

OBITUARY

Mark Plummer

21 September 1949 – 16 June 2011

We are sorry to report that Mark Plummer passed away on 16 June. He suffered a stroke a few weeks earlier and had been living with Parkinson's disease for over ten years. For the past few years he had been living at Byron Bay.

Mark was born on 21 September 1949. He was active with his school railway club (Caulfield Grammar) and hence the schools section of Puffing Billy. The school also had a campus at Yarra Junction, not far from the Britannia Creek tramway, and it was here that his interest in timber tramways was kindled. He had a part-time job as a salesman at Model Dockyard, which was very much the focus of the hobby for baby boomers. During his teenage and university years, Mark was a strong supporter of Young Labor. He graduated and worked as a solicitor: first with Legal Aid, then to the USA for 3½ years to work for Skeptics (another passion of his younger years), based in Buffalo NY. His daughter Belinda was born in 1977; Mark and his partner were together for 12 years, but never married. She and his daughter spent one year in USA with him, but didn't like the place. They returned to live with Belinda's maternal grandmother. After returning to Australia, Mark moved into building law and worked at the Housing Guarantee Fund. With both parents deceased, Mark is survived by his daughter, his sister and a nephew. He was cremated, with a service at Emerald Lake to be near Puffing Billy.

Mark played a critical role in reviving the Victorian Light Railway Research Society (now LRRSA) in 1966. In that year, when Mark was 16 turning 17, he succeeded in convincing Frank Stamford that the Society should be revived. Frank was sceptical, expressing the view that such a Society could only expect to attract about 60 members. At the time the VLRRS had been inactive for about 18 months, and there had been no plans to revive it.

As the Honorary Secretary's position was vacant, Mark was invited to take it. This he did, and he held it for three years until June 1969. One of Mark's great strengths was his ability to sell what the Society had to offer, and it was a strength which was totally lacking in the Society up to that time – and has probably not been equalled since. Mark took every opportunity to gain new members. He would work railfan trains from one end to the other distributing membership forms and sample magazines, and signing up many members on the spot. Then, after approval was obtained from the ARE and ARHS to distribute membership forms through their mailouts, membership grew to 197 by the end of 1966.

In December that year the Society held the first of many meetings in the Victorian Railways Institute in Melbourne, and for this Mark organised a very well attended film night covering a wide variety of interesting subjects. Then on 7 May 1967 he organised the first of the Society's major tours, hiring a bus to go to Alexandra and Rubicon, and arranging travel on the SEC's Rubicon incline and tramway.

At the same time Mark broke new ground in the way that Victorian timber tramways were researched. Much of this required a lot of travelling, and as he was too young to have a driver's licence, he hitch-hiked everywhere. He sought out and interviewed the former owners and employees associated with the timber tramways of Forrest and Barwon Downs, uncovering much new information and sourcing many previously unknown photographs. The result of this was published in LR 18, 19 and 22. In LR 21 he wrote an article on Cropley's Darnum-Ellinbank tramway, about which little had previously been known.

As a result of that frenzy of activity Mark not only established a viable membership base for the Society, but also demonstrated that successfully researching timber tramways required very different techniques to those used for government railways.

The scope of the Secretary's role was not clearly defined in the LRRSA Rules at that time, and by 1969 Mark's perception of his role differed from that of others. As a result a Constitution Committee was elected by the Society at an

Extraordinary General Meeting, and a new Constitution was adopted in June that year. Mark chose not to stand for election on the new Council.

Phil Rickard recalls:

"Like many in the late sixties, I was signed-up by Mark on a fan trip – in October 1966. Coming back from Healesville behind N468. His enthusiasm was rather infectious – I'm sure I'd never thought about 'light railways' prior to that date but Mark's brochure convinced me that I needed to part with a hard earned 7s 6d for a junior membership in order to find out more about them. Never regretted it. Greatest memory (teenagers' brains work in funny ways) was when he stood on a bullants' nest and got bitten, on a Mclvor tour. I recall the leaping around and yelling!"

Rod Smith recalls:

"Mark and I were contemporaries. Despite the many tensions within VLRRS/LRRSA at the time, we got on well. He had a brilliant mind, and was always very plausible. I was a guest at his 21st birthday party, with his university friends singing 'And it's one two three, what are we fighting for... Next stop is Vietnam, fighting for Uncle Sam'.

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"At the end of 1971, when I was about to enter national service, Mark phoned me one day and said he had two free tickets for that night's ferry to Tasmania. 'Would you like to head there for a week?' I packed fast, and was on the special M&MTB bus to the Webb Dock terminal. The check-in clerk said: 'Mr Plummer, this is one ticket, not two'. We went home, and booked concession tickets to fly next day (TAA — Mark would only ever use the government airline). My luggage arrived; Mark's didn't (it came across on a later flight).

We had a great time, the only holiday of my life where I relied on hitchhiking. On one night, we camped in a hike tent in a mosquito swamp near Zeehan. Soon after, I chickened out of hitching, and took a bus (an iconic Flexible Clipper) to Strahan. Mark not only hitched a lift, he charmed the driver into going via the former railway alignment, and the car was stuck in sand twice. We hired a car for one day to visit Lune River. At the quarry, the bulldozer transporter was against the loading ramp, so we drove the car onto it and took a photo.

"We lost touch. One day, relatively recently, I was on escalator at Melbourne Flagstaff station, and there was Mark heading in the other direction. I did an about turn, and met him at the top. It took me a while to realise that his medical condition had changed. Over the next few months, I had him as a guest aboard my boat, cruising from Sale. He also stayed at my house for a few nights when fleeing from internal family tensions after the death of his mother. He seemed to find peace and a niche when he relocated to Byron Bay; I believe that he returned to providing volunteer legal aid. He was forwarded an invitation to be part of the LRRSA Fiftieth Anniversary celebrations. Regrettably, Mark didn't (or couldn't) respond.

"In his time, Mark had been abrasive and demanding, a young man full of himself: we were all like that in our own way; that is what being young 20s is all about. His sincerity cannot be doubted, and his contribution was immense."

Away from LRRSA, Mark was known widely for establishing the railtrails movement in Australia. He had seen the movement in action in USA, and was impressed. Always one to support causes (he was still promoting schemes for trolley rides on closed lines in his declining years), he attracted a group of like-minded people to form Railtrails Australia. The group has had great success in convincing local communities to fund and manage the conversion of closed railway lines to recreational trails for hikers, cyclists, disabled people on mobility quadrupeds and horseriders. The initial success was in Victoria, but the idea has spread interstate, and the well-produced manual is now into a second edition, with regular online updates.



Mark on the Beech Forest Railtrail, c.2005.

Photo: Alexander McCooke

Frank Stamford, Phil Rickard, Roderick Smith