



Public transport

The history of public transport to Green Point Common and the Atlantic suburbs

The first public transport service to the developing suburbs of Green Point and Sea Point began in 1838 and employed a stagecoach-like conveyance known as an 'omnibus'. *Omni* is latin for 'all people' and so indicated that, for a fee, anyone could avail themselves of this service. In the above lithograph of Cape Town by Walter Stanhope, c. 1849, the Cape Town to Sea Point omnibus, *Victoria*, can be seen operating among more conventional forms of transport in use at that time.

For a quarter century these coaches rumbled along providing a much needed, but nonetheless bone-jarring, service over poorly maintained roads. In the summer they churned up clouds of blanketing dust which in the rainy months of winter turned into mud, reported to have been over three feet (one metre) deep in places. The result, in either case, was that it was often said passengers needed a change of clothes, if not a bath, upon reaching their destination. Little wonder that news of an enabling act passed in 1861 to allow for the development of a light rail, horse-drawn, tram service to Sea Point, was met with joyous support from long-suffering commuters.



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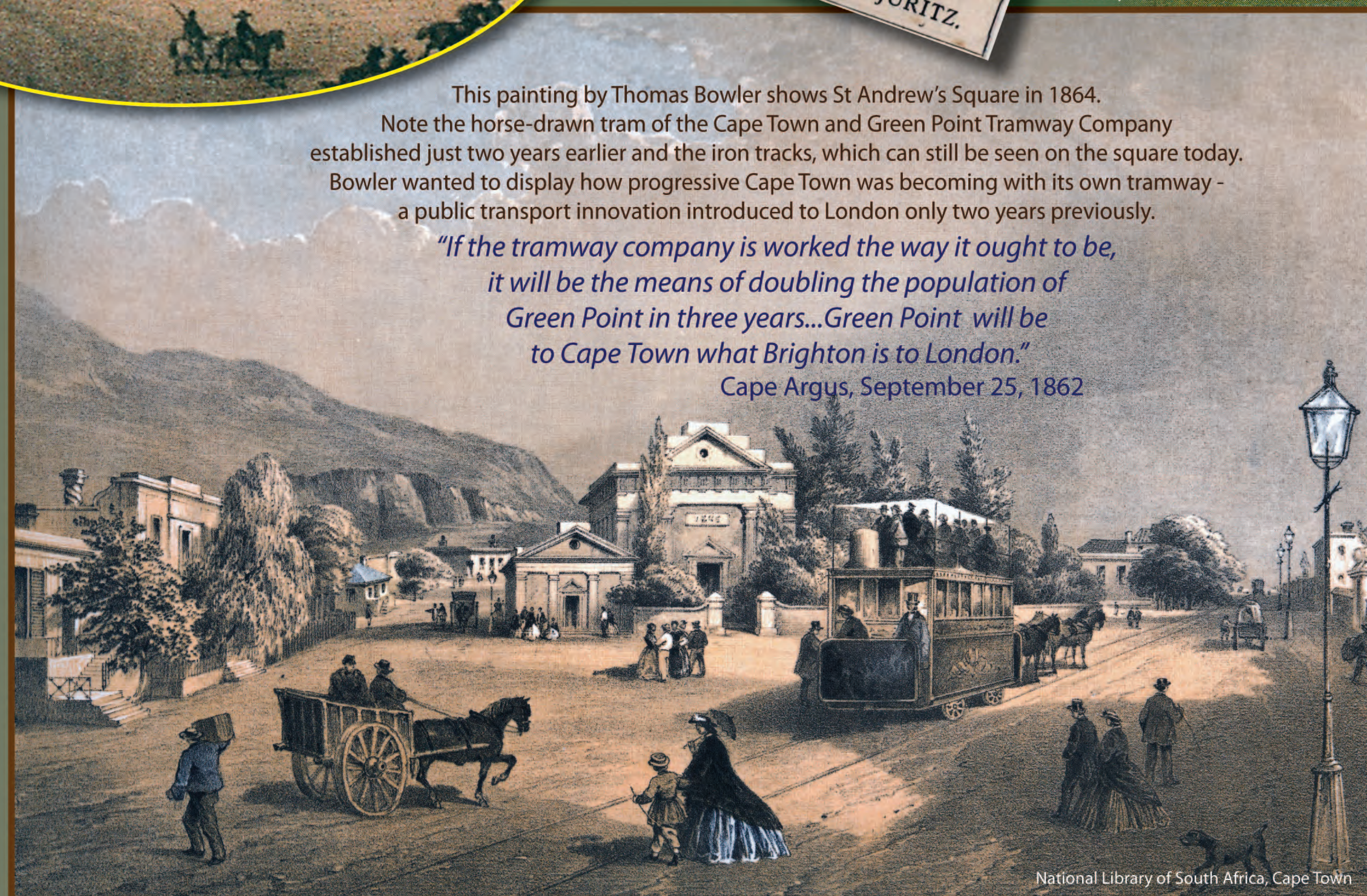
J. P. F. JURITZ.

An advert from the Cape Argus c.1895
Courtesy: Dr. J.M. Juritz

This painting by Thomas Bowler shows St Andrew's Square in 1864. Note the horse-drawn tram of the Cape Town and Green Point Tramway Company established just two years earlier and the iron tracks, which can still be seen on the square today. Bowler wanted to display how progressive Cape Town was becoming with its own tramway - a public transport innovation introduced to London only two years previously.

"If the tramway company is worked the way it ought to be, it will be the means of doubling the population of Green Point in three years...Green Point will be to Cape Town what Brighton is to London."

Cape Argus, September 25, 1862



Opening of the Green Point and Sea Point Tramway on May 1st, 1863. Pictured are various dignitaries with project engineer, James Bisset, standing with top hat in the centre of the picture.

Courtesy: Cdr. W.M. Bisset



The Cape Town and Green Point Tramway Company began operation on May 1st, 1863. At an appointed time trams would depart from each end of the single track line in order to meet and pass at a half way 'crossing' near Three Anchor Bay. This obviously allowed only one tram each way at a time or 12 return trips from Cape Town or Sea Point each day.

Although designed to carry 25 passengers inside with a further 16 on the roof, it was not unusual to find the cars overloaded with as many as 90 commuters above, inside and clinging to every available handhold. By the early 1890s this demand for transport had grown to such an extent that investors began to consider the feasibility of instituting a train service along the Atlantic seaboard.

The Metropolitan and Suburban Railway Company began operation in September of 1892. From the onset it was never an unqualified success. While it was generally agreed that the trains offered a more comfortable ride, the stations along Beach Road were not as centrally located for commuters as those of the tramway along Main. The Cape Town terminus was also less conveniently located at the bottom of Adderley Street - while the trams delivered passengers to the centre of town. Then the old horsedrawn trams were replaced with electric trams in 1896, which proved faster than the trains and so the railway slowly slid into bankruptcy and liquidation in 1898.

The Sea Point railway was revived in 1905 and even electrified in 1927 - only to be taken out of service two years later. The electric trams continued to operate until 1939 by which time the era of the private motor car and greater convenience and efficiency of motorized buses, not confined to rails, had arrived.

