

THE GIPPSLAND STORY

Although the regular passage of freight and passenger trains through West Gippsland, Latrobe Valley and Bairnsdale continues to be a familiar local scene, the region once hosted a much larger railway network. Development proceeded in two separate areas because the Strzelecki Ranges acted as a natural barrier. Lines from Melbourne were eventually constructed to South Gippsland and central/east Gippsland from a junction at Dandenong. Prior to the construction of the railway to both points, the region was almost completely isolated from the west by heavily timbered forests and swamps.

When the region gradually increased population and production from farming, sawmilling and mining activity, the Victorian Colonial Government commenced the construction of the Gippsland railway. The line from Melbourne to Traralgon was built by a number of private contractors in separate sections, with the first train arriving at Moe in 1878. The line from Moe to Sale was completed a year earlier, in 1877, and was eventually extended through to Bairnsdale by 1888, and to Orbost in 1916.

South Gippsland had to wait some years for its rail connection, with the line from Dandenong to Leongatha and Port Albert opening for traffic in 1892. Construction of the 'Great Southern Railway' presented significant engineering challenges with numerous trestle bridges and heavy earthworks required along the route.

In order to service the rich farming country in north Gippsland, a loop line was opened from Traralgon to Heyfield and Maffra in 1887, joining the main Bairnsdale line at Stratford. The South Gippsland line was extended to Yarram and Woodside by 1923, and some years earlier a line was constructed from Nyora to serve the coal mining town of Wonthaggi, which provided coal for locomotives and State instrumentalities.

Other lines were later built from Warragul to Noojee, Koo Wee Rup to Strzelecki, Moe to Thorpdale, Hernes Oak to Yallourn and Morwell to Mirboo North. A narrow gauge (2'6"/762mm) line from Moe to Walhalla opened in 1910.

Heydey, decline and revival

With the growth of the train system, the Railways successfully overcame the isolation of rural Victoria, supporting development of remote areas such as Gippsland. As one of the State's largest employers, its staff became active in community life and many were able to apply their professional training to local leadership roles. During the 1920s the Railways still maintained a dominant role in transport but after World War 2 this was gradually taken away by major improvements to local roads and increasingly efficient road transport.

Gippsland Line Closures

Koo Wee Rup-Strzelecki	1930-Final section 1959
Alberton - Port Albert	1949
Platina - Walhalla	1944-1954
Yarram-Woodside	1953
Maffra-Briagolong	1954
Korumburra-Outtrim	1953
Warragul-Noojee	1958
Moe-Thorpdale	1958
Morwell - Mirboo North	1974
Nyora-Wonthaggi	1978
Moe-Yallourn	1987
Bairnsdale-Orbost	1987
Traralgon-Maffra-Stratford	1987-93
Dandenong-Leongatha-Yarram	1987-1993 no current service

In Victoria, tracks and buildings are generally removed fairly promptly after line closures and there are now very few signs to prove they ever existed. Several of Gippsland's lost railways now have a new life as Rail Trails, allowing walkers and cyclists to explore easily graded routes through very attractive localities.

For those who can only be satisfied by the experience of a real train ride, the last four kilometres of narrow gauge line at Walhalla has been totally rebuilt as a tourist attraction in recent years and now operates regularly as the *Walhalla Goldfields Railway*. In South Gippsland, the *South Gippsland Railway* runs tourist trains on the Nyora-Leongatha section of line. After an absence of ten years, passenger trains were reinstated to East Gippsland in May 2004 and the Victorian Government is about to commence engineering assessments for reconstruction and reopening of the South Gippsland line to Leongatha. After a long period of contraction in services, there is now greater community awareness of the importance of rail passenger operations and freight potential in Gippsland.