Fact sheet: 3
History of the traffic environment of South Australia – roads, trains and trams

White settlement in South Australia dates from 1836. Narrow, winding dirt tracks were the forerunners of the road network of today.

1841 Toll gate installed at Mt Barker Road to collect revenue for the road.
1856 South Australian Government opened the first railway line between City of Adelaide and Port Adelaide. Steam trains were in operation for the next 70 years. First Adelaide Railway Station was built on the current site in North Terrace.
1873 First tram – a horse tram ran between Adelaide and Glenelg, as a private railway. Adelaide developed Australia’s first permanent (and largest) horse tram system. It grew to 82 route kilometres. By 1883 there were eleven companies operating horse trams.
1894 First petrol fuelled car driven in Australia.
1898 Mademoiselle Serpollet brought a motorised tricycle in from France.
1899 First imported motorcycle seen in Eudunda, South Australia. Glenelg Tramline came under control of South Australian Railways.
1900 First car on South Australian roads developed by David Shearer. It was a steam car and is on display at the National Motor Museum, Birdwood.
1901 Tom O’Grady, Vivian Lewis and Murray Aunger developed a chain driven car – the Lewis. Fred Modistach of Tanunda built the Quad motor vehicle.
1902 The first automobile driven in Mt Gambier was a Quadricycle.
1903 The Automobile Club of South Australia (later the Royal Automobile Association - RAA) began as a social club.
1907 The Municipal Tramways Trust was formed. Electric trams were introduced in Adelaide. The lines were taken over by the Municipal Tramways Trust (MTT) and electrified from 1908.
1911 Police introduced a speedometer on motorcycles to trap speeding cars. RAA introduced legal advice as part of its services.
1913 The first Model-T Ford sold for £215 – two hundred and fifteen pounds ($430). Speeding fines were set at £2/15/ – two pounds fifteen shillings ($5.50) for speeding and 10/ – ten shillings ($1) for drink driving.
1918 The first Adelaide woman to drive Adelaide to Sydney solo was Mrs G. Mackie. The trip took three weeks through muddy terrain. The first motor school – Saunders & Mole – was established to train motor mechanics.

1 Adapted from SafeTrack Rail Education Program Teacher Resource TransAdelaide 1998
1920 Cars were able to travel from 6-9km/h in Rundle and Hindley Streets and 12 km/h in other streets in Adelaide. The speed limit for the suburbs was 12km/h or 20 km/h and the country limit was 48 km/h. South Australian vehicle ownership ratio was 1:11 vehicles per head of population. Adelaide’s first motor show was held.

1923 White centre line markings on dangerous bends were introduced by the Highways Department.

1926 The Highways Department put in the first bitumen surface on Mt Barker, Pt Wakefield, Main North, Main South, Magill, Glen Osmond, Port, Unley, Belair, North East and Gorge Roads, and Nottage and Park Terraces.

1928 The first stop-go traffic signals in operation in Adelaide had red and green lamps. General Motors Holden commenced building cars at the Woodville plant. The Automobile Club of South Australia changed its name to the Royal Automobile Association (RAA). The current Adelaide Railway Station was completed.

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1929 The Municipal Tramways Trust ran its first tram to Glenelg, having taken over the heavy rail line, converted it to 1435mm gauge, and electrified it. H type trams, (affectionately known as ‘rattlers’) painted tuscan red and cream, were purchased for this service and are still in use, 80 years later.

1937 Three lantern (red-amber-green) traffic signals were introduced in Adelaide.

1938 The Anzac Highway was opened.

1955 The ‘Red Hen’ trains replaced Brill railcars on Adelaide’s railway system. During the 1950s and 1960s, trams were painted silver to match the colour of the other public transport vehicles run by the Municipal Tramways Trust.

1959 Practical driving tests were introduced by the RAA's Driver Training School.


1972 Seatbelts compulsory in all cars in all Australian states.

1977 Seatbelts required in heavy vehicles.

1986 TransAdelaide’s new depot opened at Glengowrie. Trams were fitted with pantographs (jointed framework conveying current to electric vehicle from overhead wires). These are now the oldest passenger trams in service in Australia. The first stage of the O-bahn (from ‘autobahn’ (German) meaning ‘omnibus way’) track to Paradise Interchange was opened.

1988 Adelaide took delivery of ten natural gas powered buses.

1990-92 Compulsory wearing of helmets by bicycle riders introduced by all States and Territories in Australia.

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Government of South Australia
Department of Planning, Transport and Infrastructure
2004  Adelaide Metro fleet included 214 (as of Sept 2004) natural gas buses, thus reducing carbon dioxide emissions by 50 per cent, carbon monoxide emissions by up to 80 per cent, nitrogen oxide emissions by almost 90 per cent (particularly sulphur and lead emissions) as well as effecting a reduction in traffic noise.

2006  New fleet of Bombardier Flexity Classic 11 trams phased in for the City – Glenelg route.

2007  Continuation of tram tracks from Victoria Square, up King William Street and west along North Terrace. Adelaide City Council introduced the world’s first solar-powered electric bus, as part of the Connector Bus service.