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*Membership of the Association is available to all who have been members of VicRoads or forerunner organisations or the spouse of deceased members and bestows on them all the rights of the Rules of Association. Cost of membership is a once only fee of \$50. Enquiries about membership or receipt of the Newsletter by e-mail should be directed to the Secretary, VicRoads Association, by phone or e-mail*



Winter has unmistakably arrived, marked by a rare and unusually strong low pressure system in the Southern Ocean that saw heavy rain and strong winds lashing the coast all the way from Cape Lewin in WA to Point Hicks in eastern Victoria. Weather gurus see this as a harbinger of further extreme weather events stemming from global warming.

Notwithstanding its wet and cold beginning, the BOM is predicting an unusually warm and drier winter due to the development of a ‘super’ El Niño <sup>1</sup> event, which does not augur well for summer. Some forecasters are predicting that this El Niño event will be the strongest since 1950. My Facebook feed is replete with frightening coloured world maps of rising sea temperatures illustrating this developing weather system.

In 1982/83 when we had a major El Niño event, Victoria experienced its worst snow season on record<sup>2</sup>, followed by its hottest summer then on record and the dreadful Ash

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<sup>1</sup> El Niño refers to an extended period of up to 12 months when sea surface temperatures in the central tropical Pacific are higher than average. Australia is especially susceptible because El Niño weakens the Walker Cell, a large-scale circulation of air which directs moist easterly winds towards our longitudes.

In strong El Niño years, this flow can even be reversed, essentially cutting off one of our key fuel supplies for cloud and rain.

<sup>2</sup> Early indications are that the 2026 snow season might be as bad as 1982/83, with many ski fields becoming dependent upon artificially generated snow.

Wednesday bushfires. Since then, our hottest summer ever occurred in 2024 and forecasters are predicting the 2026 summer will be even hotter.

In addition to the predicted El Niño effect on our rainfall, another major generator of Victoria’s weather, the Southern Ocean, is believed to be absorbing a disproportionate amount of excess heat trapped by greenhouse gases. There are concerns that this excess energy will not only alter the global conveyor belt of ocean currents but will lead to increasingly violent weather events along Australia’s southern coastal areas.

Given the unpredictability of the two weather systems and how they might interact, BOM forecasters could be tempted to dust off the dartboards they allegedly used to provide forecasts in the past. With a bit of luck, one system might simply cancel out the other and Victoria’s weather will be pretty much ‘normal’. Otherwise, we might be living in interesting times.

## WHATS COMING UP?

### Our 2026 event calendar

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Contact Person</b>
<b>Wednesday 15 July</b>	Presentation and tour of the Alstom Dandenong site. Tour will be preceded by a lunch at the Dandenong Pavilion Hotel.	Jill Earnshaw <a href="mailto:jillmearnshaw@gmail.com">jillmearnshaw@gmail.com</a>
<b>Monday 4 August</b>	12 noon for 12.30 pm Occasional Lunch, Doncaster Shoppingtown Hotel	Just turn up
<b>Tuesday 18 August</b>	Lunch at Geelong and TAC presentation.	Jill Earnshaw <a href="mailto:jillmearnshaw@gmail.com">jillmearnshaw@gmail.com</a>
<b>Monday 7 – Tuesday 8 September</b>	Visit to the Shepparton Art Museum (SAM) to see the <i>Facing Modernity: Degas to Picasso</i> visiting exhibition and the Archibald Prize Exhibition. Starts 12 noon with lunch at the SAM Café. Further optional activities on Tuesday including winery lunch.	Jim Webber <a href="mailto:jameswebber1717@gmail.com">jameswebber1717@gmail.com</a>
<b>Monday 5 October</b>	12 noon for 12.30 pm Occasional Lunch, Doncaster Shoppingtown Hotel	Just turn up
<b>Friday 30 October</b>	Annual Golf Day at Green Acres Golf Club, Kew East	Jim Webber <a href="mailto:jameswebber1717@gmail.com">jameswebber1717@gmail.com</a>
<b>Monday 9 November</b>	12 noon for 12.30 pm Occasional Lunch, Doncaster Shoppingtown Hotel	Just turn up
<b>Monday 8 December</b>	11.45 am for 12.30 pm Christmas lunch at a new venue, to be advised. (The Glen Waverley RSL is no longer available due to a major fire).	Ken Vickery <a href="mailto:kenvickery@tpg.com.au">kenvickery@tpg.com.au</a>

## **Presentation and tour of the Alstom Dandenong site**

Day/Date: Wednesday 15 July 2026

Time: Gathering at 11.30 am for lunch before the factory visit commencing at 1 pm. If not attending the lunch before the visit, please arrive at the factory by 12.45 pm at the latest for a security check in and allocation of PPE before the presentation.

Venue: Lunch – Dandenong Pavilion, 55-61 Princess Highway, Dandenong

Alstom Factory, 35-45 Frankston - Dandenong Rd, Dandenong South

Travel: The Dandenong Station is between the lunch venue and the Alstom facility.

The Alstom train building facility in Dandenong is one of the most advanced rail manufacturing facilities in Australia. The site has a long track record, having previously been used to also build Z, A, and B-class trams. Alstom previously manufactured all 100 E Class trams at the Dandenong plant and is in the process of actively building 100 next-generation G Class trams for Melbourne's network. This tour follows our highly informative and enjoyable visit to Alstom's Ballarat facility in October 2025.

As this is a working factory, attendees will be required to wear Personal Protective Equipment. This will include a bump cap, safety glasses, steel capped boots and high vis. safety vests. These can all be supplied on the day with enough notice but many Members may already have the necessary boots.

The presentation will commence at 1 pm and be followed by a walking tour which will conclude around 3 pm. Numbers are limited for this visit and Members and any guests are encouraged to register their interest with Jill Earnshaw, at [jillmearnshaw@gmail.com](mailto:jillmearnshaw@gmail.com), as early as possible. In responding, please include the following information:

- whether you will also be joining us for lunch prior to visiting the factory.
- if you own your own steel capped boots for wearing on the day or require Alstom to supply those for your use on the day; and
- if you need boots supplied for you, what size boots you require

## **Geelong Lunch and TAC presentation**

Day/Date: Tuesday 18 August 2026

As many attending or considering attending our Shepparton visit are planning a night or two away, we are now planning to visit Geelong as a day trip rather than a longer stay. We will consider that region for a potentially longer visit in a future year's program.

More details will appear in our next newsletter. We will lunch at Sailors' Rest, (where we have dined before). It is close to the TAC building.

Please register with: Jill Earnshaw, [jillmearnshaw@gmail.com](mailto:jillmearnshaw@gmail.com) or call/message her on 0438777352.

## **Shepparton Art Museum visit**

Day/Date: Monday 7 September 2026 (& 8 September if staying overnight for other activities)

You could do it as a day trip but you may also be interested in planning a night or two away in Shepparton in September.

On 7 September the Association will be visiting the Shepparton Art Museum for the *Facing Modernity: Degas to Picasso* visiting exhibition as well as the Archibald Prize exhibition.

Please email Jim Webber ([jameswebber1717@gmail.com](mailto:jameswebber1717@gmail.com)) if you interested in attending as tickets will need to be purchased in advance of the visit.

Jim will be in contact with those who register their expression of interest

As the tickets need to be pre-paid, we will require those wishing to attend to pay for the event in advance. Payment should be made by electronic transfer into the Association's NAB bank account, details as follows:

VicRoads Association BSB 083-323 ACC 170934017

Reference - Please ensure that you include your name and SAM in the "online" transaction details so that the payment can be attributed to you.

Please note that refunds may be able to be arranged if there is someone able to take your place(s) once the tickets have been purchased. If not, a refund cannot be provided as moneys will have already been provided to the venue.

For those interested in visiting Shepparton for this event, the Association will also be organising a lunch before the event and dinner after the visit to the exhibitions as well an overnight stay. A tour(s) and a winery lunch the following day are also being planned for anyone interested in participating. Please indicate when responding to Jim Webber, whether you may be interested in attending the lunch, dinner, staying overnight and participating the next day in Shepparton. Further details of the visit will be available later in the year.

Future newsletters will also contain further information on these and other events.

We are keen for local former colleagues to join us at one or all of these events so if you are, or have been, in contact with former regional staff or others who may not be Association Members but may be interested in joining us, please forward this information on to them.

These events, as well as all our others later in the year, are open to Members, friends and family. All you need to do is register.

## **IN THIS EDITION**

June's Newsletter looks at the current demolition of the Kew Head Office building – home to the CRB and its successors for 58 years and ponders as to what its loss might mean to our Members.

We are very pleased to present John Smelt's great story of his experience of being thrown into the deep end of regional road construction for six months as a newbie engineer in the mid-1970s. We would especially like to hear from other Members about their work experiences and share them in future editions.

We are also pleased to present the 2<sup>nd</sup> instalment of David Jellie's most interesting examination of the catastrophic failure of the West Gate Bridge in 1970.

## **WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING**

### **Mid-Year Luncheon at Ringwood RSL**

On 29 June, 32 members and friends attended our mid-year luncheon, held for the first time at Ringwood RSL following the closure of the Waverley RSL due to a fire in March this year.

Thanks to Nick Szwed for the great pictures



From L to R. Annette Willis, Lyn Briggs, Julie Cooper, Paul Cooper (obscured), Linda Zamprogno



From L to R. Alan Collins, Owen Thomas, Ric Anderson, Ted Barton, Jim Webber, Jill Earnshaw, David Williamson, Nick Szwed, Gerry Turner, Ted Adams (new member)



From L to R. Heather Thompson, Doug Thompson, Ross Paul, Ken Vickery, Linda Kent



From L to R. Iris Whittaker, Allison Pinto, Patsy Kennedy, Graham Gilpin, Ken Mathers, Robin Schubert, Gernot Schubert



From L to R. Rosslyn Wright, David Jellie, Clive Mottram, Graeme Stone, John Wright

### **Additional Head Office phone directories**

Lance Midgley has very kindly provided scanned copies of phone directories from 1982, 1990 and 1996. The directories are now available on our website and can also be downloaded using the following links:

[1982 CRB HO Directory](#), [1990 VicRoads HO Directory](#), [1996 VicRoads HO Directory](#)

## The demolition of the Kew Head Office Building

by John Wright

In an *Age* report quoted in our [April 2025 edition](#), Hannah Clement, Acting Chief Development Officer at Development Victoria discussed the possible refurbishing of our old HO. She said:

*'Readapting a building that opened in 1961, when it was home to the Country Roads Board, means that the early stages of that work would be ensuring that everything is still structurally sound. A crucial step would be checking that any water that has penetrated the roof has not affected the concrete. The building is not up to seismic code and needs reinforcement, and balconies would also have to be installed on the outside.'*

I think she was letting us down gently. Fourteen months later, the Victorian Government has decided, after 'extensive work with industry', to completely demolish the former head office building. A report in the *Melbourne Age* on 12 June 2026 stated:

*'Demolition of the seven-storey structure will start this week and is expected to be completed by mid-July.'*

The June *Age* report said that this *'will deliver more homes than originally planned while creating high quality open space and better connections through the precinct.'* Reading between the lines, I think this means that the new building will be considerably higher than our old headquarters.



Kew Head Office as it was in April 2025. The northern building was demolished in February 2026.

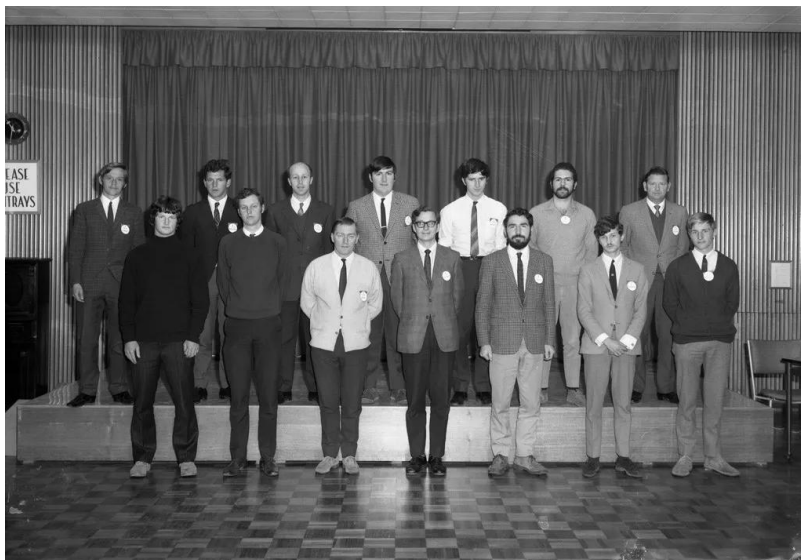
These events remind me of when I lived with my parents in a lovely old Californian bungalow in 1950s McKinnon. It was a happy period in our lives and long after I'd left I'd occasionally drive past and briefly stop in the street to reminisce. The house and garden hadn't changed and it seemed like I'd just walked out the door, and my parents, long gone, were still there. And then one day – I came past and it was gone and I was staring in disbelief at duplex townhouses. My feeling of loss was intense.

Jim Webber, who had spent much time in the now demolished Northern Building, admitted to having experienced similar feelings of loss upon seeing his former work habitat reduced to a pile of rubble in February this year.

What Jim and I have experienced, no doubt along with many of our fellow workmates, is one of life's sad realities – sometimes referred to as progress. I don't think too many of us have ever pondered on the fact that the beautiful old Victorian-era Kew railway station was demolished to create our workplace, or that the nearby Truby King Baby Health Centre<sup>3</sup> (where my mother regularly took me in 1940) was flattened in the 1990s to provide more car parking spaces in the northern carpark. Equally, I doubt that anybody mourned the demise of the briquette depot that previously occupied the area of the southern carpark.

It is quite extraordinary to realise that the Kew Head Office was continuously occupied for 58 years – 22 for the CRB, 7 for the RCA and 29 for VicRoads. I think we might have quietly established a tenure record for organisations external to the traditional government offices in Spring Street. I am guessing that a significant number of individuals spent almost their entire working lives in that building. For some of them, Kew must have seemed more of a home than a workplace.

Workplace memories are often about the foibles of the people you worked with – and the personal quirks of those in charge of you or those under your management. There is an extra layer of memories for those who regularly came into contact with the public. Head Office didn't always have a strict security system in the foyer, and for a long time, there wasn't much to stop members of the public from walking in to have a 'quiet word'.



One of the many staff induction sessions held in the Kew Theatrette. This one was in 1970.

Perhaps the most remembered Head Office area was the theatrette on the Ground Floor where generations of staff began their tenure at induction sessions – sometimes hosted by Board Members.

Regional and Head Office staff attended training sessions there before Syndal and Westgate took off as dedicated venues, and wonderful CRB Balls were held there until they necessarily moved to more commodious Town Hall venues. The Red Cross

periodically ran a blood donation centre there and the Retired Persons Association gathered there for its annual Christmas lunches. Many of us attended technical presentations there by senior staff returning from overseas study tours.

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<sup>3</sup> I believe a condition of Kew Council's late 1950s planning approval was that this Centre be preserved. When I worked for Colin Jordan in the 1990s and protested at its removal, he wryly remarked that the Truby King Centre had a lot to answer for...

Perhaps the best collection of Kew Head Office memories of people and events is documented in the 379 pages of the wonderful *Reminiscences of Life on the CRB*<sup>4</sup>, which was published in 1995 by the VicRoads Retirees Association. Many of its stories came from interviews conducted in 1987 by Peter McCullough. However, we are sure there are many great stories that have yet to be told about Kew and we would love to hear from you, so that we can share them in future Newsletters. A simple sentence or paragraph will do.

As well as being a workplace, Kew Head Office was a place of social interaction, with the Head Office Social Association organising beachside Christmas picnics for the staff and their children, the annual Balls and other major gatherings. The CRB Car Club with its well-attended car trials and treasure hunts was also a major social connector and held meetings in the theatrette with classic motor racing films and presentations by international car rally celebrities like Harry Firth.

I was one of the 300 CRB staff who turned up to work at Kew for the very first time in December 1960. Finding our allotted work places, we sat down at brand new desks on brand new chairs and marvelled at the volume of space around us. It was a treat. The two lifts were more than adequate, and opposite their doors on all the upper floors and in the basement, was an alcove with a counter, occupied by an officer designated as a Floor Controller.

The only ones I can recall from those days were Joyce Stabler on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor and Mrs Lohrere on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. In the late 1980s, in response to mushrooming staffing levels, the floor controllers' alcoves were replaced by two additional lifts.

Regional staff visiting the Kew HQ over the years were often confused by the many changes of section location. The library went from the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor to the ground floor. Dandenong Division relocated from the 4<sup>th</sup> floor to Nunawading. Bridge Division and Plans and Surveys vanished from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> floors to Princes Street and High Street, Kew. Metro Division left the 4<sup>th</sup> floor for the Northern Building and later ended up in East Kew.

As memory serves me, I think only the Corporate area (the Board Room etc) on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor and the Accounts Department on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor remained in their original locations. One infrequent regional visitor, the late Tom Glazebrook, Bendigo's Divisional Engineer, wryly commented at the 2024 Farewell Ceremony that his favourite view of Head Office was the one that appeared in his rearview mirror when he was leaving.



The demolition will be of particular significance to one of our very senior members, Stan Hodgson, who at 95 still has very clear memories of being tasked by Paddy O'Donnell in the late 1950s to manage the building of the Kew headquarters.

Stan believes that the wrecking contractors might have their work cut out for them because the structure was erected using the 'lift slab' technique, where all the floor slabs were cast at ground level and jacked into place.

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<sup>4</sup> Those unable to find this publication can read Kevin Fox's great *History of Head Office – 60 Denmark Street, Kew*, which can be found on P.8 at [VRA-Newsletter-252.pdf](#). Also, the reminiscences of Graham Gilpin and others of Kew's early days can be found on P.14 & 15 at [VRA-Newsletter-251.pdf](#).

## MEMBER COMMENTS AND NEWS

### Six Months in Bairnsdale Division – 50 Years Ago - by John Smelt

Firstly, a short history of my time with the organisation.

After completing a Civil engineering degree at Monash University, I commenced work in CRB Traffic Engineering Division in January 1975. From Mid 1976 I had four stints of six months in Bairnsdale, Plans and Surveys (twice) and Road Planning Divisions.

I returned to Traffic Engineering in Mid-1978 to develop the strategic aspects of the SCRAM signal system. From early 1982 to April 1984, I was seconded to the Ministry of Transport and worked on transport planning projects.

I returned to the RTA Traffic Strategies Group. This role was wide ranging and included developing a user-based program structure. In 1987 I became the District Traffic Engineer for about one third of regional Victoria.

With the establishment of VicRoads in 1989, I moved into the Regional Services Support Team and worked on technical and corporate programs and projects, including setting up a queuing and data recording system for Registration and Licensing offices.



John in 2025

From 1993 I enjoyed eight years in Northern Region, Bendigo, in positions including Business Services and Program Development Managers. In 2001 I left VicRoads to work in the State's Planning Department on strategic land use projects in regional Victoria until I retired in 2012.

My wife, Elizabeth Heathcote, also a transport professional, worked at VicRoads from 1989 on strategic planning projects and, when we moved to Bendigo, on road planning and road safety projects and programs and also retired in 2012.

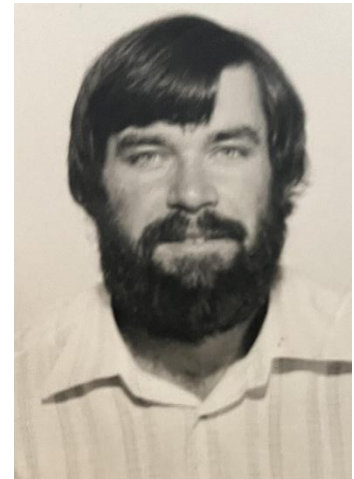
We retain an active interest in traffic, transport and land use activities and have retired to the Bellarine Peninsula.

### Bairnsdale Division 1976

It was a frosty but sunny morning at the start of July 1976 as I walked into the Bairnsdale Division Office of the CRB. I had been successful in obtaining a place on the Young Engineers' Training Scheme and Bairnsdale was my first six-month stop. I was looking forward to working out in the bush in one of the best parts of Victoria.

I was greeted by the Assistant Divisional Engineer, Wally Dyll, and the senior engineer for works, Bill Bell.

They described Bairnsdale Division. By Victorian standards it is remote with only 50,000 people. Sale and Bairnsdale are the largest towns. It is over 300km from west



John in 1976

of Sale to the NSW border east of Genoa and stretches nearly 200km well up into the mountains. A very large part of the area is forested Crown Land. Timber milling is a big industry producing sawn products and wood chips as a byproduct. There is also grazing, vegetable production in the rich river valleys and some tourism.

In 1976 the CRB Divisions were self-sufficient empires. The Divisional Engineers had very high levels of delegation enabling them to rule their empires comprehensively. Together they seemed to or actually ran many parts of Head Office in Kew as well.

Most of the road work and much of the bridge work was undertaken by direct labour gangs. The Divisions were self-sufficient with equipment, stores, machinery servicing and other necessary technical and administrative back up. Part of this was due to a limited presence of private providers in areas like Bairnsdale.

Bill explained that I would be working on construction jobs for my six months in Bairnsdale Division.

He asked if I had anywhere to live. I was still thinking about where I would sleep that night. My intention was to eventually rent a flat. He suggested I might like to experience CRB camping out. He offered a hut out at the Sandhill yard with bedding and camping equipment from the Divisional store. With some apprehension I agreed – was this part of my development plan?

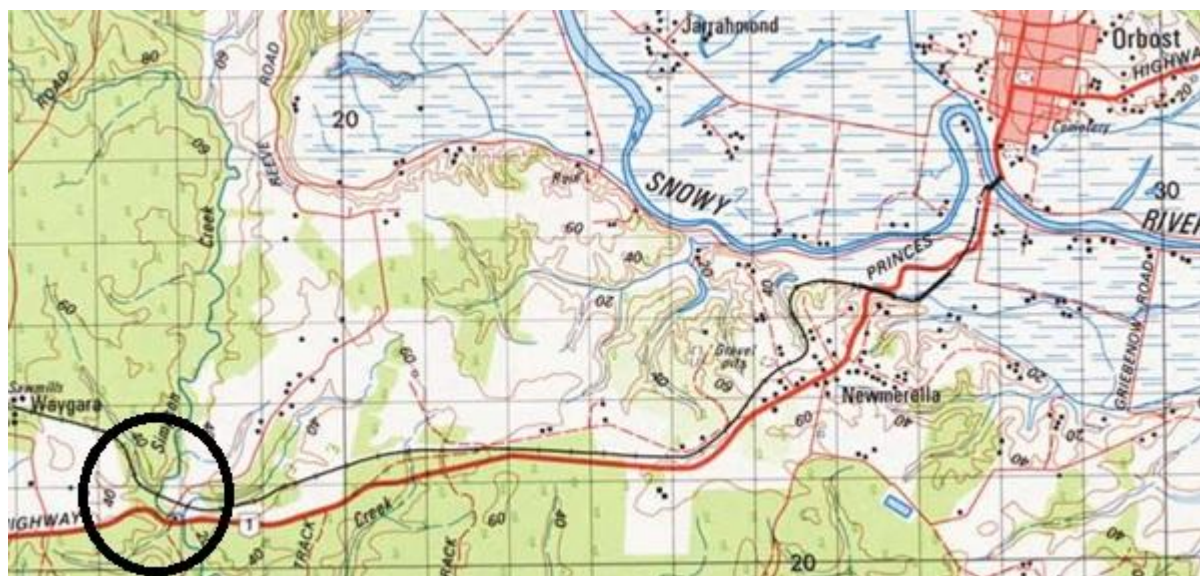
We left the office and I did not return until my last few days in the Division.

At the massive store and workshop, we picked up a CRB issue bed, mattress and bedding and a few other items useful for camping out. On the way out to the job, we drove past the Sandhill camp. It didn't look particularly attractive - a few huts in an old gravel pit.

I felt I was now in a completely different organisation from CRB Kew, although it had the familiar CRB football logo.

### **Simpsons creek**

We travelled east through Bruthen and then along the Princes Highway to Simpsons Creek about 85 km from Bairnsdale. The project was fairly large, about 3 km long, consisting of road realignment, widening and a new bridge over the creek.



On arrival we were greeted by the project engineer, David McInnes and acting overseer Sandy. The overseer is on site all the time, the responsible engineer visits a few times a week as they may have other jobs and responsibilities. David briefed us about the job and how it was progressing. He finished with 'have you got anywhere to live?' I mentioned the Sandhill Camp. He said, no, 'that's not much, you can come and stay at my place until you find a place of your own'. That sounded much better.

The job was a commutable distance from Bairnsdale, so each morning two Hi-Ace vans picked up the gang from their homes and travelled to the site. 'Be waiting outside your place by 6am each morning starting tomorrow was the message to me as well!' We returned to Bairnsdale about 6pm Monday to Thursday and 2pm on Fridays.

Some days we went via Bruthen and other days via Lakes Entrance depending on who we had to pick up. It was quite spectacular as the days grew longer to see the sun rise over the sea as we came down the hill into Lakes Entrance.

The men in the gang were mainly in their 40s and 50s, with a few younger and older. Most had worked 'on the Board' for a long time, although others had previously worked on farms or in timber mills. On the bus, they made me feel welcome even though I didn't know much about the local football teams and local wildlife, especially birds, and I wasn't a fisherman. They were the main topics of conversation in the bus apart from talking about who was being moved to which jobs. It seemed the men could be sent to any location in the Division as needed, often at short notice. Over the weeks in the bus, I had time to gain some understand of their way of life.

On site I undertook a range of activities like levelling, teaching levelling and learning about the plant and how to use it efficiently and effectively. I learnt early on how skilled the road workers were in their jobs. A good overseer is vital too.

The most impressive skill is that of the grader operator. The grader is a piece of equipment that shapes the road and the operator is a sculptor using the flexibility of its blade to create a smooth, safe road based on a mixture of cross fall, grade and curvature.

I saw the pride and care the road gang members and engineers had for their work on their highways. Life on site certainly was different from a comfortable office in Kew.



The Simpsons Creek project in 1976



Overseer Sandy checking for soft material on the Simpsons Creek project

### **Somewhere to live**

Living in David's house worked out well. It was also an opportunity to talk about the job and the area. David's house was sparsely furnished so my CRB camping kit came in handy. On my first night in Bairnsdale, I slept soundly in my CRB bedding, on my CRB bed and CRB mattress. After some months I moved to a rented flat on the shore of Lake King in Paynesville, a magnificent location.

The weekdays were busy and, combined with the early starts, meant evenings were quiet and short. On weekends, I had friends come and visit, hung out with friends in Sale, explored the area or went back to Melbourne.

### **Back in Bairnsdale by 2pm on Fridays**

One very important rule in the Division was that all Bairnsdale based gangs had to be back in town by 2pm on Friday for personal business and services. Weekly work hours were adjusted to meet this requirement. This was 1976 so there were no electronic banking and businesses and shops were keeping 9 to 5 [only on Monday to Friday].

On Friday afternoons, I also need to go down the street. I would hardly recognise men from the gang, now all cleaned up and dressed up for town.

### **Road building materials search**

After several months, I left the Simpsons Creek job to search for road building materials for the next job. It was the reconstruction and widening of about 4 to 5 km of the Princes Highway in the locality of Manorina, 130km from Bairnsdale, between Orbost and Cann River.

The materials search initially required finding records or talking to people with knowledge of where previous gravel had been obtained for the Forest Commission and others as well as the CRB.

Being this far east, we were in very dense bush. There was an upper storey of big trees and a lower storey of thick vegetation of all sorts which made movement through it very difficult and also difficult to see ahead or to the ground.

I initially travelled out from Bairnsdale each day with Steve Prosser from the Division's laboratory and one of the field construction crew, who dug holes efficiently. After a while I learnt what to look for so Steve stayed in the lab to analyse the previous day's samples.

When we found a promising location, we called in a backhoe and operator to dig further.



Searching for road building materials east of Orbost in 1976

After some weeks we found good material. Holes dug by the backhoe confirmed this. The site had been a gravel pit a long time ago and was now covered in thick vegetation above head height with a lot of medium to large trees spread through it. We needed to ascertain the extent of the good material. We pushed our way through the undergrowth and put pegs in a grid for sample holes.

Based on the samples from the grid I was able to calculate the amount of good material. It proved to be extensive enough so, after obtaining Forest Commission approval and doing quite a bit of work on the track into it to take many truck trips, the pit was ready to open up.

A very big, hired dozer (Caterpillar D9) arrived in dramatic style on a float covered in flags, due it being an over dimensional load. The contractor fired the machine up and it made its first cut. Bush, trees and whatever else were flying in all directions.

After a while, the contractor stopped and let fly with a long list of expletives. Most of the expletives referred to snakes. We saw that there were three or four unhappy snakes just in one small area he had just cleared.

I'm thinking to myself I almost blindly was pushing through that very dense bush last week. The contractor continued with the expletives basically saying that he wasn't going to get off his bulldozer for anything! We sat in our 4WD more than usual that day.

That was one of many run ins with snakes.

## Manorina and Bemm River

In October it was time to move most of the Simpsons Creek road gang out to start the job on the Princes Highway at Manorina as the Simpsons Creek job was pretty well finished.

Manorina was located in thick bush and really consisted of only a few buildings. There was also a basic service station because with a couple of petrol pumps and shop which sold lollies, but not much else.



The Manorina project in 1976

It was no longer feasible to do it as a daily commute, so accommodation had to be found. The nearest suitable accommodation was at the Bemm River Hotel, 22 km down the Sydenham Inlet Road. The tiny, quiet town of Bemm River is on the shore of a large, beautiful lake – Sydenham inlet and is popular with fishers.

The small pub had some basic accommodation in huts, but these were rarely occupied. Accommodating and feeding about 12 or so road workers, including me, from Monday night to Friday morning over many months was a challenge for the pub. So, it was arranged that the wife of one of the roadworkers would work in the hotel with the publican's wife to feed the workers and generally house keep. There wasn't any trouble. It was agreed that the publican was a pretty tough character, not to be messed with.

About 5 other members of the road gang stayed in caravans on site at Manorina. A spot for the caravans was found near the petrol outlet and vegetation cleared. The ground was very muddy, and the caravans became bogged as they were being put into place.

The men requested pathways clear of the mud to access the ablutions van and to enter and exit the area. Their request was not acted on and this escalated into an industrial dispute with a visit from the union representative. After a meeting it was agreed that the CRB would provide crushed rock paths, which seemed the reasonable thing to do.

The men who stayed on site were paid a camping allowance and provided their own food. In wilder days, not that long before 1976, men would just take a loaf of bread, a



Luxury CRB accommodation at Manorina in 1976

bottle of tomato sauce and a gun for rations. I think the people who stayed down at the pub didn't get any other allowances since the food and accommodation was provided by the CRB.

Life was quite pleasant at the end of the day when the Hi Ace arrived back in Bemm River. Many of the fellows went fishing before dinner. On occasions we had some of their freshly caught fish for dinner.

There wasn't any trouble. It was agreed that the publican was a pretty tough character, not to be messed with.

### **Communications**

One major issue when working out at Manorina was communications. If vital equipment broke down the whole job could stop. It was urgent to message a fitter to come out. The fellow who lived in the house attached to the petrol outlet often slept during the day. It was agreed that he would leave the door to his house open so we could use his phone. We would go into his bedroom where he was sleeping away, take the phone away off his bed side table and go in the hallway shut the door and make reverse charges calls. A bit primitive but it worked!

### **Rain**

Weather, particularly rain, has a major impact on roadworks and the roadworkers' job. East Gippsland, particularly east of Lakes Entrance, has a wet, often warmer east coast of Australia climate.

Wet weather for Head Office people means a remembering a jacket or umbrella and a bit of nuisance in walking from the cutting to the buildings before settling into a warm dry office. For most people their work role is unaffected.

However, for those CRB workers on site their whole day or week is completely changed by wet weather. They pivot from continuing to build the road to preserving what has been done by continually checking and clearing temporary drainage lines and maintaining a safe route for road users. When the rain stops it may take some time before the equipment can be usefully and safely put to work in the mud. Many days can be lost after major rainfall events.

For the workers, it is demoralising sitting in the bus or site huts for hours while the rain pours down watching good work being washed away. This is only broken by the need to go out into the weather to maintain drainage lines and keep the road safe for users.



Rain Damage on the Simpsons Creek project

On the Manorina project there was a significant weather-related incident. The project was running a bit behind schedule and the engineer in charge decided to attempt to speed things up by ripping a long section of existing road at one time. This was completed by the end of the day. The work gang retreated to Bemm River and the campsite. During the night we all heard rain beating down on the roof. Over breakfast some expressed concern.

When the gang from the pub arrived at Manorina a scene of organised chaos welcomed us. Queues of vehicles stretched from both ends of a sea of mud where the road had been yesterday.

Vehicles had become bogged in the exposed pavement which had turned into mud. Those gang members on site had been woken by angry motorists at about 1 am. By the time we arrived, emergency signing and a system were in place to get vehicles through.

Mobile plant was carefully towing vehicles, one at a time, for some hundreds of metres through the muddy ripped section. Due to the narrowness of the road this was a delicate task with two-way towing. Large vehicles mostly managed to make it through, although some needed rescuing, causing further delays. The traffic churned up the road material and water seeped in further.

This activity continued for most of the day, luckily the Highway was not too busy out there. On this morning, we didn't get the usual cheery wave from the Mallacoota mail van driver.

With more workers on site, work started on building a temporary sidetrack for all vehicles and this was eventually successful. Many drainage lines were dug to clear as much of the water as possible off the exposed road material.

It took nearly a fortnight to return the job to where it was on the evening before the heavy rain. A considerable amount of additional fill had to be brought in. There were also claims by motorists for damage and cleaning and general letters of complaint to be dealt with by the engineer.

At the end of this event several older members of the gang reminded us that we should have noticed the black cockatoos flying inland which, in East Gippsland, means serious rain is coming.

### **Snowy River Bridges**

I had time out from the road projects to learn about the construction of new bridges for the PHE at Orbost across the Snowy River and its flood plain. The project was nearing completion.

The project was managed by a project team, independent of Bairnsdale Division and lead by Stan Jarvis. I was shown over the project by Senior Engineer David Jellie and Peter Ryan.

It was a big, busy project. Ashby's Gulch bridge across part of the flood plain was, at that time, one of the longest road bridges in Victoria. Many of the structural elements, including beams were fabricated on site. The beams and location of the bridge piers have been designed to maximise water flow in floods and minimise impact from large floating debris.

### **Bituminous Surfacing Gang**

There was much speculation in the road gang about when the Bituminous Surfacing (BS) gang would start up and who would join it. In Bairnsdale Division the BS gang commenced road resealing in about late October, although the start date depended on coldness of the preceding months. The gang operated over the warmer months when the ground temperature enabled the seal to hold to the existing pavement. The BS gang was staffed by divisional workers and seasonal workers. Quite a lot of different items of plant are used requiring skilled operators. The spray gang worked long hours all over the division on CRB and council roads as well as resealing other areas such as the Bairnsdale airport runway.

I gained some understanding of how they operated from a few days with them.

### **Conclusion**

Six months in the bush, out of the office stretched my comfort zone. I learnt an enormous amount about building roads. This was very useful background in later planning and financial roles. I also learnt a lot more about working with people and teams and appreciating the wide range of important skills they bring to jobs. This was important in all my later working environments and generally mixing with people.

I thank the people in Bairnsdale Division for explaining their work and for providing me with great experiences.

*I apologise for errors and omissions as over 50 years the memories can blur.*

*John Smelt 23/5/2026*

## West Gate Freeway, Part 2 – by David Jellie

[Editor's note: This is David Jellie's second instalment of his history of the West Gate Freeway. The first one, published in the April Newsletter, was about the early planning for a crossing of the Yarra River at Fisherman's Bend and the design and collapse of the bridge during construction.

This instalment describes the causes of the collapse - mainly, the technical issues. Please note that David has used imperial units of measurement because all of his references used them.]

All the aspirations for West Gate Bridge were dashed at 11.50 am on 15 October 1970 when it collapsed during construction killing 35 men.<sup>5</sup> Alastair Robinson was working on the Lower Yarra Freeway project on the western side of the bridge and he described this day as follows:

*“On the day of the collapse I was on site at the freeway's western interchange, on a sunny day just before lunchtime, when a contractor told me that he had just heard that the bridge had fallen down. At first, I thought this wasn't true but, when others were saying the same thing, I raced back to our site office and Bob Morison asked me and some others to immediately go to the site and see if the CRB could offer assistance with the recovery effort.*

*When we arrived at the site on the Spotswood side, we were overwhelmed by what we saw. We saw the buckled steel bridge span lying on the mudflat, with adjacent parked cars and buildings spattered in mud from the impact of the fallen bridge hitting the ground. The emergency services people were all on site and were recovering the injured and dead from the point of impact. It was a terrible sight. The emergency services people were well equipped and didn't need our assistance so we returned to the site office.*

*We had a casual employee at our site office named Des Gibson who decided to leave us and get a job working on the bridge. He was on the bridge when it collapsed, survived the fall but died within 12 months from the mental trauma he had experienced from the collapse.<sup>6</sup>*

*Later when the bridge was reopened, I remember the trepidation that I felt when first driving over the bridge. In later years I was the Operations Manager in VicRoads Central Region and was responsible for the management of the maintenance of the West Gate Bridge. This involved inspecting works from the moveable maintenance gantry on the underside of the bridge.*

*In time I adjusted and it just became part of the job.”*

Although there is no doubt that the primary cause of the collapse was due to the removal of the bolts in the transverse joint at the midpoint between Piers 10 and 11, there are other aspects of the design of West Gate Bridge which contributed (or may have contributed) to the mode of failure.

In the initial stages of consideration, four feasible routes were investigated for the crossing before adoption of the final line. The adopted bridge alignment was designed

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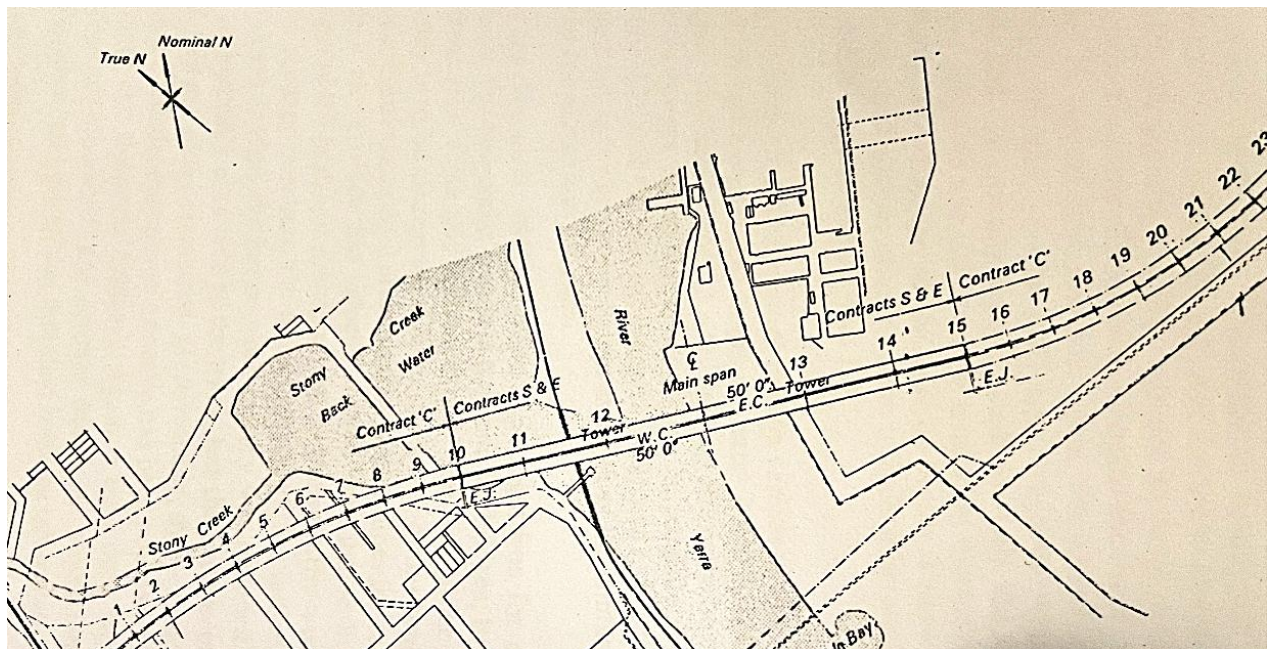
<sup>5</sup> The dead included boilermakers, ironworkers, carpenters, engineers, riggers, fitters and a first aid officer.

<sup>6</sup> Des's name is not on the official West Gate memorial, but he is another victim. Another worker, Joe Owens, died in a fall during construction resumption in 1972.

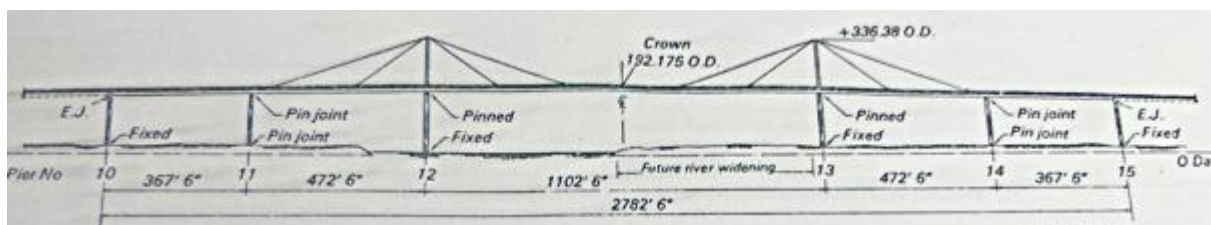
for high-speed traffic with a design speed of 70 mph and the horizontal alignment transitioned from a straight over the river to a curve at the western end between Piers 10 and 11. At this point, the road surface became superelevated whereby the outside level of the road becomes higher than the inside. This side slope is an essential element of road design as it helps to counteract the centrifugal forces imposed on vehicles driving at speed and provides ease of driving and road safety. The transverse slope also assists in draining water off the deck.

On the eastern side, there was a similar arrangement between Piers 14 and 15 but in reverse. So, at these two spans, despite them being seemingly straight, they were slightly twisted at the furthest ends to accommodate the geometry of the deck superelevation. The fabrication of the box girders had to accommodate this complication of geometry.

The layout of the bridge in plan and elevation is shown in the diagrams below. Note that dimensions are shown in imperial units.



Plan of West Gate Bridge and approaches. The horizontal curvature of the approaches at each end extends over the spans between Piers 10 and 11 (where the collapse occurred) and Piers 14 and 15 which had been successfully erected before the collapse.



Elevation of West Gate Bridge. This diagram shows the articulation of the bridge with deck expansion joints located on Piers 10 and 15. The two main towers (12 and 13) are fixed at their bases and pinned to the superstructure at the top. Piers 11 and 14 are pinned at both ends – top and bottom - so that they act as props.

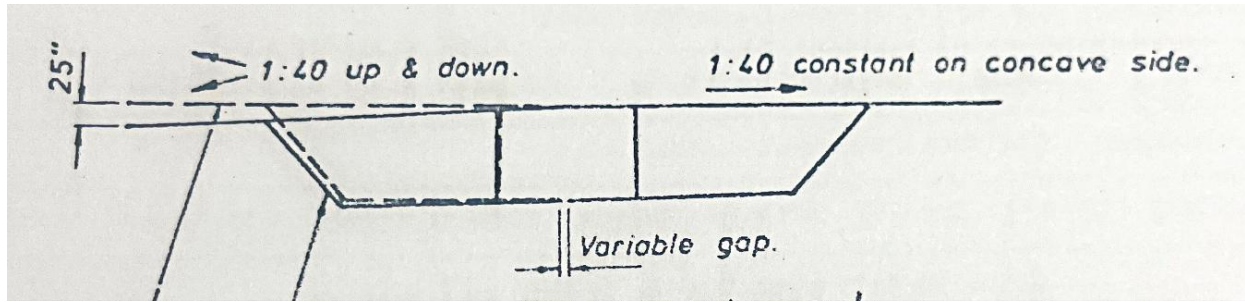
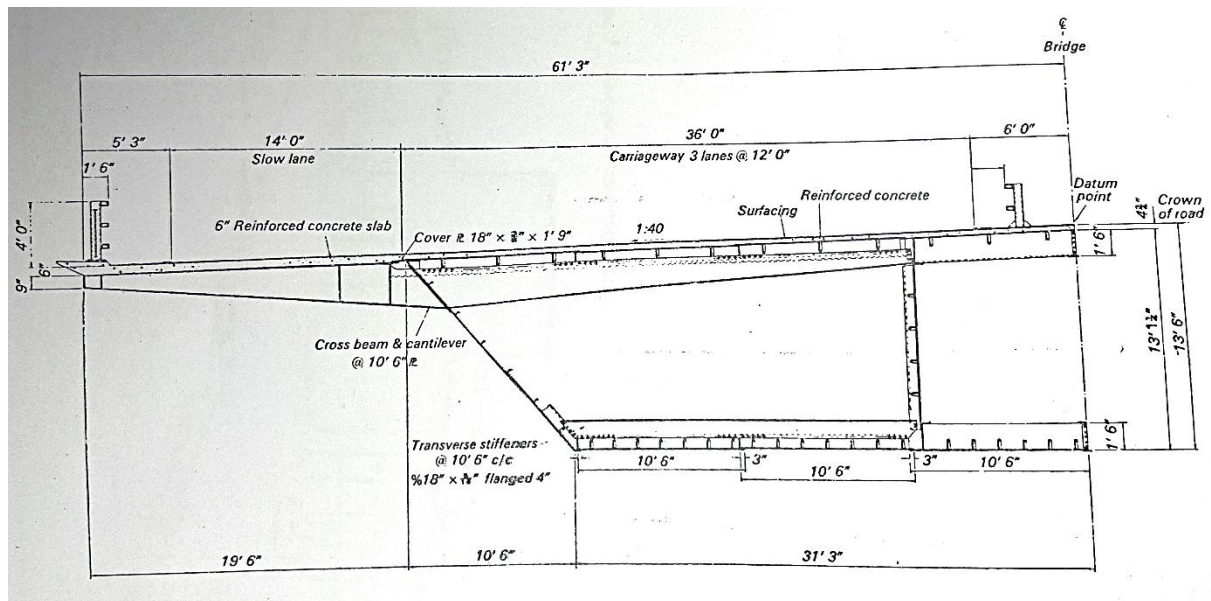


Diagram illustrating the change in shape of the box girder due to variable superelevation. In simple terms, the box girders in the last two spans had a slight 'twist' to match the deck profile of the concrete viaducts at the expansion joints at Piers 10 and 15.

The construction method involved making sets of half boxes on the site at ground level and jacking them up some 200 feet into their final positions. Eight half boxes were joined together on the ground thus forming one half of the deck of the full span. It was then hoisted up to the height of the pier.

This had to be done with exacting care to ensure that each half aligned with its partner. The superelevation, mentioned earlier, caused complications too. The shape of the affected deck components had to be precisely calculated and detailed and accurate construction was paramount. The success of the method could only be gauged once the assemblies are lifted into place and joined together.



Half cross-section of the original design for West Gate bridge showing the six-inch thick reinforced concrete deck. The steel section shown here is the half box described below.

Ironically, the experience of building the span between Piers 14 and 15 on the east side of the river, should have rung alarm bells – not only for that span but also for the counterpart span which later collapsed between Piers 10 and 11 on the west side. Span 14-15 was completed notwithstanding a series of desperate measures (as described below) and heralded complications which should have immediately prompted closure of the work to reset the construction method.

The construction method was to assemble the two longitudinal halves of the span on supports on the ground replicating their ultimate position in the bridge. Each could be described as a half box girder – and when the two halves were joined together - after the connection of the longitudinal splice running from pier to pier down the middle of the

span - they formed the completed box girder. Each span comprised eight sections of box girder i.e. there were seven transverse splices in each half box girder. All the splices were done using high-tensile steel bolts.

When it came to lifting the northern half of span 14-15 the staging on the ground supporting the half span was removed such that the assembled length was supported only at each end. The upper plate of the half box girder forming the deck of the bridge buckled in a wave along its length with a maximum distortion of 15 inches.

Neither FFP (Freeman Fox and Partners) nor WSC (World Services & Construction Pty Ltd) anticipated this. Had the complete box girder been assembled on the ground the resistance to twisting (or torsion) would most likely have been overcome by the lateral stiffness of the box. Alternatively, the flange of the longitudinal joint could have been stiffened in some way to brace the edge to resist the buckling.

Despite the clear evidence that something was drastically wrong, WSC decided to lift the half span and deal with the buckling in place – some 200 feet in the air. The southern half was then lifted with a similar result but the cambers<sup>7</sup> between the two halves varied by 3 1/2 inches further complicating the task of aligning the two half boxes.

One end of the sagging half span was raised by 7 inches thus enabling the half boxes to be aligned and joined at the centre after which, the raised end was forced down to achieve general alignment except for gaps which were closed by hydraulic jacks. Some gaps were aligned by placing strong beams above and below the joint using high-tensile bolts tightened hard. There were also other actions taken to finally close the joint.

All this work of forcing and straining the steel would have changed the shape of the bridge slightly but, more alarmingly, it could have altered the properties of the steel - the effects of which are incalculable. Rather than place a hold on work to revise the method of construction to achieve a safe outcome, they forged ahead with no real solution and it was only with luck that this span was erected without disaster. The fact that it was completed probably provided the contractor with a false confidence that they could do it again for span 10-11.

When constructing span 10-11, similar problems arose. Despite changes in the construction method, the two halves when set in place resulted in gaps that were too large to successfully join the sections. During the Royal Commission, it was pointed out that no other bridge of a similar magnitude had used this method of construction.

Learning from the experience of erecting span 14-15, the free edges of the half spans at span 10-11 - running longitudinally down the centreline of the bridge – were stiffened and cross beams were installed to prop the flange to prevent buckling. This worked when lifting the half spans. But when they were finally set in place, there was a vertical gap of 4 1/2 inches which was too large to close using jacks.

This discrepancy was possibly caused by other issues which may have complicated the construction method. For example, the alignment of the half boxes was surveyed by instruments but under differing temperatures. They weren't done at a uniform temperature. The effect of differential temperature may have rendered the surveys to be unreliable. Also, a crane was erected on the southern half span located near Pier 11,

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<sup>7</sup> Camber is a deliberate upward bowing of the span, such that when in its final position, it deflects downwards to its design position.

the load of which may have created another possible discrepancy in matching the two half spans.

The north side was erected first and positioned to form half the deck of the span. The southern half box was then lifted into place and once at height, the two half sections were brought into proximity but they only met at their ends. WSC had proposed to install jacks at the stiffening diaphragms in an attempt to counteract the vertical misalignment of the edges of the half boxes and special screwed connections were to be used to bring the edges together horizontally. However, there was a change of contractor at around this time. John Holland Constructions (JHC) took over from WSC and it proposed a different method to save time.

A decision was made to place large, concrete blocks (called kentledge) on one half span to deflect it downwards to close the gap. The kentledge comprised seven 8-ton blocks and they were placed at mid-span. From the Royal Commission, it appears that there were no calculations made about the stresses arising in the steelwork as a result of this action. Although the kentledge closed the gap, a buckle formed near mid-span. After it occurred, the difference in level was taken out by jacks and the two half spans were bolted together but only as far as the buckle permitted.

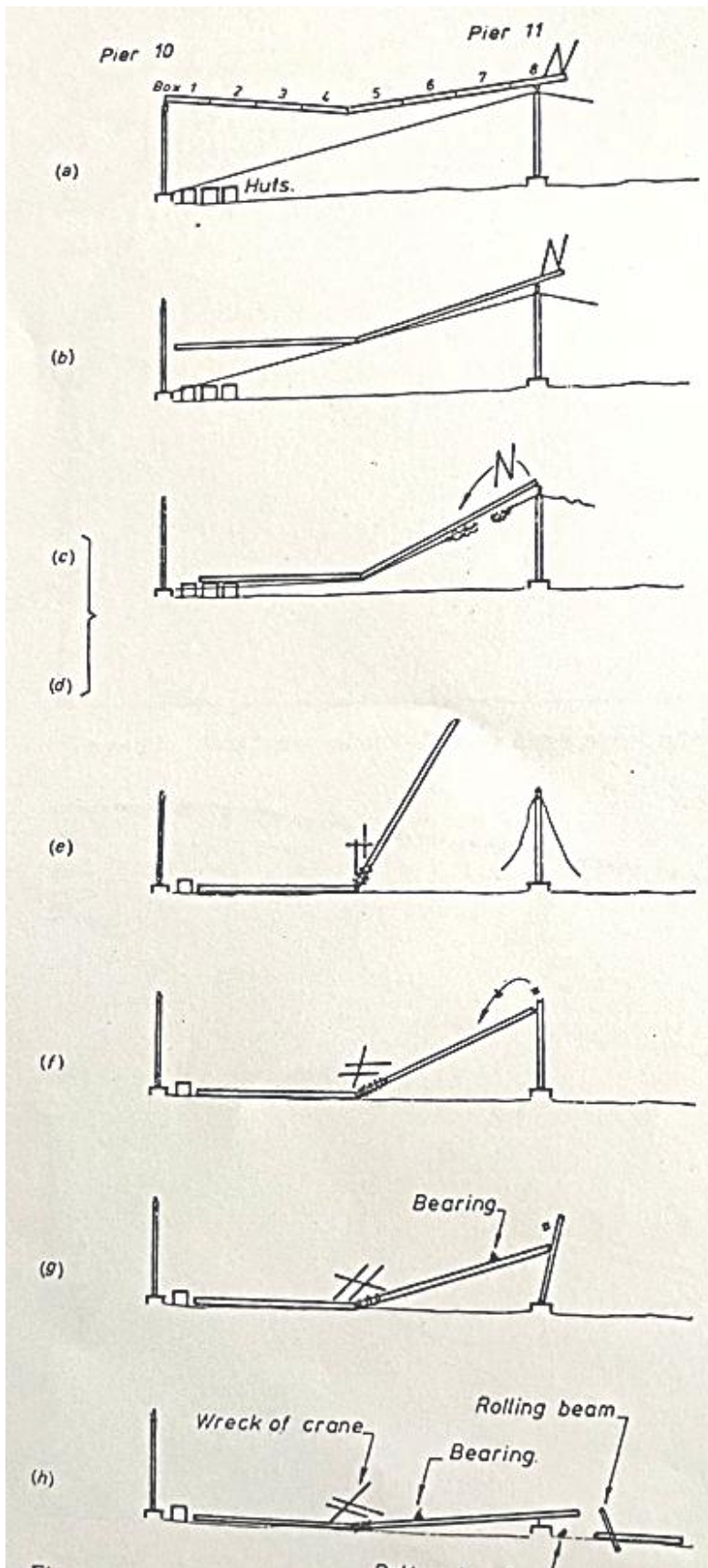
The span remained in this condition for about a month while the parties decided the next course of action. A similar dilemma occurred on span 14-15 where they removed some bolts from the joints to relieve the stress to straighten the buckle. The Resident Engineer representing FFP was uncomfortable about this but he could not offer any other course and he did not want Cec Wilson<sup>8</sup> to see the buckle lest complaints being made.

Thirty-seven bolts in the transverse mid-span joint were slowly and cautiously removed reducing the discrepancy in the height of the buckle but extending it in length. As every bolt was removed, it reduced the bridge's ability to carry the load. People on the deck felt the span settle. When steel is overloaded, it gives warning by yielding slowly. It does not snap suddenly.

It was about 50 minutes between the gentle settlement and the catastrophic failure during which there was frenzied activity by the men on the span trying to restore the bolts in the joint – and to call on senior engineering advice. By this stage, there was nothing to be done. The steel slowly yielded and this could not be reversed and then it suddenly collapsed. From the time it started to sag, it was inevitable that the bridge would collapse.

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<sup>8</sup> Cec Wilson was the General Manager of the Lower Yarra Crossing Authority and was once a senior design engineer with the Country Roads Board



The dynamics of the collapse are shown in the diagram on the left.

Pier 11 was hinged at its base and it was stayed by the cables shown in figures (a) and (b). there were three huts at the base of Pier 10 and a crane was stationed on deck near Pier 11. The span folded at the buckle at midspan - at the joint between sections 4 and 5 - which was the location where the bolts were removed.

The box girder bridge was pulled off Pier 10 and during its descent, boxes 1-4 were near horizontal as shown in figure (b). The horizontal momentum pulled the span towards Pier 11 and the western end of the horizontal span fell on two of the huts at the base of Pier 10.

The hut nearest the pier was undamaged. The men in the two outer huts were killed outright. This is shown in figure (c).

The falling bridge broke the stays supporting Pier 11 and dislodged the crane at Pier 11. When boxes 1-4 hit the ground, there was a whip-lash reaction at the other end and boxes 5-8 lifted off Pier 11. The crane (and other equipment - including fuel and oils) and the men on the deck fell to the ground and fire broke out in the wreckage.

The rotary momentum of boxes 5-8 ceased and then reversed and boxes 5-8 crashed into Pier 11 dislodging the bearing on to the deck of the bridge. This is shown in figures (e) and (f). Pier 11 became unstable and it fell to the ground. It fell on to the mud on the bank of the river and slid sideways. This is shown in figures (g) and (h).



Looking east on Span 10-11. The crane is on the southern half, which has just been jacked up from ground level and it will be rolled towards the northern half where the photographer is standing. The undulating upper edges of both halves are evident. The stiffening of the deck plates is also evident. (Image courtesy of Rob Morgan ARPS)



The fallen span, with Pier 12 in the distance. (Image courtesy of Rob Morgan ARPS)



An aerial view of the aftermath of the collapse. The hut that survived can be seen at the foot of Pier 10 in the background. (Image from Channel Nine news footage)

What I have described above are the technical issues about the design and construction of the bridge. As mentioned earlier, the Royal Commission also cited other issues which contributed to the disaster including the lack of honesty and trust between the main participants in the project, and the toxic industrial relations between the employers and unions and between the unions themselves. Morale on the site was very low – always a sign of ineffective project management.

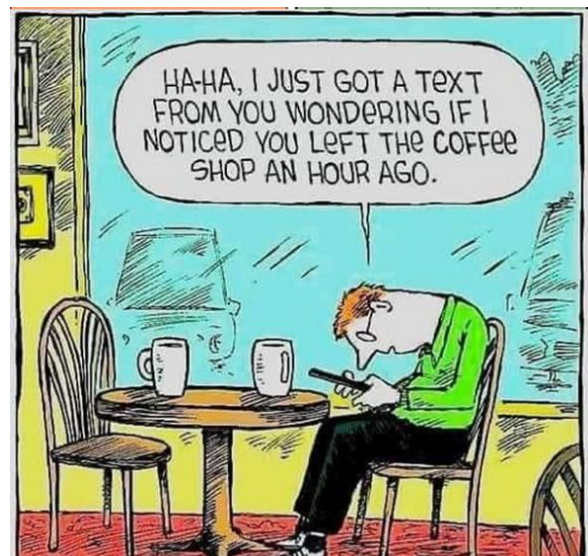
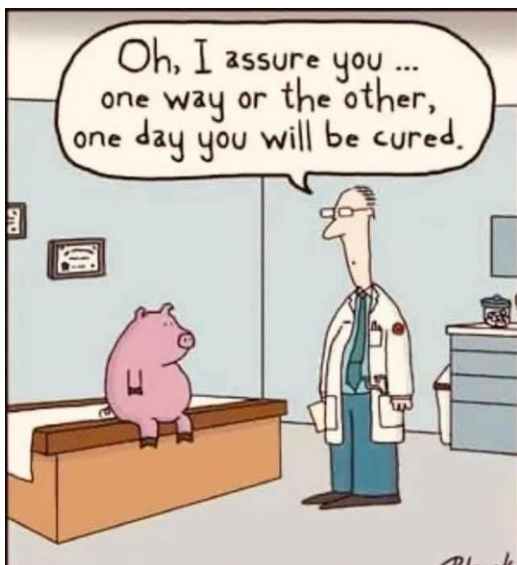
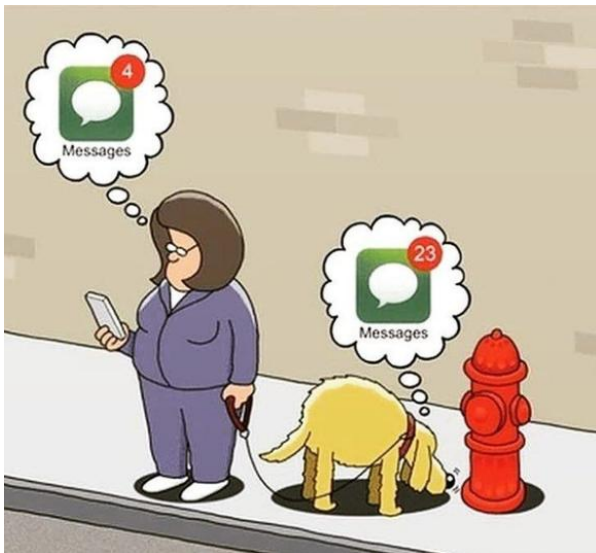
There was a changeover of construction contractors at a crucial time and union action contributed to slowing the work thus putting pressure on project time lines. The Commission quite specifically puts some blame on the labour force for contributing to the disaster. I can't make comment on these issues.

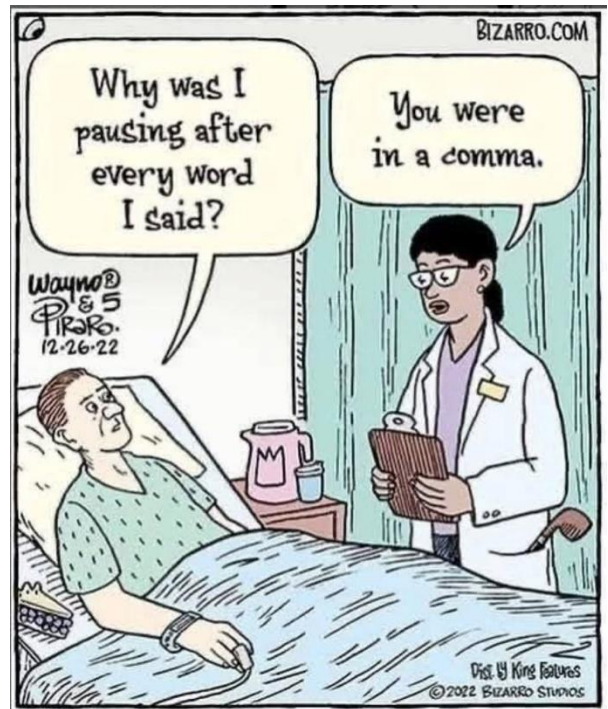
After the collapse, analysis of the design indicated that it was not fit for purpose and the bridge had to be redesigned within the same cross-section of the box girder. The composite concrete deck was scrapped and replaced by an orthotropic steel plate with an epoxy asphalt road surface. The completed bridge was opened to traffic in November 1978.

I have not enjoyed writing this story. As a bridge engineer, I was deeply shocked when I heard the news of the collapse and more distressed when I first saw the report of the Royal Commission. I am also saddened for the men who lost their lives and for the families who would never see their loved ones again. There are others who survived but the trauma will never disappear from their memories and my thoughts go out to them as well. Like Alastair Robinson, I always think of them as I cross the bridge.



West Gate Bridge today. (Image courtesy of Rob Morgan ARPS)





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