

90 years of road making in victoria

FLINDERS ST WEST
LEFT LANE



NINETY YEARS AGO AN ACT WAS PASSED TO MAKE AND IMPROVE ROADS IN VICTORIA. WE HAVE COME A LONG WAY SINCE THE DAYS OF SITE VISITS ON HORSEBACK AND BUSH TRACKS CUT THROUGH WITH AXE AND LOGGING CART. WE TAKE A LOOK AT THE MAKING AND SHAPING OF VICTORIA'S ROADS.



ABOVE: ROADS WERE BUILT MANUALLY WITH HORSE AND CART, 1913.

OPPOSITE: EARLY MORNING TRAFFIC ON KINGS BRIDGE, 1961.

Terrain in Australia is distinctive for both its extremes and its vastness. The concept of the tyranny of distance must have struck the first European settlers as they took in just how large this continent is. While the Aboriginal people had 'trode lightly on this earth' for the previous 40,000 or so years, Europeans were to change all that.

The road network was an inevitable part of the development of this state – or colony as it was then – by white settlers. In *Roads for the People*, author WK Anderson notes: "The first man-made construction in Victoria that can be dignified with the title 'road' was built in December 1801 on Seal Island." It was the first of many.

The rush for gold in Victoria in 1851 coincided with the declaration of the colony as a separate state. Both events undoubtedly gave impetus to the development of the state's roads, thankfully, as in the early days their condition was ordinary indeed. So bad, in fact, that virgin bush seemed preferable to the roads for some travellers. In August 1852, engineer Edward Snell tried his hand at the diggings and, after a moderately successful spell, headed back to Melbourne from Bendigo. He wrote of this trip that "the roads being so bad we determined to strike out a fresh track through the bush"¹.

The gold rush was particularly significant in accelerating the development of Victorian roads – the consequent wealth, combined with the dramatic influx of people to the state, demanded better infrastructure. A Central Roads Board was established in 1853 and abolished in 1857. In spite of its brief existence, it was very successful and very productive: "By the end of 1855, a little less than three years since its start, the Board had built 152.2 miles of metalled (type of gravel surface) road, 34.2 miles of formed, drained and partially metalled road, 12.6 miles of formed and drained road, 8.61 miles of cleared road, 164 bridges, 39 fords, 411 culverts, 27 toll houses, 12 punts and five boats."²

RAILWAYS BEFORE ROADS

The railways reigned supreme for the next 50 or so years, until 1911 when an investigation by Mr AJ Norris found that a roads board was required. By this time, Victoria's roads had deteriorated dramatically. The Norris Report recommended the formation of a centralised body and the Country Roads Board (CRB) was established.

Even from these early days, roads have not been merely a practical consideration. William Calder, Engineer and Chairman of the Country Roads Board from 1913

to 1928, said in the CRB's first annual report:

"Apart from their utilitarian aspect, roads should be made as interesting and attractive as possible ... The Board will use its influence to preserve existing native trees bordering our main roads and as far as practicable will not sanction the removal of trees and shrubs."³

Obviously aesthetic considerations were not the sole criteria in road construction and development, but they were considered important.

FIRST DRIVER LICENCE IN 1910

It was not until 1897 that the first motorcar appeared in Melbourne and the first Victorian driver's licence was issued in 1910. It did not take long for the car to make its mark on society: "Before the turn of the century, no more than a handful of motor cars were in use across the nation, but by 1910, 102 models made by 50 different makers were on sale and an estimated 12,000 vehicles had been registered for road use; by 1915 the vehicle population had soared to about 38,000."⁴

Quality, as far back as 1914, was deemed of great importance when constructing and maintaining roads. "If it be sound policy to build good roads, it is equally important that they should not deteriorate," said the Country

Roads Board's first annual report.⁵ Important changes in the political supervision of the authorities involved in providing transport related services to the state were initiated in 1935. In a key development, the Minister of Railways was replaced by the Minister for Transport, the new title more accurately reflecting the breadth of the portfolio in question.

ROADS FOR THE SETTLERS

Regional concerns have remained a very important consideration for VicRoads and its predecessors (which included the Central Road Board and District Roads Boards (1851-1857), the Country Roads Board (CRB) (1912), Road Safety and Traffic Authority (RoSTA) (1967), Road Construction Authority (RCA)/Road Traffic Authority (RTA) (1983).

The tyranny of distance idea remained a strong reality – without adequate roads communities were isolated and cut off from the rest of the state: "The Board did not forget people on the land ... it continued to take its responsibilities for providing roads for isolated settlers very seriously, believing that any road plan that does not make provision for roads of this character fails in its objective to develop the state."⁶

A brief history

THE FIRST ROAD BUILT IN VICTORIA WAS IN 1801 WHEN IT WAS STILL PART OF NEW SOUTH WALES. SINCE THEN THE FAMILY LINE OF VICROADS HAS MANY ENTRIES WHICH AROSE IN RESPONSE TO THE CHANGING NEEDS OF VICTORIAN ROAD USERS.

BETTER COUNTRY ROADS WERE A NECESSITY FOR THE EXPANDING VICTORIAN ECONOMY (COUNTRY ROADS BOARD 1913), MORE VEHICLES MEANT THE CARS HAD TO BE REGISTERED (MOTOR REGISTRATION BRANCH – MRB – 1921), AND PEOPLE HAD TO BE LICENSED (TRANSPORT REGULATION BOARD – TRB – 1933).

THE 1980s WERE HIGHLIGHTED BY ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE AND MERGER. THE ROAD SAFETY AND TRAFFIC AUTHORITY (R_{OSTA}) WAS COMBINED WITH THE TRB AND MRB TO BECOME THE ROAD TRAFFIC AUTHORITY (R_{OSTA}) IN 1983. IN THE SAME YEAR THE COUNTRY ROADS BOARD (CRB) BECAME THE ROAD CONSTRUCTION AUTHORITY (RCA). VICROADS WAS FORMED WHEN IN 1989 THE RTA AND RCA MERGED.

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[NOTES]

(1) ANDERSON, WJ 1994, *ROADS FOR THE PEOPLE: A HISTORY OF VICTORIA'S ROADS, HYLAND HOUSE AND VICROADS*, MELBOURNE, PAGE 13.

(2) *IBID.*, P. 16.

(3) *IBID.*, P. 61.

(4) *IBID.*, P. 45.

(5) *IBID.*, P. 57.

(6) *IBID.*, P. 78.



ABOVE LEFT: A CART GETS STUCK IN THE MUD. A COMMON OCCURRENCE DURING VICTORIA'S GOLD RUSH.

RIGHT: THE HOTEL IN THE MAIN STREET OF BERWICK SERVES AS A JUNCTION BETWEEN THE PRINCES HIGHWAY EAST AND THE ROAD TO UPPER BEACONSFIELD, 1913.

In Victoria, by the end of the late 1960s more than 100,000 cars were registered each year and in 1969 there were a million cars on Victorian roads, sharing space with approximately 300,000 trucks, motorbikes and other vehicles. In 1979, there were 1.8m motor vehicles registered in Victoria – representing an increase of some 500 per cent since 1950. It also reflected the continuing trend towards the car as the preferred means of transport for most Victorians.

Road making has evolved through many stages in Victoria's history. In the 1970s, freeways reigned supreme. Influenced by developments in the United States, Australian engineers were taken by the craze. Public concern about the proposed freeways and highways on sociological and environmental grounds was extreme.

It reached such a point that in 1973 the Hamer Government announced that Melbourne's proposed freeway network would be cut in half. Pre-empting philosophies of governments, and generations to come, Premier Hamer decreed that freeways would continue to play an important role in the government's plan for a balanced transport system, but that most freeways would be banished to

outer suburban and country areas and that greater emphasis would be placed on public transport.

VICROADS IS FORMED

The formation of VicRoads in 1989 represents a particularly significant milestone in the development of Victoria's road network.

As the VicRoads mission statement at the time stated, a centralised body would be responsible for “planning, designing, constructing and maintaining roads, managing road use through registering vehicles, licensing drivers and traffic management, and providing information and road user services”. The organisation's purpose reflects the diversity of its brief: “To serve the community and contribute to the social, economic and environmental development of Victoria and Australia by managing the Victorian road network and its use as an integral part of the overall transport system.”

In a relatively short period of time a vast and complex road network has been developed in Victoria. VicRoads, in partnership with the State Government and the community, is in charge of guiding that network safely, efficiently and successfully into the future.



ABOVE: ENGINEERS DISMOUNT TO DISCUSS ROAD PLANS.
LEFT: DARGO ROAD, 1913.

The driving force

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A ROADS SYSTEM IN VICTORIA HAS BEEN DRIVEN BY PEOPLE WANTING A SAFE AND EFFICIENT MEANS OF GETTING AROUND.

All those involved in that development have a story to tell. We spoke to two VicRoads staffers at different ends of their careers.

John Cunningham spent 49 and a half years with VicRoads, starting out as a Patrol Assistant and working his way up to First Patrolman. He retired last year. Born in Bellbrae, he spent much of his working life on the Great Ocean Road, which he loved. "God's country, that's what I called it," John Cunningham says. He recalls that in 1952 the road was crushed rock all the way from Anglesea to Apollo Bay.

John's career spanned many key historical events in that part of the world. He remembers parts of the Great Ocean Road literally being washed out to sea after heavy rains in 1954.

During the Ash Wednesday fires in 1983, John, along with co-workers and others from the area were evacuated back to Geelong. About five years after that, John recalls that the Great Arch at Eastern View

collapsed. "We had to get a bulldozer down to move it – it was cutting off the traffic and everyone was driving up on the sand dunes to get around it," he says.

Working outside in such beautiful surrounds was definitely part of the attraction of VicRoads, he says. But there was a strong camaraderie between him and his co-workers.

"I had a fantastic time," he says. "We still get together once or twice a month." John also found his work very rewarding: "You were proud of every section of the road and kept it just as you'd want it."

At the other end of her career is Tarmi Kane, 24, now a Project Engineer with VicRoads. She studied Civil Engineering at Melbourne University and became interested in the organisation when VicRoads gave a presentation to students in their final year.

The diversity of work available at VicRoads was one attraction for Tarmi. "I really liked the idea of working for six months in three different places," she says.

"It also sounded like VicRoads really looked after its people."

For her first graduate placements Tarmi worked in Geelong as Road Safety and Traffic Road Use Management Officer, on the Eastern Freeway as Environment and Communications Officer and then in the Metro North Western Region as Regional Projects Engineer. She is now in construction management, still with the Metro North Western Region, and works on road duplication projects. "We deal with projects from \$1 million and up," she says. "I've got a lot of responsibility – it's a very busy department."

At 24, she is still working out exactly what she wants to do with her career. "I can see myself staying with VicRoads ... there are so many things to do here," she says. Tarmi is enjoying the VicRoads mentoring scheme, which provides her with an opportunity to discuss her career options: "I talk to my mentor about all aspects of my work."

VICTORIA HAS BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR A GREAT MANY WORLD FIRSTS IN ROAD SAFETY, INCLUDING BLOOD ALCOHOL TESTING, SEATBELTS, MOTORCYCLE HELMETS AND BIKE HELMETS. THIS LIST STANDS TODAY AS A REMARKABLE SET OF ACHIEVEMENTS.

VICROADS CHIEF EXECUTIVE DAVID ANDERSON CREDITS THE PARLIAMENTARY ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE INQUIRY PROCESS AS INSTRUMENTAL IN MANY OF THOSE ADVANCES. HE ALSO SUGGESTS GOVERNMENTS HAVE BEEN ABLE TO EMBRACE ROAD SAFETY AS A BI-PARTISAN ISSUE. "GOVERNMENTS, REGARDLESS OF THEIR POLITICAL PERSUASION, HAVE APPARENTLY ALL FOLLOWED THE ROAD SAFETY EFFORTS IN AN APOLITICAL WAY," HE SAYS. "THE MOMENTUM JUST KEPT GOING. IT WASN'T SEEN AS THE PRESSURE OF ANY PARTICULAR PARTY, IT WAS JUST A COMMUNITY ISSUE."

A NUMBER OF SAFETY AND EDUCATION INITIATIVES ARE CURRENTLY UNDERWAY THAT DEMONSTRATE VICTORIA'S 'PIONEERING STREAK', AS VICROADS CONTINUES TO LOOK AT BETTER WAYS OF ACHIEVING ONE OF ITS PRIME AIMS – A SAFE ROAD SYSTEM FOR THE PEOPLE OF VICTORIA.