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3. Steel Rails

(a) Trams

As the city expanded interest grew in forms of transport that would be faster and more reliable than sedan chairs and jinrickshas. The use of steam and electricity as an alternative to human muscle power presented possibilities of developing land that hitherto had had insufficient access.

In 1881 a number of schemes for tramways were announced; Mr. F. Bulkeley Johnson, representing Jardine Matheson and Company introduced a bill in Legislative Council to authorise the construction of a tramway along Ewo (now Yee Wo) Street, Wanchai Road, Queen's Road to Western Market and then to Praya West. Mr. Ng Choy was given leave to introduce a similar bill. Later in the same year a further proposal for a tramway from south of Murray Barracks to Victoria Gap, just below Victoria Peak, crossing Kennedy and Plantation Roads, was added to the original scheme. These proposals resulted in a detailed ordinance running to some 53 pages enabling the promotors Franchis Johnston, Frederick Sassoon, Charles Smith and William Hughes to go ahead with the construction of six tramway routes, five linked along the north shore of the island and one from Garden Road up the hillside to Victoria Gap. This Ordinance, No.6 of 1882, as well as detailing the promoting company's rights and privileges contained a provision whereby after three years of operation any 20 ratepayers could put forward representations that they were deprived of the full benefit of the tramway and if, after enquiry, this was upheld the Governor in Council could authorise another company to operate the tramway. The ordinance authorised the tramway to be used for conveying passengers, animals, goods , merchandise, minerals and parcels and the charges included tolls for horses, mules, oxen, pigs and sheep. After the initial burst of enthusiasm interest waned when the question of financing these schemes was examined. Doubts were also expressed as to whether trams could be accommodated on the narrow and, in places, congested streets.

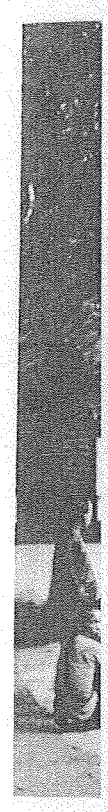
In 1885 the original promoters sold their rights to Tramway No. 6 - that is from Garden Road to Victoria Gap - to the Honorable Phineas Kyrie and Alexander F. Smith for only $HK2,000. Mr. Smith was the driving force in the enterprise. After some financial difficulties the new company - the High Level Tramway Company - began construction in 1885 and the tramway, operated by means of a steam hauled cable was officially opened in May 1888. In 1905 a new company - Peak Tramways Company Ltd. took over. (Fig. 3) At that time the Peak District was little more than a series of barren rocky hills but it provided some welcome relief from the heat of summer and Mr. Smith's enterprise resulted in the rapid development of the Peak district as a favoured residential area from the time that the tramway was opened.

The tramway also served the Peak Hotel which was situated adjacent to the Victoria Gap terminus. Cars were hauled by cable to an altitude of 398 metres above sea level and the steepest part of the track had a gradient of 1 in 2. The original haulage equipment was steam driven and this continued in operation until 1926 when electrical winding gear was installed.

From the Peak Tramway stations sedan chairs, and later rickshaws, provided feeder services and at some stations shelters were erected for the coolies. The Peak station later had a telephone call service manned by an English speaking operator. From 1896 to 1922 up to 60 sedan chairs were licensed specifically for the Hill (Peak) District and between 1919 and 1922 there were 40 jinrickshas licensed for the Peak District.

In 1908 proposals for a second tramway to the Peak were turned down. The route was to be from a terminus at the junction of Battery Path and Queen's Road and thence across Upper Albert Road via the eastern side of the Glenealy ravine to Robinson Road and Conduit Road to a terminus adjacent to the Peak station of the existing tramway. The merit of the scheme lay in the provision of a service to the Mid-Levels at robinson Road. The scheme was opposed by residents near to the line of the proposed tramway, in particular by the Vicar Apostolic of Hong Kong, the Right Reverend Bishop Pozzoni, who objected on the grounds that a tressle bridge over Glenealy would cause too much noise and interfere with religious services in the Cathedral and lessons in the nearby Mission School. An alternative route through the Botanic Gardens was rejected on engineering grounds and the proposals were withdrawn by the promoters. It is interesting to note that a study on traffic in the Central and Mid-levels area started in 1982 included an examination of some form of moving pavement roughly on the same line as the earlier tramway proposal.

The tramway system along the north shore of the island was delayed for some years and the scheme was taken over by new promoters. The original Ordinance of 1883 was replaced and a new bill was introduced in 1901 by Mr. J. Dalziel : this authorised the construction of a tramway within the territory of Hong Kong and passed into law as Ordinance No.10 of 1902 which remains, with amendments, on the statute book to this day. The Ordinance divided the system into seven sections and the company was authorised to build all or any of the sections and, unlike the 1883 Ordinance, specified that the motive power should be electricity. At the end of 50 years or after any subsequent period of five years, Government was given a power of compulsory purchase. The fares set out in the 1902 Ordinance ranged from a maximum of 20 cents for a first class passenger for a shorter



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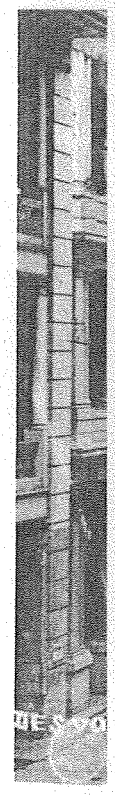

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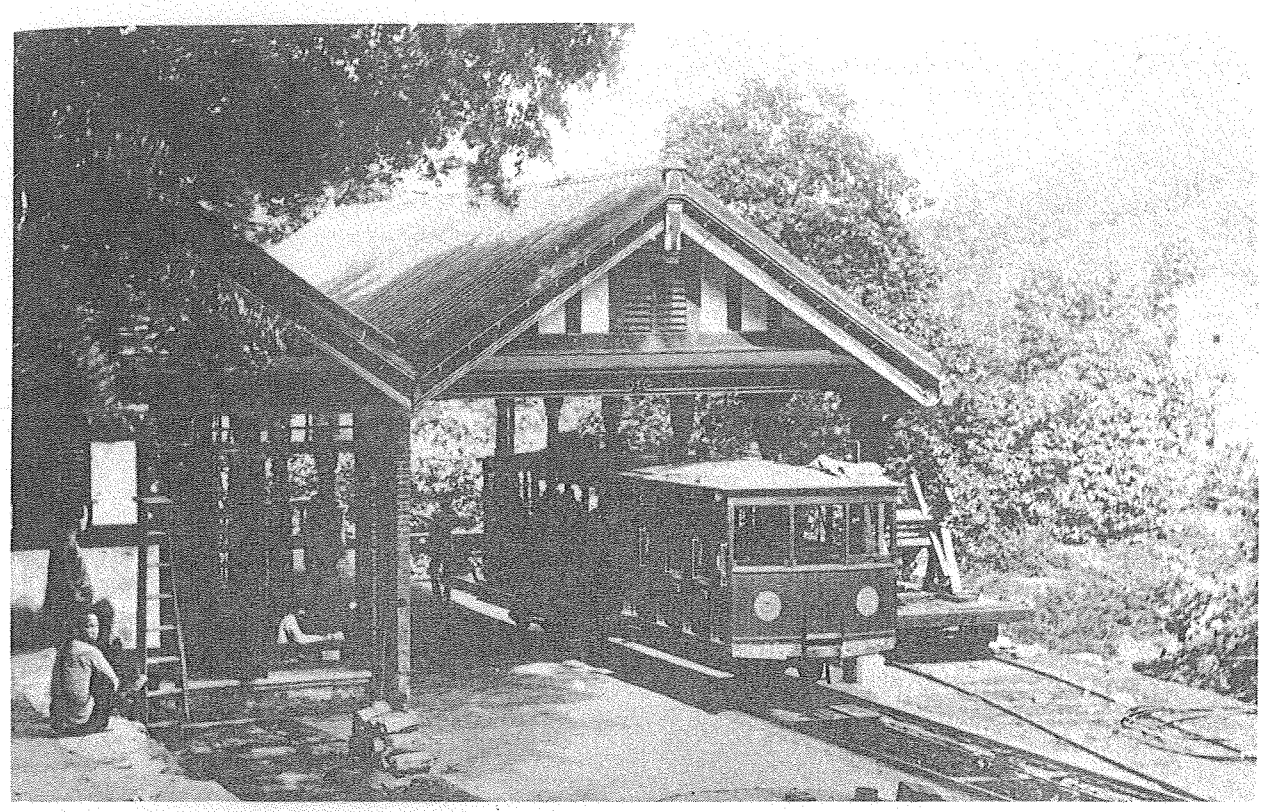

Fig. 3 Peak tramway lower terminus, circa 1900.

Fig. 4 Trams in Des Voeux Road Central, circa 1924.

journey than could be made, 72 years later for the same price! Fares for goods and minerals were also quoted including 20 cents for a chest of opium! In February 1902 the Hong Kong Tramway Company Ltd. was incorporated in England; this company came under the control of the Electric Traction Company of Hong Kong Ltd. which changed its name in 1910 to the Hong Kong Tramway Company Ltd.

Track laying began in May 1903. The gauge was 3'6" (1.07m) and the cars were a maximum of 6'4" (1.93m) in width. A generating station was built near the Bowrington Canal alongside the main Russell Street depot. The tramway was opened in July 1904 and as new sections were opened the system soon stretched from Kennedy Town to Shau Kei Wan. (Fig. 4)

Following British practice workmen's cars were required to operate under the 1902 Ordinance but they proved unpopular and were later withdrawn. Trams were then a prestige form of travel and in 1909 the Viceroy of Guangdong (Kwangtung), CHANG Jen-chun, while paying an official visit to Hong Kong, was taken in a specially decorated tramcar to visit the then new Tai Koo Docks in Quarry Bay. Financially the tramway was not an instant success and in 1912 the company suffered a serious boycott from the Chinese population. This arose from a decision to refuse fares tendered in Chinese silver coins which, while having the same face value as Hong Kong currency, had a lower silver content. The difference represented a 4-5% loss to the company. Government intervention by means of the Boycott Prevention Ordinance helped in ending the boycott early in 1913. Soon after, with a notable increase in the immigrant population, traffic rapidly increased and a first dividend of 7.5% was paid to the shareholders in 1913; from that time the system was firmly established as an integral part of the transport system. In 1914 trams carried more than 9 million passengers.

(b) Trains

Government's interest in internal public transport was largely confined to providing the necessary regulation and law enforcement to allow private enterprise to operate freely. The idea that Government should become directly involved in the operation of public transport was out of keeping with the philosophy that the function of Government was to provide the environment in which trade could flourish but not to engage in commercial enterprises itself. Against this background the involvement of the Hong Kong Government in the development of the Kowloon-Canton Railway comes as a surprise and it is necessary to look at events outside of Hong Kong to find the explanation.

9. Trams

The Tramways Company had started their operation in 1904 with 26 single-deck trams; in 1912, the fleet was expanded by the addition of new trams with double decks and an open top and some of the existing cars was converted to double deck. By the end of the First World War the Tramway Company had a fleet of 80 cars and in 1918 11 million passengers were carried during the year and 1.3 million car miles were run.

In 1919, the application originally made by the company in 1913 to operate trams in Kowloon was finally turned down. A decision had been deferred during the war years on the grounds that planned road reconstruction in Kowloon had been deferred. However, in April 1919, it was announced that Government was considering a tramway system in Kowloon operated either by Government itself or, by a private company in response to an invitation to tender for the concession. The Government proposals were published as follows :-

" It is proposed to have a tramway from the ferry to Sham Shui Po along the new road past the Garden City to the seawall where the glass factory stands. The return journey is via the Kowloon City Road to Chatham Road, along to Salisbury Road back to the Star Ferry. Trams will also run back from the terminus near the glass factory across Kowloon. The junction will be by Waterloo Road towards the sea front. The other junctions across Kowloon will be along Gascoigne Road to or from Public Square Street which is intended for the benefit of persons coming from or going to this part. It is also the ultimate idea of Government to run trams on through Sham Shui Po to Lai Chi Kok across the reclamation which is to be made." (1)

(The glass factory referred to was near the junction of Boundary Street and Waterloo Road.)

It was unusual for Government to even think about operating public transport, as its policy had always been that public utilities could best be operated by private enterprise. The only exceptions to this were the railway and water supplies. Despite the announced intention to operate a tramway system nothing was done and later licences were issued to various bus companies to operate services in Kowloon and by 1927, opinion, both of the public and the Government, was swinging in favour of buses. The Tramways Company's short-lived entry into bus operations between 1927 and 1933 were mentioned in Chapter 7.

In 1925 the company investigated the possibility of a complete replacement of the tramway with buses and trolley buses and powers were sought to operate trolleys from Whitty Street to Causeway Bay via Queen's Road. The investigation found that there was no great advantage in making the change. The trams were carrying 21 million passengers a year with a fleet of 86 cars and the higher cost of

(1) China Mail.

carrying the same number of passengers by buses and trolley buses, of which a much bigger fleet would be required, was not considered worthwhile.

During the 1930's those parts of the tramway system which were still single-tracked with passing loops were progressively double-tracked as the roads were widened by the Public Works Department. This mainly involved the line between Causeway Bay and Shau Kei Wan which was heavily congested.

From 1933, when the new bus franchise for Hong Kong Island was granted to the China Motor Bus Company, competition between the buses and trams was restrained by the fact that the tramway service offered a cheaper second-class fare, but in 1935, the bus company was permitted to operate second class services on those routes which covered the tram routes. As a result, the receipts of the Tramways Company dropped significantly; in 1935, 27 million passengers were carried as compared with 30 million in 1934 and 31 million in 1933. To meet this competition, the tram fares were reduced to as little as 6 cents for first class and 3 cents for second class. This resulted in an immediate recovery in the number of passengers carried with 31 million in 1936 and with the influx of refugees from then onwards until 1941, there was a continuous increase in the number of passengers carried reaching 72 million in 1941, by which time the fleet had expanded to 109 cars

During the Japanese attack on Hong Kong in December 1941 trams continued in operation right up until they were actually under fire from Japanese artillery. During the occupation, services were reduced because of poor maintenance and ceased altogether in November 1944 because of power shortages.

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