

'Attractive Timber Waiting Sheds' Public Bus Shelters of Early Canberra

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If you were to drive around the inner residential suburbs of Canberra chances are that you will see some of the city's early bus shelters lining the roadways. They are constructed from timber and greatly contrast with the ubiquitous concrete 'block-house' type structures which line the roads through the outer suburbs and with the new aluminium and Perspex modern shelters being built at the Civic Interchange in the city. If you come across one of these wooden shelters then you are travelling on one of Canberra's early established bus routes.

The first public omnibus service in the Canberra City area was commenced by the Commonwealth Department of Works in October 1923. It was mainly for the benefit of workers constructing the buildings in the new city and ran between the various camps and 'tent cities' to the many building sites in Civic and Parkes. The general public had to wait another two years before they were served with a bus transport system. In 1925 a private operator began running a service between the two developing residential suburbs of Ainslie and Eastlake (Kingston) and the shopping centre at Queanbeyan.



Waiting for a bus in an 'attractive timber waiting shed' (Photo P. Dowling 2002)

The need for a public transport system began to intensify as the population of Canberra grew. In 1927, the year that the first Federal Parliament sat in Canberra, there were three-hundred and seventy-three private cars, sixty private motor trucks, and fifty-five private motorcycles. Of the five thousand residents, five-hundred and twenty were licensed to drive a car and sixty-one to ride a motorcycle. Among those residents who had no private access to motorised transport, there was a pressing need for some type of transport to move about the city. Mainly, they needed to travel to and from work each week day, but on the weekends the limited leisure and shopping facilities in Canberra imparted a strong desire for recreational travel. In July 1926 the Federal Capital Commission launched a limited bus service to address these needs.

Their original intention, however, was to transfer responsibility of an internal bus service to a private operator as soon as possible rather than continue to provide the service themselves. There was much overcrowding on these early services particularly during the times when workers were commuting to and from their places of work. Services were often infrequent, and time tables often disrupted. By the end of 1927 the service had already run at a loss of £4,000.

What was it like to travel on the public transport system in its formative years? Two of Canberra's early residents describe their experiences for us. The first is an eighteen year old public servant who was transferred from Perth to work for the Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research (later CSIRO). She moved into the Gorman House hostel in 1933 and tells us:

The bus services in Canberra were simple - there were only two - No1 and No2. As I recall, they both plied between Ainslie and Kingston and return. The difference was that, while both ran through Civic and Acton and proceeded along Commonwealth Avenue, No1 would continue - turn at the P.M.'s lodge but No2 would veer off to the left and run past Government Offices, Old Parliament House to the Hotel Kurrajong, Brassey House and Hotel Wellington. Both would end up at Kingston. Although there might have been variations, basically these were the routes and areas serviced.¹

At that time, these were the only routes. Consequently, when I was working at the C.S.-I.R. [CSIRO] I had no option but to walk. It was a long trek across a paddock from Gorman to Civic, then hike along a gravel road to Black Mountain. I don't know whether the road had a name, but if it did, I was not aware of it.

Our second young resident came to Canberra from Adelaide in 1941. She was also a public servant and lived in Gorman House during the years of World War II. She tells a similar story of getting around Canberra by the omnibus system:

I could look out my window [at Gorman House] and see the bus pull up immediately outside of it. At night of course the black-out blind was pulled down. Buses were numbered, and as I remember, were Nos. 1, 1&2, 2, and 3. These were the routes they travelled. I caught the 1&2 route to work when I travelled by bus. No. 1 route, I think, may have gone around to Westridge (now called Yarralumla). 3 route was a direct route from somewhere, maybe the Railway. They were regular at peak hours to and from the public service office, but otherwise there were lengthy gaps often between them. Hurrying on to a bus in my early days I found myself on what seemed like a Cooks Tour around the suburbs of Red Hill and Forrest.

Last Friday night Audrey and I went to Kingston to have a look at the shops. There are not many there but you can manage to get all you want. Some very nice china shops. The shops close at 1/4 to 9 so we were home fairly early. It takes about 1/2 hour to go by bus and they are terribly crowded. They are not double deckers so don't hold many and don't run very frequently.

While travelling by bus in these early days was a somewhat haphazard affair the public transport system nevertheless provided a vital and essential service to the residents for much of their working and recreational travels. As such there was a need for shelters on the routes.

The Public Works Department constructed the shelters on request from the Canberra Omnibus Service. The usual practice for building shelters on particular routes followed the rising populations, the spread of urban development and the increase of usage of each route. There were also strong community demands in the construction of the shelters. Local Progress Associations, notably Reid, Yarralumla, and Griffith, as well as other organised community groups, regularly sought support services such as bus stop shelters for residents of the newly developing suburbs by lobbying local government members.

The first shelters began to appear during the 1920s and 1930s. They were of several designs and constructed predominantly from vertical timber boarding. Timber, concrete and glass elements were used during the 1930s and 1940s and from the 1940s onwards steel, fibro, concrete and glass were to be more prominent in their construction. By the 1980s the familiar concrete 'block-house' shelters had begun to appear around the developing suburbs of Canberra. (It is interesting to note that the latest design of suburban bus shelter now under trial is made of moulded plastic - a far cry aesthetically from the first timber constructions).

The reasons for using timber for the first shelters were centred on cost reduction with the method of construction reflecting the need to find economically viable methods of cost saving. Bus shelters were considered less important structures in the growing city and suburbs. In 1944 there was a change from the original vertical board construction to horizontal weatherboard. There had been troubles with the battens twisting and warping on the original shelters. The first design was later rejected for a less costly one. The Stuart Street, Barralier Street shelter built in 1944 appears to be of this construction.

While many of the early structures were constructed with permanent floors of timber floor boards, tiled floors or concrete slabs, some were built without floors. They had internal rolled gravel surfaces which often required re-rolling and grading to reduce the weather damaged surfaces. There was often no sealed kerb, nor pathway for many of the shelters causing repeated complaints from the users concerning the conditions of the surrounding areas, including muddy, wet and rutted grounds. This led to the ACT Omnibus Service crews requesting the Department of Works and Housing to seal the edges of roads at bus stops. Perhaps this was more a case of repeated muddy bus floors rather than muddied passengers' shoes.

The bus shelters were described euphemistically as 'attractive timber waiting sheds'. And that they were. Some came with a name-board declaring the name of the street on which they were located. There was usually a time-table in a glass covered case, and some were illuminated at night. There is little recorded detail of the colours of the bus shelters. A tender was given in 1952 to paint them uniformly with internal and external walls of shadow grey, ceilings primrose and window frames white. Graffiti was seen as a problem as early as 1948 and there were several creative suggestions for solving the problem. One such was to paint the walls a mottled colour thus discouraging the practice by robbing the artist of a monochrome background. Fortunately there is, however, no evidence that this occurred. Vandalism was (and still is) a threat to the shelters. One only has to remember the recent fate of the shelter in Yarralumla. Glass windows were often found smashed and internal light fittings were damaged leading to complaints by the users of the poorly lit facilities. Maintenance of the shelters was a continual process. Maintenance teams would travel to each shelter in sequence to clean and repair the structures making them safe and clean for the passengers. This program was later determined to be labour-intensive and costly and was abolished sometime in the late 1950s.

There are about sixteen wooden bus shelters remaining from these early days. So, next time you are travelling around the inner suburbs of Canberra keep an eye open for them. They are significant structures related to the early growth of Canberra and are visual reminders of the development of the early omnibus service and the first routes. They represent the early public transport network which was extending to serve the growing Canberra population and the suburban environment. While you are looking at the bus shelters cast your thoughts back to our two young early residents who often waited patiently (or impatiently) for their bus on routes 1, 1&2, and 2 seated in one of these attractive timber waiting sheds.

References

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