

## **The North East Railway Story**

### **The Main Line**

The earliest proposals to construct a railway in North East Victoria date back to 1862. For several years there was inaction and bitter rivalry as to where a proposed railway should run. The North East line emerged as the winner and construction for the final section of line between Benalla and Wodonga was underway by mid January 1872, working from both ends of the new line.

### **Wangaratta**

On 18 October 1873, the whistle of the train carrying the Governor into Wangaratta was heard. Festivities continued long into the night. For many years Wangaratta was a busy station, serving as the change-over point for other lines, bringing in large quantities of general merchandise, grain, wool, beer, briquettes, and petroleum products. Now the main form of revenue generated at Wangaratta is passenger traffic.

### **Chiltern**

On opening day, 19 November 1873, buggies, carts, and pedestrians made their way to Chiltern. At 2.30pm, the locomotive arrived with the Governor of Victoria. After speeches, officials boarded the train for Wodonga. The Chiltern Railway Goods Shed was erected in 1873 and the Railway Station in 1874, featuring ornate brick and cast iron work, and drinking fountains extending from the veranda columns.

### **Wodonga**

In 1873 the railway line reached Wodonga, along with the extended railway family of a station master, gatekeepers, enginemen, guards, fitters, fitters and shunters. The broad gauge line was linked 10 years later to Albury, to meet the NSW standard gauge line. Up until Federation in 1901, a Customs inspection area examined baggage and parcels from Sydney, as passengers changed trains. The NSW standard gauge was extended from Wodonga to Melbourne in 1962.

### **The Branch Lines**

Once the main trunk railways had been completed, the branch lines crept out, snaking crookedly from main lines to link towns.

### **Beechworth & Everton**

The first truly country branch line to be opened in Victoria was that of the Beechworth Junction to Everton on 7 July 1875. The last train ever to operate to Beechworth was a special passenger train on Monday 3 January 1977.

### **Tallangatta**

By May 1891 the remarkable timber trestle viaduct over the Mitta Mitta River and flats was completed. The viaduct had 233 openings, each of 20 foot spans. On 1 June the towns people of Tallangatta flocked into the street at the sound of the train whistle to see the first locomotive roll into town. The opening was celebrated with a lavish banquet under the banner "Forward Tallangatta!" The Tallangatta line was officially opened to regular traffic on 24 July 1891. It was later extended in stages to Cudgewa – the last section between Beetomba and Cudgewa opening on 5 May 1921. The line between Bandiana and Cudgewa was closed on 1 March 1981.

### **Myrtleford**

The line reached Myrtleford in 1883. Until 1890, Myrtleford was the railhead for coach passengers and horse-drawn goods further up the Ovens Valley. Passenger trains continued for nearly 70 years, ceasing in 1952. Goods trains, bringing fertilizer, farm machinery, grocery lines and general freight items and taking out local primary produce continued until the early 1980's. The line was closed between the mainline junction and Myrtleford on 13 April 1987.

### **Bright**

On 17 October 1890 a huge crowd assembled in Bright to see the first mail and passenger train arrive. The station was decorated with flags, and a banquet was held for the official party including the Hon. Duncan Gillies (Premier and Minister of Railways), and guests at the Masonic Hall. Along with passengers, trains on this branch line transported nuts, tobacco, hops, timber and empty liquid gas bottles. The line between Myrtleford and Bright was closed on 30 November 1983.

### **Whitfield**

From the late 1880s attempts were made to extend a railway line into the King Valley. A narrow gauge railway (2 foot 6 inch) from Wangaratta to Whitfield opened for traffic on 14 March 1899. Traffic on the line over the years included livestock and a mail motor trolley service. The line was officially closed on 12 October 1953.

### **Acknowledgements**

Wangaratta Historical Society, Wangaratta Rail Enthusiasts Group, Bright & District Historical Society, Myrtleford & District Historical Society, Chiltern Athenaeum Trust, Tallangatta & District Heritage Group, Wodonga Historical Society, *The Branch Line* by Lloyd Holmes, *The Ovens Valley Railway* by Wal Larsen, *6½ Inches from Destiny* by Keith Turton, *VR to '62* by Leo Harrigan