

The Sandhurst Line

Following the discovery of gold in Sandhurst, there was strong support for the construction of a railway to link the region to Melbourne. In July 1855, a resolution was sent to the Governor of Victoria on the desirability of a rail link.

Despite heated arguments about such matters as the route of the railway, on 4 May 1858 the Government engaged Cornish & Bruce to build a double-track railway from Footscray to Bendigo, 97 miles and 3 chains at a cost of £3,356,937.

Industrial trouble plagued the project during the construction period. The 8 hour day was introduced, but the contractors had not allowed for this in their price and endeavoured to import labour at cheaper rates. In July 1861 500-600 men marched along the line, destroying property as they went from Malmesbury to Kyneton. The police were completely outnumbered and 50 mounted yeomen were called out to Woodend and Kyneton. Their presence calmed the situation and eventually an agreeable settlement was reached. In spite of the innumerable difficulties encountered during the project, the work was completed in just over four years.

A feature of the Melbourne – Bendigo railway is the number of tunnels, viaducts, bridges and culverts. Even today, this line is considered to be one of the finest designs in Australia and the standard of engineering by Joseph Brady and construction of the bridges, viaducts, tunnels and culverts is still admired for its durability and aesthetic qualities.

Woodend

Passenger and goods traffic from Footscray to Sunbury commenced in February 1859. The section from Sunbury to Woodend took a further two and a half years to complete. The official opening ceremony was held at Woodend on 6 July 1861. Passenger traffic commenced two days later and goods traffic on 14 October in the same year. At that stage 6 clerks and 15 porters were employed at the goods station alone.

The original Woodend Railway Station was an imposing building of strong classical design with a heavily porticoed frontage. It was unfortunately destroyed by fire early December 1897.

Woodend remained a refreshment station, mainly to serve the Daylesford line passengers until approximately 1953.

Kyneton

There was much controversy in Kyneton about where the railway line would go, with the southern deviation eventually chosen.

By 1861 the line reached Kyneton and the railway to Kyneton was officially opened on 24 April 1862. A holiday was proclaimed, streets decorated and 1000 people awaited the arrival of the first train on a station decorated with green boughs and a 'Welcome to Kyneton' sign. The train consisted of eight or nine carriages, two engines and three hundred passengers including the Hon. Mr Mitchell, Chief Commissioner of Customs. A grand banquet was held at the Mechanics Institute.

Kyneton is the largest bluestone station in Victoria, making close to the largest railway station surviving from that era, and which still has its goods shed, water tank and spout, signal box and road crossing gates.

Castlemaine

Originally the main railway line was to have by-passed Castlemaine, but the richness of the gold discoveries added weight to the clamour to divert the line, even though this would add to the cost and delay its completion.

On October 15 1862, the line to Castlemaine was formally opened by the Governor of Victoria, with "elaborate decorations, a procession, and feasting and dancing".

Opening the line gave local confectionary maker, T.S. Barnes, a great opportunity to promote “Castlemaine Rock” to passengers, leading to the popular tradition of stopping en route from Melbourne to Bendigo to buy a tin for the trip!

Castlemaine was the home of the Cornish & Bruce railway workshop and depot, erected in 1860 and believed to be the biggest and best equipped at that time. The Thompson & Co workshops were established in 1875, built 40 locomotive engines from 1914-1916.

Bendigo

Following the official opening of the Bendigo line on 20 October 1862 by the Governor of Victoria Sir Henry Barkly, a banquet was held for 800 guests, followed by a grand ball, with dancing until dawn. The evening was well organized and a huge success until the visitors made their way to the station to catch the 5.30am train back to Melbourne. Confusion reigned as there was insufficient water for the engines and exhausted visitors were obliged to stream back to town in search of accommodation, but the shortage was such that many were obliged to bed down on pews in local churches.

The train eventually left about midday and to add to the confusion, sparks from the engine ignited a grand gum tree arch erected at the station and it burned to the ground!

Research and images supplied by the Bendigo Historical Society, Kyneton Historical Society, Castlemaine Historical Society, Woodend & District Historical Society