

Domain URBAN LEGEND JENNY BROWN

A fare go for first cabbies

There was little comfort for hansom cab drivers — unlike their passengers.

FOR the commuters of early Melbourne who could afford to hire horse-drawn transport, the hansom cabs that until the early 20th century were the city's taxis made the journey relatively comfortable. As it is today, and as the pending Taxi Industry Inquiry suggests, hailing a cab on Collins or King Street could be a lottery. There were good cabs and bad cabs.

The bad cabs had surly drivers and slow horses. Bad cabmen could be thugs when faced with fare evaders or rogues when gouging passengers. "A pound to St Kilda? Outrageous!" In 1867, *The Argus* newspaper labelled the bad cabmen "brigands, highwaymen and blackguards".

"Vile slander," the cabmen countered. Having paid five shillings to gain their licence to pick up passengers on the high streets, they wanted the profession to be respectable. The good cabbies, they said, rarely got bad fares.

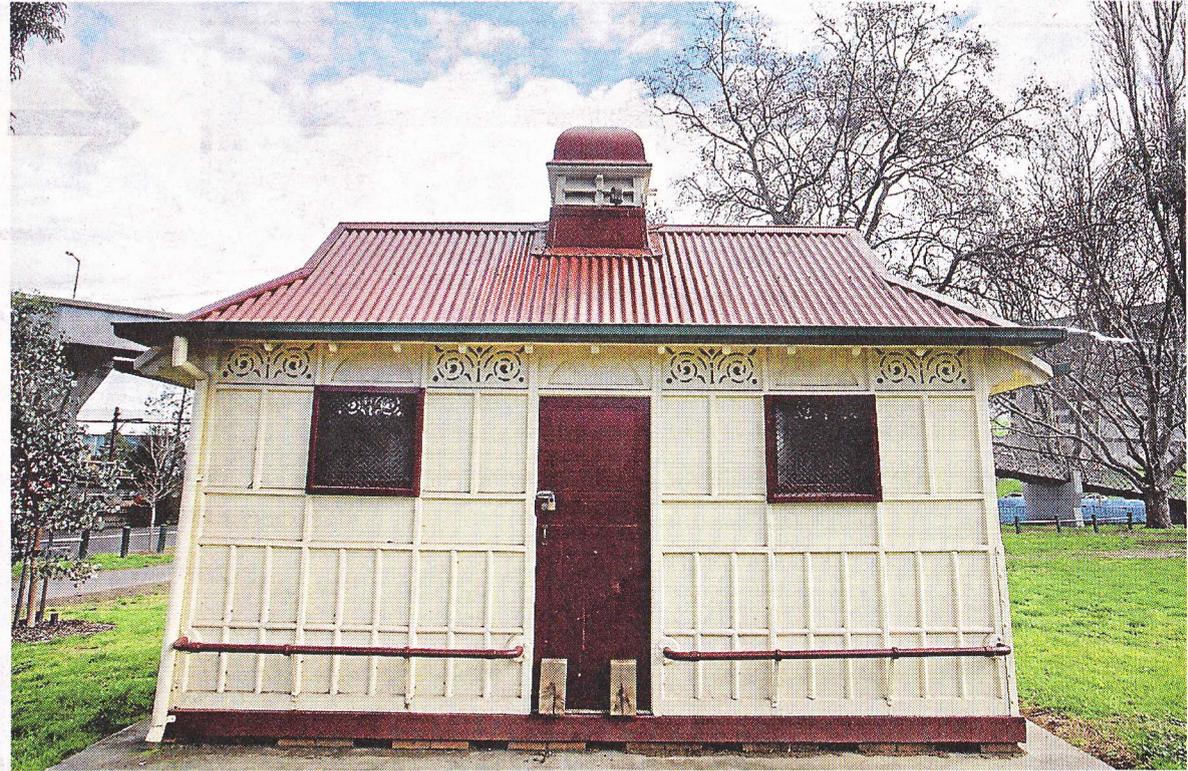
The good cabs had fast horses and polite drivers, defined in a livery of bowler hats and fancy vests.

The driver/cabman sat on an exposed sprung platform behind the cabin in all weather — outside big hotels on the other side of midnight in midwinter; outside sporting grounds during a cricket-season heatwave.

The passengers were, by contrast and in the best instances, cocooned in upholstered leather, carpet and sometimes stained-glass windows. In the campest of cabs, they also sat amid vases of flowers.

"We shall be the happier if behind a pair of smartly trotting horses and ensconced in an easy-rolling vehicle," said a writer who preferred this mode.

The first hansom cab in Australia started operating in Melbourne in 1849. Soon horse-power was public transport. Omnibuses, with teams of six horses, could carry 16 passengers. In the 1850s, Clara Aspinall, author of *Three Years in Melbourne*, wrote that Melbourne had indeed become a horsey scene: "Barouches drawn by milk-white steeds or magnificent bays, pony carriages and



The Grand Rank Cabman's Shelter in Yarra Park originally stood in Spring Street.

PICTURE: LUIS ENRIQUE ASCUI

American buggies of every description."

On the slow, draughty, clunking omnibuses that stopped at every hotel, the fare to St Kilda was three-pence. The good hansom cabs could charge more by offering a direct service.

By the 1870s, London had about 3000 hansom cabs and took the lead in taking pity on the weather-worn profession by erecting 61 cabman's shelters around the city's precincts.

Melbourne followed in the 1890s by building 13 of these portable timber structures around the ranks where the horses stamped and the cabmen waited.

Only two survive. One was found in a South Yarra backyard and restored to the grounds of Christ Church on Toorak Road. The other, now heritage listed, can be found in Yarra Park, near the MCG.

The 5.3-metre by 2.3-metre wooden building, with the ventilation lantern on its red iron roof, is

today used for storing parking signs. Its role 120 years ago was as a standby station used by cabmen who tied their horses to the railing, which is intact on the front.

The shelter is out of context in the park. Known as the Grand Rank Cabman's Shelter, it originally stood in Spring Street, opposite the Windsor Hotel, which in those days was known as the Grand Hotel.

The Grand Rank Cabman's Shelter is in Yarra Park, near Brunton Avenue. Melway 2G E8.