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St Kilda Railway Station & Metropol Apartments 60 & 64 Fitzroy Street, St Kilda

As the terminus of the first passenger railway constructed in Victoria, St Kilda Railway Station is the oldest surviving railway station in Victoria. In fact, of the three station buildings surviving from this very early period of rail travel in Victoria, (South Yarra and Werribee are the others), it is the most complete. It also has a train hall, one of only three in Victoria (with Geelong and Ballarat). The rail link to the centre of Melbourne stimulated St Kilda's status and development from the 1850s as a salubrious and fashionable resort and suburb.

The colonial gentry and business class, who had settled at St Kilda from the first Crown Land sale of 1842, had sought relief from the city with St Kilda's fresh air, sea baths and pleasant vistas, only a comfortable carriage journey away.

From 1844 there were daily coach services to Melbourne in the morning, returning to St Kilda in the evening, but reversed on Sundays for day trippers. In July 1851, the publican of the Royal Hotel (10) initiated the first frequent public horse-drawn omnibus service to St Kilda from the city. In 1845, each resident of St Kilda and of the Melbourne Corporation had donated £25 towards the making of the St Kilda Road.

But the St Kilda Road had problems. *The Illustrated Journal of Australasia*, declared: that the road "gives accommodation to comparatively few persons, has involved long delays, cost immense sums for cutting and occasioned no end of disputes beside the evil of a thronged road". William Strutt's remarkable and famous picture *Bushrangers on the St Kilda Road* depicts his impression only a few hours after he visited the scene of a bushranger hold-up in October 1852.

In August 1852, the Melbourne and Hobson's Bay Railway Company was formed to construct a line from Melbourne to Sandridge (Port Melbourne), replacing Wilbraham Frederick Evelyn Liardet's first carriage service which had operated from December 1840. The company's healthy eight per cent dividend in its first year encouraged it to also construct a branch line to St Kilda.

James Kearney's map of 1855 already shows the proposed station beside a spectacular housing estate to be built on the southern end of Albert Park. Streets radiate from Park Crescent, in the Regency manner, like a spider's web. Fitzroy Street is depicted in its full 60 metre proposed width, as a true extension of St Kilda Road to the sea.

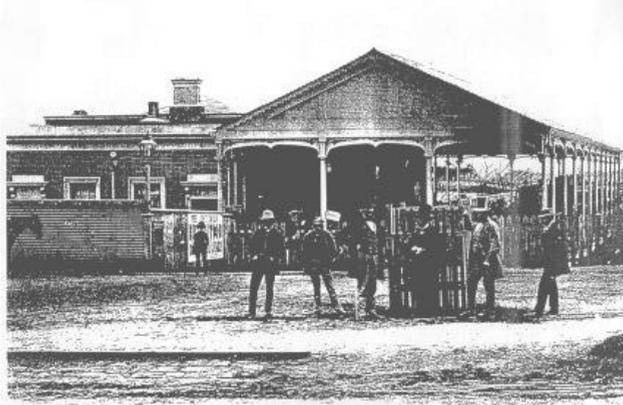
Tenders were called for earthworks and buildings on 3 November 1856 and the line opened on 13 May 1857 with a banquet in the station. Engine house and carriage shed were built later that year. The designer of the station building is not known. James Blackburn architect and engineer was the company's designer, but on his death in 1854, he was replaced by less known William Eldon.



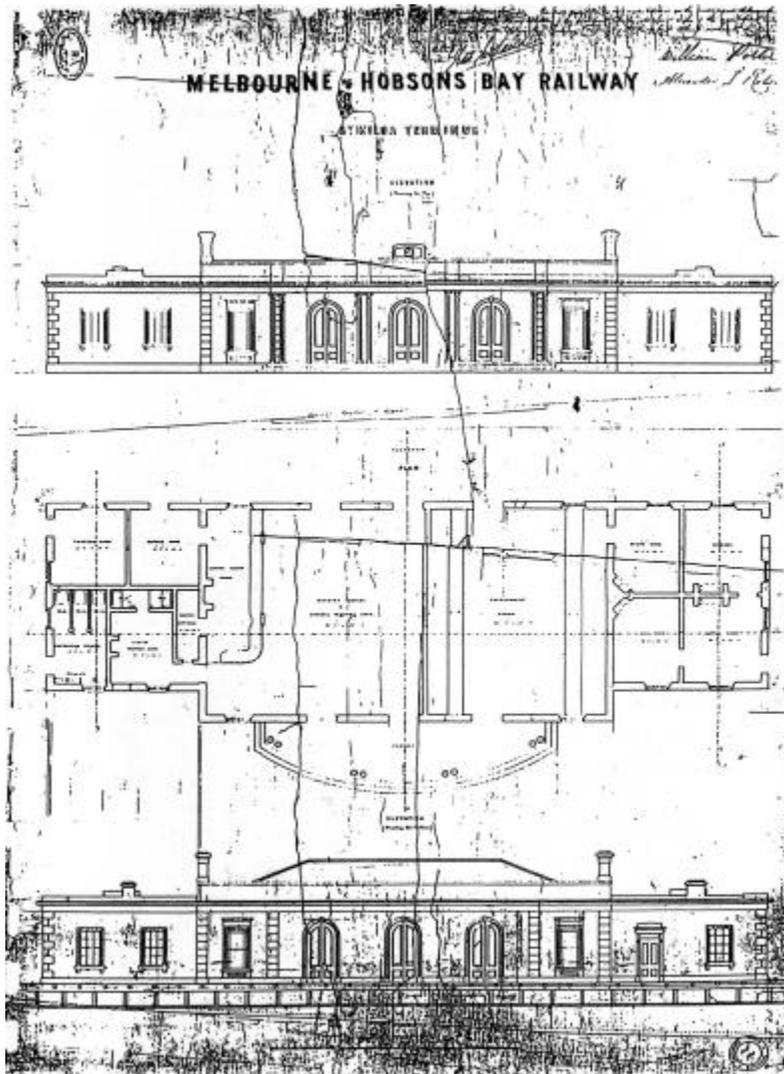
James Kearney's plan for area around St Kilda Station, 1855

The new station did not impress the *Illustrated Journal of Australasia* : ‘...(it) has little to recommend it on architectural grounds. It is chiefly interesting as one of the principle vomitories of the city of Melbourne’. Its western embankment (now Canterbury Road) was contained by a bluestone retaining wall some three metres high. It housed booking office, refreshment rooms, station master's residence, store, staff-rooms and toilets.

These first railways were an expensive form of transport and so the line confirmed the prestige of St Kilda, Gillian Upton observes. The line was planned for these affluent local commuters, but floods of weekend tourists descended to the beach by train; about 100,000 travelled each month. The platform was doubled in length within the year. The station was a link to the Brighton omnibus, which left from its forecourt. This faced the sea, as its destination, rather than commercial Fitzroy Street.



St Kilda Railway Station, c. 1864



Original Plans and Elevations for St Kilda Railway Station, 1856

The line's Enabling Act planned it to extend to the Barkly and Grey Streets corner, but once locals noticed construction extending right into Fitzroy Street, and cutting at Grey Street, they protested. The line already extended 20 metres into Fitzroy Street, causing the Council to reduce the width of Fitzroy Street to 40 metres. In 1858, the Victorian parliament again considered extending the line south to the corner of Grey and Barkly Streets through a tunnel. The Council view that this would be 'detrimental to the interests of the town' prevailed and the proposal was abandoned. It was revived in 1883, when a Parliamentary Standing Committee on Railways recommended extension of the line through Elwood to Middle Brighton.

Gillian Upton recounts that one train did attempt to climb to Barkly Street in the 1920s, jumping the tracks into mid-Fitzroy Street. To the north of the train shed was the coal yard, necessary to fuel the locomotives. Fred Wimpole, licensee of the George Hotel opposite, also secured the licence for the large refreshment room at the station in 1874, within a year of him buying the hotel.

In 1859, shareholders of the Melbourne & Hobson's Bay Railway Company voted to pay £5,000 to the Brighton & St Kilda Railway Company to construct a loop line extension around to Windsor station. This line was constructed over the Albert Park swamp, past the end of the lake, on an embankment and timber viaduct then parallel to Union Street, by the end of the year. By the end of 1861, it had extended to Brighton Beach. It is depicted on Cox's map of 1866. The loop, such an ambitious, costly folly for a private enterprise, was closed 11 months later, when the Richmond line was extended to Windsor by another company, and it was dismantled in 1867.



Cox's plan for extension of railway line to Brighton, 1866

The Fitzroy Street scene which met the eager tourists is described by the *Victorian Tourists' Guide* of 1895:

and from this fashionable resort trains - over 60 on every week day - run at frequent intervals from six am. until midnight..... The service is slightly altered on Saturdays and on Sundays 39 trains travel each way..... On leaving the St Kilda station, turn to the right down a wide thoroughfare flanked with pleasant residences, most of which are to be approached through well kept gardens, leads direct to the sea-beach. Here on any fine day, and particularly on any fine Sunday, may be witnessed all those agreeable sights associated with a fashionable watering place, and whilst on shady balconies, individuals may be seen reclining in all the lazy luxuriousness of *dolce far niente*.

In July 1878 the private railways including the (then) Hobson's Bay United Railway were acquired by the Victorian government. Passenger numbers declined by 23 percent when electric tramways opened to Brighton Road (1888) and to the Esplanade (1891). The Victorian Railways Department fought back by installing its own electric tramway between St Kilda Station and Brighton (via Grey Street, Barkley, Ormond Esplanade and St Kilda Street) in 1906, duplicated in 1913. In 1907, the station was substantially renovated. The portico was demolished and a verandah and new refreshment room built facing Canterbury Street. The Station Master's residence was commandeered as a post and telegraph office.

The railway line was electrified in 1919. In the 1920s it was the second busiest station in Victoria after Flinders Street. Over 1957-59, the Railways tram was closed due to competition from motor traffic (68% increase between 1947-51), leading to the decline of the station and of St Kilda itself: "... a sort of Aussie Cannes, with a better beach, has become tawdry, its one guinea now cheap at half the price," explained the novelist Hal Porter from his vantage point as manager of the George.

Gradually the station facilities closed: the refreshment rooms (1969), the post office (1972), the booking hall and ladies waiting room (1976), and in 1981 services on the line were reduced. Sunday trains ended. In January 1983, the St Kilda line was converted to a tram route, initially known as 'light rail'. In 1989, several fires damaged the timber station building and by December, the roof had been destroyed.

In 1996, Donleavy Fitzpatrick envisaged a tiny vineyard with a cheese store on the 'station site'. By 2002, Metropol Apartments at 60 & 64 Fitzroy Street (Billard Leece, architects) rose from the station forecourt site, terminating the successful Canterbury Road series of townhouses (22). Both projects were shepherded through the development process by SJB Planners. An insulting attempt by the developers to name the tram stop at the station 'Metropol' was quickly aborted.

Catherine Heggan, former chair of Heritage Victoria declared that the Metropol is ‘not only right for the current market, but points the way to the sort of developments we’ll be seeing more of in the future. It is built around a public transport hub, it has a community focus and it injects interest and liveliness into the area and it combines living and retail’.

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