

Monthly Meeting: Tuesday, 10 May 2022
Mr Griffin's Ill-fated City Railway
with Mark Butz

A 1922 image of Griffin's broken railway trestle bridge has always stuck with Mark Butz as a symbol of how we can underestimate the natural environment. It also began his interest in the whole ill-fated railway idea and in how it came to disappear largely from view.

His May talk to members outlined the sorry story with additional, little-known images that have stayed submerged in collections largely due to eccentric cataloguing and descriptors — an encouragement to think very laterally and sift very patiently in research. He also sought to dispel some myths and misunderstandings.

A railway was fundamental to Griffin's design from its earliest concept — the primary means to get to and from the city, complemented by an extensive streetcar network to move around the city.

Upon his arrival here, Griffin found his design had been pre-empted somewhat by the railway from Queanbeyan and the line to the Powerhouse. His umbrage set the tone for a long and difficult relationship with other government officials and advisors, and the railway has been cited as the chief source of contention.

His City Railway was to leave the line from Queanbeyan and sweep in a gentle arc to

meet the Causeway Axis. The Causeway held back Griffin's mighty East Lake, its water level some 6 metres higher than the central lake basins. It carried roadways, but the railway lines would have pride of place at its highest point, another 3 metres above the waters of East Lake. Emerging onto the Causeway from the south, passengers would be treated with sweeping views of the city and its ornamental waters.

The Railway would pass through the city area with multiple stations, the entire line sunken below the level of roads to ensure no level crossings. It would then link to a new line to be built from Yass at the expense of the NSW Government, as provided for in Seat of Government legislation of 1909.

Frustrated by strident Departmental Board opposition, implementing Griffin's ambitious plans had barely commenced when the Great War broke out in July 1914, and all expenditure on the city was severely curtailed. It was agreed that a temporary surface line could be built, termed a 'construction tramway'.

Reflecting these economies, a spur line left the Powerhouse siding near the station and ran along a low earthen embankment, about 2 metres high, just to the west of the proposed final line for the Causeway. It crossed the

Molonglo on a timber trestle bridge, which was very conspicuous on the open floodplain.

To avoid building a second bridge, Jerrabomberra Creek was diverted into a newly-cut channel, which rejoined the Molonglo just upstream of the trestle bridge.

Excavations and tunnelling in the foothills of Mount Pleasant were avoided by having the tramway curve away from the trestle bridge towards Civic, rejoining the planned line east of today's Anzac Parade.

Temporary it may have been, but a tramway across the Molonglo floodplain would allow city construction to proceed steadily, especially when the river level was elevated, as in 1913 and 1915 when flooding damaged the line from Queanbeyan.

The line to the city was opened for goods traffic in 1921. It terminated at a platform and three loop sidings in Civic Centre, the platform site being in modern Garema Place.

In July 1922, Canberra experienced its largest flood in 30 years, severely damaging the railway. Holes were punched through the embankment while the rails and decking of the bridge were left dipping into the river.

Conflict and economies had led to an unsound design. Loss of the line was almost inevitable with the unwise diversion of Jerrabomberra Creek flanking a poorly conceived earthen embankment, the angle of the bridge trestles resisting the river flow and flood debris, while the timber piles had been installed poorly. While its replacement was being contemplated, in May 1925 an even larger flood set a new record and swept away the last of the trestle bridge wreckage.

Despite the loss, city construction work continued with a new light tramway connection in 1924-25 crossing the Molonglo close to Scott's Crossing. This was an offshoot of the narrow gauge tramway that connected the Powerhouse, Parliament House and the Brickworks at Yarralumla.

Northward of the point at which the link met the standard gauge City Railway in Reid, one rail of Griffin's tramway was moved inward (14½ inches) on the existing sleepers.

This allowed the northern part of Griffin's City Railway to deliver bricks and workers to build the city, until the Brickworks tramway line was removed ahead of the opening of Parliament House in 1927.

Multiple alternative plans came to nothing, and in 1950, Federal Cabinet agreed to remove from the City Plan the railway, the Causeway embankment, and East Lake. The rail alignment through the city was abandoned and reallocated to other uses. The rails were lifted and sold off, and the last bridge, adjacent to the Duntroon Road, was removed in 1959. There is no truth in the myth of a locomotive becoming stranded and being buried.

One apparent misunderstanding has cited a siding close to the Russell Hill worker settlement, but that section of the City Railway line became unusable in 1921, before the settlement began in 1926 – so the reputed siding was either never used or never built.

The line to the city was never replaced, and the idea of a rail link to Yass was finally abandoned in 1972, so now Mr Griffin's City railway was cut off at both ends.

It was then obliterated, except for some truncated rail remnants in Cunningham Street, Kingston, and some spaces or alignments that persisted from the statutory city plan, gazetted in November 1925. Its form is echoed in the alignments of The Causeway, Amaroo Street, Reid, with its remnant embankment, and Lonsdale Street, Braddon. The graceful arc which would have delivered the line to the southern end of the causeway is preserved now as Kootara Crescent, Narrabundah.

A less obvious legacy arose as water from Lake Burley Griffin backed up into the old channel used to realign Jerrabomberra Creek and into the ancient flood channels on Dairy Flat, forming 'fingers' of water that attract a host of bird species. The City Railway is gone forever, but its brief existence bequeathed us the Jerrabomberra Wetlands.

Mark Butz

A more detailed account of this story was published in the *Canberra Historical Journal*, No 80, March 2018, pp 31-41.



The low level bridge over Scott's Crossing ran between near where the National Gallery is located to the area of Blundell's Cottage and St Johns. Of greater railway interest is the low level bridge behind it, which carried loads from the Yarralumla Brickworks to building sites in Civic.

*Photograph courtesy of the National Archives of Australia
NAA: A3560, 4896*



When the Scott's Crossing bridge was completed in January 1929, a major road improvement program was underway. That may explain the two machines on the road opposite what is now the Anzac Parade entrance to St John's graveyard. For Mark, this is another of the 'little-known images' of the railway (foreground) discovered recently. It was catalogued as, 'Aerial view of a cathedral, Canberra, ca. 1920s'.

Source: [Fairfax archive of glass plate negatives, National Library](#)



This Mildenhall image complements the one on our front cover, showing the railway stretching from the right foreground, around Glebe House, to a terminus on what is now Mort Street, Civic. Gorman House, on Ainslie Avenue, is visible behind and to the right of Glebe House, as are plantings around what is now the Rugby League Club and Oval, with a young Haig Park across the mid-distance.

Source: National Archives of Australia, NAA: A3560, 1150