

Steam Trams in Chinatown

A look at steam tramways, Singapore's first form of public transport

In the late 1800s, Chinatown's central location had turned it into a lively precinct, and its streets bustled with the constant movement of people and goods.

Most people travelled in rickshaws or bullock carts if they were not wealthy, while those who could afford it commuted mostly on gharries – horse-drawn carriages of light design imported from India.

Connecting two centres

Trade to the East from Europe grew tremendously during the 19th century, thanks to the Industrial Revolution as well as the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which not only increased shipping traffic to the East but also amplified Singapore's importance as a trading crossroad of the Far East.

In 1897, a deep-water dock was constructed at Singapore's New Harbour (later renamed Keppel Harbour), in order to accommodate the large steamships that had been built to transport big loads of cargo from Europe to Asia. As more steamships arrived, the busier New Harbour became, and in no time at all, the harbour and the town around the Singapore River became tremendous centres of trade growth.

From this growth stemmed the need to connect the two centres – cargo had to be quickly and easily transported between New Harbour and the area around the Singapore River, leading to the introduction of steam trams.

The rise of steam trams

In 1882, the London-based Singapore Tramway Company was established to construct and operate street steam tramways. Over the next few years, plans were drawn up to construct lines that would reach all of Singapore town, and on 7 April 1885 the first rails were laid. Over the next two years, 16 steam trams were ordered.

The first regular service from Tanjong Pagar to Johnston's Pier began on 3 May 1886. This was the settlement's first form of public transport. The trams ran the entire length of South Bridge Road in Chinatown, between the town area and New Harbour. South Bridge Road got its name as it ran south from the Elgin Bridge over the Singapore River. The road ends at the junction of Neil Road, Tanjong Pagar Road and Maxwell Road. South Bridge Road grew in importance when it became a link between the town and New Harbour. Import and export businesses, including assorted wholesale and retail merchant traders, go-downs (warehouses) and goldsmith shops, set up shop here.

Waning popularity

As modern as they were, steam trams were not popular with the public for a number of reasons. First, the double-decker steam trams had the top deck open, which meant that passengers had to sit directly under the hot sun. Smoke and steam also hissed from the top of the tram – an unwelcome addition to the already crowded and dirty streets. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the fares were expensive because fuel costs were high and overheads were heavy. Rickshaws posed the biggest competition to the steam trams because their fares were so cheap, besides which they were also more convenient and more readily available.

By 1 June 1894, steam trams ceased to operate in Singapore. The next time they made their appearance was in 1905, when they were powered by electricity. But even these electric trams were unable to rival the successful rickshaw, and by 1925 the trams were replaced by trolleybuses.

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