

# A SOCIO-ECONOMIC HISTORY OF THE PUBLIC PASSENGER TRAMWAYS OF KIMBERLEY: 1880 - 2000

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

For the last one hundred and twenty years, the tramways of Kimberley have served the Diamond Fields well, and yet surprisingly, very little has been published on the subject. Therefore, it is hoped that perhaps one day, a complete and detailed description may be possible. This present study makes no claims in this respect, for it is hoped that still more information will surface, in which case it may be possible to update and improve upon the current content.

All measurements have been retained in their original “Imperial” format of feet and inches rather than metric, and miles rather than kilometres. The reason for this is that the origins of the tramways date back to the “Imperial Age” and thus the original measurements have been retained for authenticity. The only exception to this has been in Chapter 9, which covers the reconstruction of the tram and its reintroduction in 1985, by which time the “Imperial Age” had been consigned to history.

The drawings of the tramcars have been included in order to give an idea as to how the tramcars and some of the more important items of equipment looked, when in service.

A single individual cannot research the history of the tramways of Kimberley, even only an outline history, for such is the scope of the subject, information must from necessity originate from a myriad of sources.

Thus mention must be made of the many people who have given their time, expertise and information so freely, to assist with the contents of this thesis. Indeed, this is one of the more pleasurable aspects in producing such an account, in that one comes into contact with many people; people that perhaps one would never normally come into contact with.

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## **SYNOPSIS**

This study examines, in some depth, the rationale behind the tramway development that occurred in Kimberley. It also looks at the socio-economic impact that the tramways had on Kimberley's development and growth, covering the period from 1880 to 2000.

After the introduction in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 looks at the overall evolution of tramway development in America, Britain and Europe, with a brief outline of its rise, decline and slow return to favour, which has seen the re-emergence of the tram in many cities.

Chapter 3 looks at the area now occupied by Kimberley and sets the scene for the events that were about to unfold. This chapter also sketches an outline of the early development, which occurred on the Diamond Fields following the earliest diamond discoveries, as Colesberg Kopje was quickly transformed from a small hill to an ever-deepening hole in the ground.

Chapter 4 of this study examines the machinations of the earliest, but stillborn tramway proposals, which came to naught amidst a host of unrelated but pressing issues, including the vital supply of water to the dry diggings. Other significant issues, which are included, are the great Smallpox Epidemic and the general feeling of uncertainty and unease on the Diamond Fields, which was to come to characterise and haunt the diamond mining activities for many years to come.

Chapter 5 looks at the Gibson Brothers' rise to prominence with their Victoria Tramway Company, which despite setbacks and delays finally became operational in 1887. The chapter continues by explaining how the tramway survived, largely along British lines, using horse, mule, steam and electric traction, despite the difficulties posed by the Anglo Boer war, especially the Siege of Kimberley.

However, as described in this study, the tramways served more than merely the provision of a means of public transport, although this was certainly the primary function. The tramways assisted in transforming a shanty town of tents and corrugated iron huts into a "proper" town, complete with all the trappings of civilisation, such as electric street lighting and theatres, and later on into a fully-fledged city. As the settlements expanded, the tramways were extended to serve the new fledgling suburbs, although it must be stated, sometimes with a certain degree of reluctance.

This meant that Kimberley's growth was not as a result of the expansion of the extending network of the tramways, but rather the other way around. This was partly because that prior to 1914, the tramways had been expected to generate a profit rather than a loss! Basic economic principles applied, and although the social responsibility of providing the inhabitants with an effective means of public transport was forthcoming, it came at a cost to the passengers, and the fares were never cheap.

Chapter 6 looks at the two schemes considered by the Kimberley Borough Council, one of which became operational, but as an industrial undertaking only. The second, and more important scheme, proposed by the ratepayers of Ward 5, failed to find municipal support and thus the residents were compelled to wait until it was finally resurrected successfully in 1915.



Chapter 7 examines the promotion of De Beers own tramway scheme into a highly professional Americanised electric interurban, linking Kimberley with the pleasure resort at Alexandersfontein. Despite difficulties, the system also developed into a successful tramway, which in 1914 was incorporated into the Kimberley Tramways, which also took over the operations of the Victoria Tramways Company as from 1 July 1914.

Chapter 8 of this study looks at the challenges confronting De Beers Consolidated Mines Limited with assuming full responsibility for operating the Kimberley Tramways. The year 1914 was to prove a watershed in the fortune of the tramways, in that from the De Beers' perspective, the tramways were now seen as part of a larger corporate initiative involving the provision of greater social responsibility for Kimberley. Thus running the tram service at a small loss was quite acceptable. Indeed it was perceived as part of the necessary price to be paid for "keeping faith with the inhabitants of Kimberley". The main difficulty was the integration of two virtually separate systems and routes, plus three new extensions, into a properly integrated public system. This task would have been eased considerably had Kimberley been in the midst of an economic boom. Unfortunately the opposite was true, and Kimberley experienced more economic turbulence during the inter-war years than at any other period in its history. Somehow the trams kept operating for the full twenty-five year period of the concession, but thereafter even De Beers could not afford to continue.

Sadly, the price of keeping faith, in monetary terms, did eventually rise to unacceptable levels. With annual losses exceeding £12,000 during the late 1930s, and the expectation that this figure would increase, closure was inevitable. Nevertheless, the public passenger service provided by De Beers offered Kimberley's inhabitants the lowest tram fares in the country. Nevertheless, certain truncated sections of the system lingered on right through to the mid-1970s.

Having operated the public passenger service for the residents of Kimberley for the full twenty-five year concessionary period on behalf of the Kimberley City Council, the tramways did eventually close in 1939. Had De Beers not closed the tramways when they did, the outbreak of the Second World War would most certainly have.

Chapter 9 examines how the revival of the tramways was first mooted, until success was finally achieved. This study has also chronicled that through some strange quirk of fortune, some of the tramcars managed to survive, albeit on the De Beers industrial system, but survive they did, until the time came for their revival. Although today only one solitary tramcar survives in service, the spirit of the past is retained. Nevertheless, much more could have been achieved, but the initiatives offered were not acted upon. Thus tramcars that could have been restored were thrown aside as surplus to requirements, and bereft of their fittings, unceremoniously dumped in a scrap yard. The chapter continues with how the tramway has continued in operation into the twenty-first century, and so that today, it remains unique in Southern Africa.

Having chronicled the socio-economic history of the tramways of Kimberley, Chapter 10 of this study attempts to put events in Kimberley into the larger global and South African perspective. It looks at what lessons can be learnt from Kimberley's experiences in tramway operation, and considers whether Kimberley's experiences with trams, combined with the light rail transit concept, offer any possible benefits or solutions towards solving some of South Africa's current public transport needs. It concludes with recommendations for the future, including the suggestion for taking the original tramway concept and updating it to today's modern-day counterpart, light rail transit.

An interesting parallel with Bloemfontein is also explored, where trolley buses rather than trams, were introduced. The concept of other large South African centres of population such as Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban following Kimberley's example in introducing tourist-orientated tramway systems, is also examined.

In the section entitled The Road Ahead, the three present-day imperatives of public transport are examined. Having explained the nature of these three imperatives, namely; Strategic, Tactical and Operational, Kimberley is compared against each of these imperatives in turn, and then against modern day parameters. The two perspectives are then compared and comparisons drawn, showing both similarities and differences. The scope of the similarities are very apparent and the main difference is noted as being that South Africa's current transport legislation appears better equipped to guide current and future transport policy, than previous legislation.

Thus the study concludes by expressing the hope that Kimberley's experiences with the provision of public passenger transport, covering the last one hundred and twenty years, can make a valuable contribution to the future wellbeing of public transport throughout Southern Africa.



## **SINOPSIS**

Hierdie diepgaande studie ondersoek die rasionaal wat agter die ontwikkeling van openbare tremspoor-dienste in Kimberley gelê het, asook die sosio-ekonomiese impak wat die tremdiens op Kimberley se ontwikkeling en groei (oor die tydperk 1880 tot 2000) gehad het.

Na die inleiding in hoofstuk 1, spreek hoofstuk 2 die evolusie van tremontwikkeling in Amerika, Brittanje, en Europa, aan en gee 'n oorsig van die uitbreiding, inkrimping en die stadige terugkeer tot aanvaarding van die modus, wat nou in baie stede weer ingebruik geneem is.

Hoofstuk 3 kyk na die gebied rondom Kimberley en stel die agtergrond tot die gebeure wat in hierdie studie beskryf word. Die hoofstuk skets ook die vroeë ontwikkeling op die diamantvelde.

Hoofstuk 4 ondersoek die vroeë tremvoorstelle wat eintlik tot niks gekom het nie, onder die moeilike omstandighede van watertekorte, siektes en algemene onsekerheid op die diamantvelde.

Hoofstuk 5 beskryf die Gibson broers se Victoria Tramway Company, wat in 1887 begin bedryf het, en verduidelik hoe die tremdiens oorleef het, met die gebruik van perd, esel, stoom en elektriese trekkrag, ten spyte van die Anglo-Boer oorlog en die beleg van Kimberley.

Die trem het meer as net aan die openbare vervoerbehoefte van die stad voldoen. Dit het gehelp om 'n tentdorp te omskep in 'n groot dorp, met al die voorbeelde van beskawing soos straatligte en teaters, en later in 'n volwaardige stad.

Soos die vestigings uitgebrei het, is die tremroetes ook verleng om die ontwikkelende woonbuurte te bedien, alhoewel dit soms met 'n mate van weerstand gebeur het.

Dit het beteken dat die groei van Kimberley nie as gevolg van tremspoorontwikkeling plaasgevind het nie, maar eerder omgekeerd. Dit was gedeeltelik as gevolg van die feit dat, voor 1914, van die tremdiens verwag was om 'n wins te genereer. Basiese ekonomiese beginsels het gegeld, en alhoewel die sosiale verantwoordelikheid om die inwoners met doeltreffende openbare vervoer te voorsien nagekom was, het dit teen 'n prys gekom - tariewe voor 1914 was nooit goedkoop nie!

Hoofstuk 6 beskryf die twee tremvoorstelle wat deur die Kimberley se stadsraad oorweeg is, waarvan een as 'n industriële onderneming voortgesit is.

Hoofstuk 7 beskryf die uitbreiding van die tremdiens na Alexandersfontein wat deur De Beers gefinansier is, en wat in 1914 by die Kimberley Tramways inkorporeer is.

Hoofstuk 8 spreek die uitdagings aan wat De Beers moes hanteer toe hulle volle verantwoordelikheid in 1914 vir Kimberley Tramways aanvaar het.

Die jaar 1914 was 'n waterskeiding in die welsyn van die tremdiens omdat De Beers die tremdiens nou gesien het as deel van sy korporatiewe verantwoordelikheid teenoor Kimberley. Dit was dus aanvaarbaar dat die tremdiens 'n klein verlies maak – in wese was dit gesien as deel van die prys wat nodig was om vertroue te behou onder die inwoners van Kimberley.

Ongelukkig het die prys uiteindelik na onaanvaarbare hoogtes geklim, want in teenstelling met die tydperk voor 1914, het die tariewe wat van passasiers gevra was, geval tot die laagste in Suid Afrika. Alhoewel 5 miljoen passasiers jaarliks vervoer is, kon hierdie toenemende verliese nie onbepaald voortduur nie.

Nadat De Beers die openbare vervoerdiens in Kimberley namens die stadsraad vir die volle 25 jaar van die konsessie bedryf het, het die diens uiteindelik in 1939 gesluit. Al het De Beers nie die tremdiens gesluit wanneer hulle dit wel gedoen het nie, sou die uitbreek van die tweede wêreldoorlog dit waarskynlik gedoen het.

Hoofstuk 9 beskryf die herinstel van die tremdiens in Kimberley. Deur 'n eienaardige verloop van sake, het sekere trems en ander toerusting in Kimberley oorleef. In die 1970s het die proses begin wat daartoe gelei het dat daar vandag darem een roete en een trem nog in gebruik is. Hierdeur word die “gees van die verlede” behou. Méér kon moontlik gedoen geword het, en méér geleenthede kon gebruik gewees het, maar nietemin bly Kimberley die enigste plek in suider Afrika waar 'n egte 1905 trem nog gevind kan word en waar die ondervinding om op hom te ry, wel op 'n daaglikse basis geniet kan word.

Alhoewel die hoofklem van die studie op die rol van Kimberley in Suid-Afrikaanse tremontwikkeling van die vroegste dae tot 1947, lê, word die parallel met Bloemfontein, waar trolliebusse ingestel is, ook ondersoek. Die voorstel om toeris-geörienteerde tremdienste in Kaapstad, Johannesburg en Durban in te stel, word ook gemaak.

In die voorlaaste hoofstuk word die drie “imperatiewe” van openbare vervoer ondersoek, naamlik die strategiese, taktiese en operasionele. Kimberley se ondervinding word teenoor elkeen van die drie vergelyk, eerstens uit ‘n geskiedkundige oogpunt en daarna teen die huidige behoeftes van openbare vervoer. Die studie bevind dat daar sterk ooreenkomste tussen die geskiedenis en die huidige bestaan en dat huidige Suid-Afrikaanse vervoer wetgewing eintlik sterker is om vervoerbeleid te “dryf”, in vergelyking met vorige wetgewing.

Die studie spreek die hoop uit dat Kimberley se openbare vervoerondervinding oor ‘n tydperk van meer as een honderd en twintig jaar, ‘n waardevolle bydrae sal kan maak tot die optimisering van openbare vervoer in Suid Afrika in die toekoms.



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