

Growing Victoria

Victoria heard the 'first scream' of a steam whistle from the 'iron horse' at Flinders Street beside the Yarra on 12 September 1854. It was the ceremonial opening of the first steam-worked railway in Australia, a 3.6km line linking Melbourne with its shipping harbour on Hobsons Bay. It ran onto the new Station Pier at Sandridge, now Port Melbourne, enabling the fast transfer of import and export cargoes, as well as passengers and their luggage.

Enthusiastic users of the new line persuaded the line owners to build a purely suburban branch through South Melbourne to St Kilda which opened on 13 May 1857. Six weeks later, the first country line opened from Geelong to Greenwich, near Newport at the mouth of the Yarra.

Private companies continued to run some suburban lines up to 1878, but the Victorian government undertook most of the network expansion from 1856. A priority was getting goods to the emerging goldfields. The Geelong-Ballarat and Melbourne-Bendigo lines were opened in 1862, with an 1864 extension to the Murray at Echuca tapping into western New South Wales and the Riverina pastoral trade.

In the wake of selector settlement induced by the 1869 Land Act, main line extensions connected midland gold towns in 1874-5, and crept across the Wimmera plains, reaching Horsham by February 1879. Portland Pier was linked to Ararat through Hamilton in December 1877, while the final suburban linking of the main Gippsland line from Sale was completed in April 1879. The Goulburn Valley line reached Shepparton in January 1880 and Numurkah in September 1881.

Under the impetus of the 1880s boom, and the notorious 'Octopus' Railway Construction Acts of 1884 and 1888, track mileage almost doubled after 1884 to 3120 miles (4992km) in 1895. Single track lines branched into the Mallee for grain and mallee roots, into south Gippsland for coal and the farm and animal produce which were also the staples of east Gippsland, the northeast foothills, the south western plains, and the Mornington peninsula. Timber was the target freight of lines through the central ranges and the Otways as far as Forrest. Narrow-gauge lines (2 ft 6in) between Wangaratta and Whitfield (1899), Upper Ferntree Gully and Gembrook (1900), Colac and Beech Forest (1902) sought similar goods.

Milestones were the North Eastern line reaching Wodonga in November 1873, and the Murray bridge connecting with Albury which completed the Sydney link in August 1883. The line to Adelaide through Serviceton operated from January 1887. Later South Australian links were from Murrayville (1915) and Dartmoor (1917).

Northwestern Mallee lines branched off the line north from Birchip which reached the irrigation settlements near Mildura in 1903. Lines touching the Murray at Robinvale and Yungera serviced soldier settlement blocks offered after the First World War.

From 1909 the State Coal Mine at Wonthaggi was run by the railways as a source of locomotive fuel. With the advent of diesel fuel 50 years later, the busiest coal line ran from Morwell transporting brown coal briquettes to the Newport power house and to Melbourne householders.

Gippsland lines reached furthest east at Orbost (1916), and north to Walhalla (1910) and Nayook (1917). In an agreement with New South Wales, Victorian tracks went across the Murray to Deniliquin (1923), Stony Crossing and Balranald (1926), Oaklands (1938). Track mileage reached its peak in the war years 1940-45 with nearly 4760 miles (7616km) in use, some on reopened lines.

During the mid-1950s, freight haulage was streamlined by the introduction of containers on the Melbourne – Sydney route. From 1969, international shipping containers were handled. The 1970s safe-handling challenge was liquid petroleum gas. New aluminium wheat wagons in 1966 completed the switch from bagged to bulk grain handling which had begun in the mid-1930s. Tall cylindrical silos and mechanical elevators replaced rectangular bag stacks at wayside stops. Improved hopper grain wagons came in the 1980s. Easier gradients on a new standard gauge Western line, completed in 1995, allowed heavier trains and tonnages. Grain haulage now produces Victoria's highest freight revenue.