

Living by the track

Railway Towns

Rail lines impacted on the focus and shape of towns and townships, even wayside stops. Line deviations to Kyneton and Castlemaine created bitter division in 1860-2. By contrast, Morwell and Wycheproof happily incorporated the line into their main streets.

Streets, lanes, ways, walks, parades, roads, drives, crescents and terraces that were called Station or Railway feature in more than 320 towns and suburbs. Some have streets by both names, even where the railway has long been closed. Chiltern retains its Railway Access Road. Violet Town's place on the North Eastern line has produced Railway Road, both North and South. Frankston has turned its Station Street into a Mall.

Trains brought jobs, bustle and exciting prospects, evoked by engines roaring at speed and hissing at platforms, plumes of black smoke, long wailing whistles, clanking couplings, banging doors. For those living closest to the track there was fine sooty dust and the shudder of walls as the train passed. A VR annual award for the best garden at a railway house enhanced town pride. In the 1930s the fettle's garden of standard and archway roses at Monomeith near Koo-wee-rup took the prize two years in a row.

Victorian Railways Institute

Formed in 1910 to further employee education in technical and leadership skills, VRI headquarters in the new Flinders Street station included a library, classroom, billiards room and gymnasium also used for dances. Beginning at Ballarat in 1916, 23 branches were established in railway towns. Their halls and associated tennis clubs, ovals and bowling greens became sporting and social cores for their communities.

Railway Business

The railway brought on a business boom, beginning with bookstalls, cafes and hotels. Bath's Hotel at Ballarat was rebuilt in brick as the line approached in 1862. Station refreshment rooms, hamper service and tea stalls at smaller stations were run on contract until the 1920s. By 1929, the Railways had its own refreshment branch, with Victorian cheese, dried fruit, orange juice and fruit loaves as specialties. Refreshment rooms at stations such as Seymour and Benalla on long-distance routes were extended and staffed to allow serving up to 1000 people during a 20 minute stop. Jobs also emerged on dining and buffet cars.

A major industry spin-off was Ballarat's Phoenix Foundry being progressively contracted to build 353 locomotives between 1873 and 1904. Rock crushers, firewood and sleeper cutters transacted minor seasonal business at rail yards. Major seasonal business came with the late summer grain harvest. Goods sheds

handled a wide variety of produce, including fresh food the late 1890s when ice cooled vans were introduced.

Rail depots and running shops at North Melbourne, Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo, Maryborough, Seymour, Ararat, Benalla and Traralgon did repairs in areas such as lighting, boilers, coal tenders and carriages. In 1917 engine overhaul workshops opened at North Ballarat and North Bendigo. Seventy years later in the 1980s, these workshops were building a range of wagon types. North Ballarat built modern grain hopper wagons for V/Line. Roundhouses / engine sheds and turntables were integral to junction stations and line termini during the steam age.

Reshaping

Line closures which started in the 1930s accelerated after the war. However, during the 1950s Operation Phoenix was a major government effort to make up for decades of under investment. It aimed to upgrade more profitable services in the face of strong competition from motor vehicles. Steam services were phased out. The Bland Report completed in 1972 prompted major reform in country rail operations. Uneconomic branch lines and stations were closed, with passenger road coaches offered as an alternative. The container load business was restructured and 35 major freight centres established, starting with Horsham in 1976 and concluding with Geelong in 1980. Bulk haulage became the major focus.

The Lonie Report completed in 1980 triggered greater change. Grain handling was upgraded. Under the 'New Deal' program country passengers saw new locomotives, new carriages, better timetabling and improved stations. In 1985 Ballarat station, severely damaged in a fire, was restored to heritage condition and a clock was finally installed in its tower. Nearby crossing gates, now a rarity, were also retained. Disused stations including the magnificent Maryborough one were turned to other uses. Recreational rail trails make good use of former track beds.

Privatisation

In May 1999, the Victorian rail freight business was sold, and the metropolitan and country passenger businesses were franchised in August 1999.

Current Improvements

Today, the Government is upgrading the lines to Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo and Traralgon under the Regional Fast Rail project. New 160 km/h V'Locity trains will serve these lines. Country passenger services have been restored to Ararat (July 2004) and Bairnsdale (May 2004) and will eventually be restored to Mildura and Leongatha.