

**The Mt Lawley Subway – enabling people
to move safely and
efficiently between the suburbs**

by

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Introduction

People previously relied on the river and poor roads for transportation, but the new Eastern Railway provided a fast and efficient link between the port of Fremantle, the City of Perth, and the market town and commercial centre of Guildford. However, the railway line would pass through Maylands, East Norwood and Mt Lawley creating a divide for people and road traffic wanting to move between the suburbs or for those wanting to travel along Guildford Road through to the City of Perth and beyond.

This manuscript aims to show how:

- (i) the railway was an important means of transport and grew busier as the population increased,
- (ii) the difficulties and dangers of people crossing the railway line became problematical,
- (iii) the building of the Mt Lawley subway opened up a safe route for people and traffic and allowed the railway to run unimpeded, and
- (iv) the subway needed widening as traffic increased with cars and trams.

The Eastern Railway and Fenian's Crossing

On the 1st March 1881, the first metropolitan line joining Fremantle to Perth and Guildford was opened by the Governor of Western Australia, Sir William Cleaver Francis Robinson¹. The line was extended to Midland Junction in 1886. The suburban passenger service did not become available to residents in the Perth Road District until 15 years after the opening of the Eastern Railway when the Maylands Station was opened in 1896. The service proved popular and trains ran from Perth to Midland every 40 minutes or so at peak times and hourly during the day and at weekends. By the middle of 1905, some 2-3,000 passengers boarded trains at Maylands every working day. The Mt Lawley railway station did not open until 1907, after the opening of the Mt Lawley subway.



People and road traffic from Perth to Guildford all passed the intersection of Guildford Road and East Parade, and crossed the railway line at Fenian's Crossing, possibly known as such because of the Fenian convicts' role in building the old Guildford Block Road. In an advertorial about the Maylands Estate in 1897, Fenian's Crossing was shown in the adjacent photograph showing to prospective buyers how easy it was to cross the railway line². Indeed, the Crossing

was also manned 12 hrs a day to help people cross safely³. This may have been the case in the early days but the increase in overall population in the area, and the opening of the Maylands State School in 1903 meant increasing numbers of people were wanting to cross the railway line. The locomotives were large and powerful and would not be able to stop should someone be on the railway line, hence the people and traffic were required to give way to the trains.

Despite attempts to make the crossing safe, people were being killed trying to cross the railway^{3,4,5}, with the bodies often being cut to pieces by the powerful locomotives. The dangers at Fenian's Crossing were becoming increasingly apparent and the need for a better means of crossing based upon public safety, as well as keeping the trains running, began being debated.

The Mt Lawley Subway

Not all subways proposed to improve the safety of railway crossings were approved by the Commissioner of Railways, and one in Kalgoorlie in 1904 is a case in point⁶. However, the Mt Lawley subway must have had merit based on the arguments about danger to the population and that its strategic location was likely to make matters worse as the population and traffic increased.

Public opinion is a strong driver in such efforts to bring about change, and the residents of the Norwood Estate, Highgate Hill, Mt Lawley and the Old Guildford Road districts lobbied the Commissioner of Railways (Mr William J George) and the Minister for Railways (Mr John B Holman) in 1904 for a subway to be built⁷. Whilst there was no real objection by the Minister, things were slow to move due to financial constraints and further deputation by the Maylands Association was required⁸ finally resulting in the Minister for Railways (albeit a new one, Mr William D Johnson) confirming in 1905 that work on the subway had started⁹. The task was a large one and the project took over eight months to complete¹⁰ and despite the potential benefits of the subway, there were complaints about the length of the closure of the crossing¹¹.



Mt Lawley Subway 1907.
Courtesy of Gold Estates Holdings.

A steel trussed railway bridge spanning concrete abutments was finally constructed to carry the railway tracks over the Guildford Road/East Parade intersection and the road level was dropped; the Mount Lawley subway was opened in 1906. Upon first inspection of the adjacent photograph, a number of features catch the eye. Firstly, the road to and under the subway is metalled but not sealed. And secondly, the traffic of horse drawn carts is elementary. But closer inspection shows the railway line passing over the road and confirms that the objective of separating the people and traffic from the railway line was achieved and, in this regard, the subway was a

success.

The progressive development of the Mt Lawley subway which occurred over the next twenty years did not involve the railway line as such as it chugged along steadily, but it was the road which passed under the railway line that evolved to cope with the changing and increasing traffic. By the 1920s, about 15 years after the subway's opening, the main changes seen were the sealing of the road, the insertion of kerbs, and the use of motorized vehicles.

The Network of trams

Following the opening of railways, a more complex network of public transport around the suburbs was required, namely trams. However, it was soon discovered that municipal councils had no authority to lay down tram tracks in public streets for private tramway companies and so a general tramways act was therefore proposed. The Tramways Act (1885) provided a pathway for the laying of the first tramway, but the proposal did not proceed. The next proposal was granted a provisional order under the City of Perth Tramways Act (1897) authorising construction of an electric tramway within the boundaries of the City of Perth, providing it would not interfere unduly with the railway system. Sadly, this did not go ahead either, and so 12 years after the original Tramways Act (1885) there was still no tramway built in Western Australia.



Mt Lawley Subway in 1930s, with tram #34.
 Courtesy of City of Stirling Library, Local studies Collection

The first tramway to be built in Perth was operated by an English company, Perth Electric Tramways Limited. Construction started on 30 January 1899, with services commencing on 28 September 1899. The first line ran 4.8 kilometres along Hay Street, from East Perth near the WACA Ground to Thomas Street in West Perth with a spur line along Colin Street to Kings Park.

A Royal Commission first mentioned the value of extending the Lord Street line down to Ferguson Avenue, Maylands, in 1922¹². However, it wasn't until 1927 that the need to increase the range of the tramways resulted in the laying of a single tram line through the Mt Lawley

subway to form the Maylands route. This was not popular with some as it was believed that the tramline would make an already busy and dangerous subway even more dangerous¹³. The extension of the Lord Street tramway and the Maylands tramway route was opened on the 7th March 1928, with a single tram line passing through the Mt Lawley subway.

The widening of the Subway and a second tram line

The subway continued to function with a single tram line down the middle amidst increasing road traffic for another seven years but discussions began in 1935 to look at alleviating the congestion in the subway¹⁴. In essence, three proposals were made to reduce the dangers, namely (i) to widen the subway, (ii) tunnel through the adjoining embankment to make room for footpaths, and (iii) clear obstructions to the view of drivers. Further discussion saw that the widening of the subway was most appropriate, but then three options based upon costs were proposed¹⁵, namely (i) a new subway 52 feet wide costing approximately £14,000, (ii) a second subway adjacent to the existing one at a cost of £9,000, and (iii) two small subways 6 feet wide on either side of the existing subway for pedestrians.



After widening the subway, the 2nd tramline was laid. Courtesy of City of Stirling Library, Local studies Collection

The inputs of the Perth City Council and the Railways and Tramways Departments were sought¹⁶, and a final recommendation of a widening of the subway to 52 feet and including a second tram track, two vehicular ways and two footpaths was published¹⁷. The next stage of negotiations involved deciding who would pay for it.

The provision of funding from the Metropolitan Traffic Trust Fund was deemed the best way forward, but agreement was required from all the metropolitan local authorities. A number of authorities objected, and examples of those not supporting the funding of the project included Melville Road Board¹⁸, Midland Junction Municipal

Council¹⁹ and Subiaco Municipal Council²⁰, but others were supportive such as Fremantle City Council²¹, East Fremantle Council²², South Perth Road Board²³ and Guildford Municipal Council²⁴. Following further discussions and negotiations, the objectors finally agreed to payment through the Trust Fund²⁵.

Three huge girders with a span of 91ft 6in and a height of 20ft were made from Australian steel at the Midland Junction Railway Workshops and designed by the Chief Civil Engineer Mr SJ Hood²⁶. The first girder was put in place in the early hours of Sunday 30th September 1939. The site was well lit by electricity and had over 100 people stay out all night to watch the work²⁷. The last girder was placed in position on Sunday 29th October 1939 and weighed 211 tons²⁸.

Subsequent developments

In August 1951, trams were taken out of service and replaced by motor buses. There were some structural supports added over the years, but the next publicly announced work was in 2014 when the concrete abutments were painted with murals to tidy them up. The efforts of the local Member of the Legislative Assembly, Mr Michael Sutherland, to achieve a consensus by the local governments and the state government departments for the work to proceed was acknowledged²⁹. A cycle path was subsequently added.

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