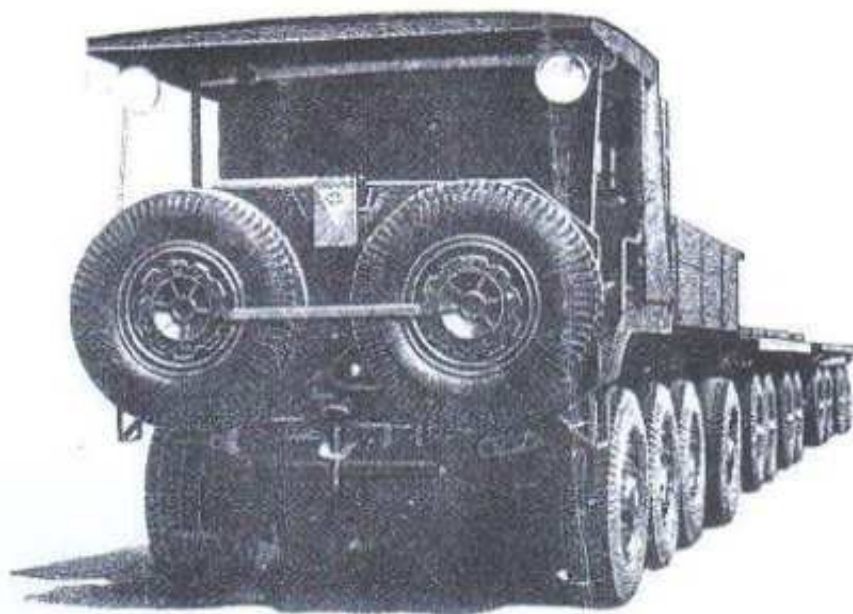


This view of the AEC Road Train sent to Australia in 1934 when new shows the aptness of the name, with some 24 wheels divided between the tractor and the two Dyson trailers. The utilitarian appearance was emphasised by the front mounting of the two spare wheels, with the vehicle's identity conveyed only by the AEC triangle. It was a product of the work on cross-country vehicles carried out by Hardy as described on page 33, the model number being thought to be 851. (AEC)



12 – Australia

The complexity of the Road Train tractor as built for Australia is conveyed by this drawing. The original engine was an 8.8-litre Ricardo-head unit of basically the then standard specification, with the usual output of 130bhp at 2,000 rpm. The drive was taken via a four-speed and reverse main gearbox (probably the standard 'crash' unit of the time), through a three-speed auxiliary box mounted amidships to the rearmost axle and then via short intermediate propeller shafts to the other three; the vehicle thus being an 8 x 8. The foremost and rearmost axles steered and each pair of axles were sprung, bogie fashion, to allow the contours of very rough ground to be accommodated. The two trailers were similarly sprung and the geometry of the whole outfit was so arranged that each would follow quite precisely in the tracks of the tractor, thus justifying the description 'road train' and giving the trailers the benefit of the smoothing-out effect of the tractor's wheels.

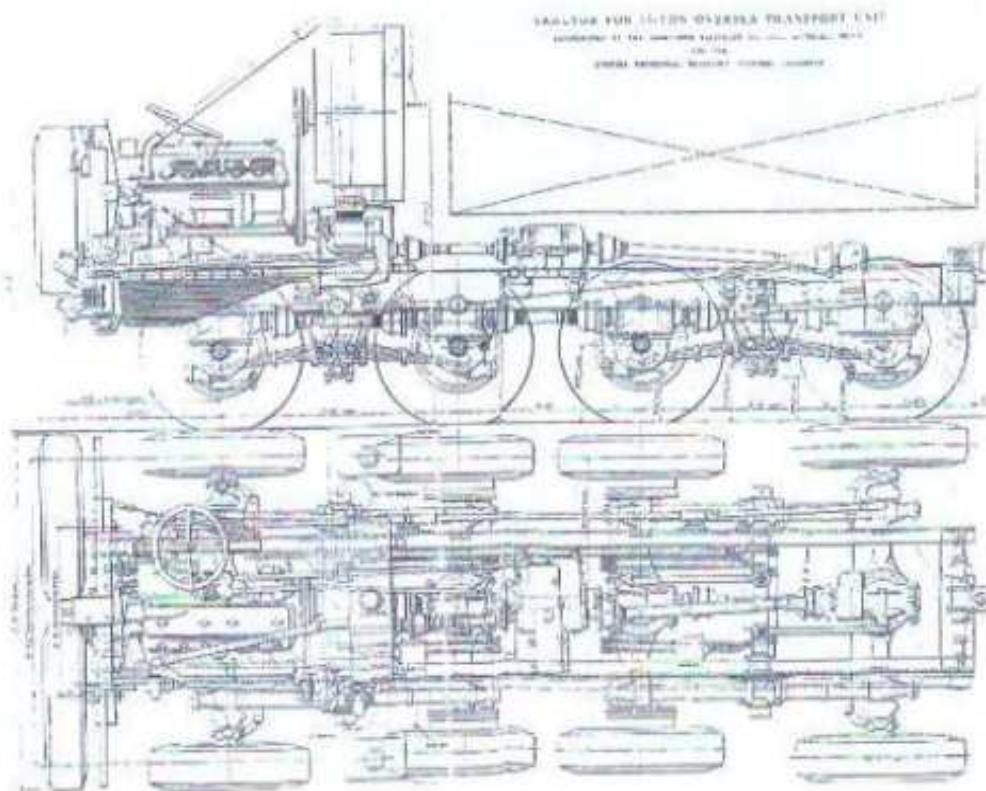
The combination's rated payload was quite conservative, at 15 tons, though clearly intended to allow for the problems of rough terrain, and was exceeded considerably at times. The tractor itself weighed 7 tons 15cwt in chassis form and the load capacity (payload plus body) was only 3 tons 16cwt, but a clue to its capabilities is given by the tractive effort figure, expressed locomotive-style, of 15,000lb. The trailers were each rated at 6 tons payload.

A Westinghouse compressed air brake system, rare on a British goods vehicle in those days, was provided, though only the two centre axles of the tractor were braked. The control system allowed for the brakes on the rearmost trailer to be applied first, then the first trailer and finally those on the tractor, preventing trailer over-run. The

radiator was located high up behind the engine, with a huge slow-speed fan driven by belt from an auxiliary shaft on the engine which also drove the compressor for the brakes. The normal engine fan was retained to circulate air round the engine and the occupants of the cab.

A prototype road train, but with petrol engine, had been built by AEC in 1929 under the auspices of the British Overseas Mechanical Transport

Committee and tested in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) in Africa. In the late 1930s similar vehicles are understood to have been sent to the Soviet Union, and it would be interesting to discover if anything is known of their fate. Fortunately the Australian vehicle survived and has been preserved, as shown overleaf.





The Road Train entered service on arrival in Australia at the end of April 1934, starting with a run from Adelaide to Alice Springs, over part of which there was no road. By December it had covered 10,000 miles with no mechanical defects and in the next ten years, operating out of Alice Springs it is estimated it covered 770,000 miles. Starting proved difficult in winter as seems to have been common with AEC-Ricardo engines, but it became standard practice to shovel the embers of camp fires under the engine or if possible to park on a downward slope. It was reckoned the tractor, with an overall bottom gear ratio of 94.5 to 1, could 'haul anything' and if terrain was difficult, it could

get through itself and then haul the trailers using the winch and cable also provided. When normal roads in the Northern Territory were closed during the War with the threat of invasion by the Japanese, it supplied food and necessities to small settlements throughout the region. The biggest load was two railway carriages weighing 45 tons, taken from Alice Springs to Larrimah for use by the Red Cross after the Japanese had bombed Darwin. Plans to restore it began when it was found in Darwin in 1964, and after passing through the hands of enthusiast individuals it was acquired by the Museums and Art Galleries Board of the Northern Territories, who supplied these

photographs of the restored vehicle when nearing completion. The original engine was found to be irreparable, with broken con-rods and a hole in the crankcase, so a 1948 7.7-litre unit from a bus was fitted and the Museum's workshops handed the tractor over in October 1990 and it is now on display in Alice Springs. One of the trailers has been found and it is hoped to restore this too, if the funds to be raised by an appeal allow. We are indebted to Graham Edge and Jared Archibald of the Museum & Art Galleries of the Northern Territories, Darwin, for information and illustrations.