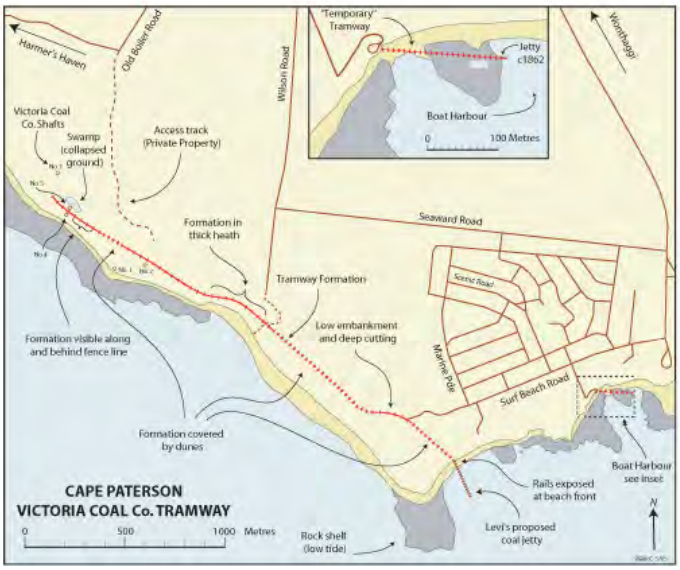
PLOD ESSAY: **Rusting Rails, the Final Link**

WILLIAM Hovell's discovery of black coal near Cape Paterson, seven kilometres south of Wonthaggi, in 1826 did not seem to excite too many people in the Colonial Government at the time. The discovery was near what is now known as Wreck Creek (formerly Coal Creek), about 1.5 kilometres west of Cape Paterson and near present-day Harmers Haven.

However, in 1840, Superintendent La Trobe of the Port Phillip District visited Westernport and expressed interest. He sent H. Cameron to investigate. Cameron returned speaking enthusiastically about what he had found. In 1841 an experienced miner called William Watson sank a shaft at Coal Creek but the venture ended in October 1841 after two sealers were killed nearby.



In December 1841, a Welsh miner, Richard Davis, headed south-east to the Cape where he found the seams originally sighted by Hovell. He sank a small shaft a little above the high-tide mark at what is now Harmers Haven, mined a small quantity and carried 25 pounds of it to Melbourne to show La Trobe in an effort to obtain a miner's lease. He was dismayed to find that La Trobe was virtually powerless to help so set off in search of work at the Burra mines in South Australia.

Davis returned in 1852 to what was by then the Colony of Victoria, where he found work on the Castlemaine gold fields. Around this time the new Government announced a £1000 reward for the discovery of an “available coalfield” in the colony as it sought to free itself of depending on expensive coal imported by sea from NSW. After some delay, Davis again approached La Trobe for a mining lease so he could prove the worth of the Cape Paterson field but was told (erroneously) that the Newcastle Company held all rights to mine coal for seven years. But he was offered a quarrying lease over 700 acres near the coal outcrops and this time, in conjunction with a partner, Thomas Bury, he accepted.

Davis sank a shaft a short distance inland from the cliff face west of the Cape and named it “The Reward”. It lay on the west side of Coal Creek. On the east side, on the strength of reports of Davis's efforts, Nathaniel Levi had established the Victoria Coal Company in 1859. Levi, a member of the Victorian Parliament, who described himself as an “auctioneer”, raised £20,000 from share issues and appointed Richard Davis as the company's manager.

Davis sank three shafts under the company's name. The first was virtually on the beach midway between present-day Harmer's Haven and Cape Paterson; the second was at the base of the old coastline, a short distance inland, while the third was at the top of the cliffs overlooking the ocean.

Levi's son, Henry, took over management in 1863 and sank two further shafts. In total, close to 3000 tons of coal was raised with 1933 tons despatched, the bulk of it by bullock wagon to the 'Boat Harbour', a small cove just over a kilometre east of the Cape, which protects it from the west but leaves it very exposed to weather from the south and east. Here the coal was bagged and loaded into whaleboats tied to a jetty built from a rock platform. This was the only means by which the coal could be transported to ships moored offshore. It cost the company 18 shillings per ton to transport the coal from the mine to the ships. The company intended this to be the principal shipping place for its activities but the jetty was destroyed by bad weather on several occasions. To make matters worse, moorings provided by the government about a kilometre and a half offshore shifted in a storm and silted over. With insurers then refusing to cover vessels visiting the Cape, it became clear the boat harbour was not the answer Levi and his supporters were seeking.

The company tried using the jetty at Inverloch, seven kilometres to the east. It was well protected but the sandbar at the entrance to Andersons Inlet was an unacceptable hazard. So the company returned to an earlier plan and chose the Cape itself, where a rock platform jutted into Bass Strait and provided some protection from the seas. A jetty constructed from the shore on the east side of the rock platform would service the ships and a tramway would link it with the mine. Nathaniel Levi petitioned the government for assistance. In August 1862, it agreed to provide rails and a grant of £1000 for the construction of a tramway.

In October 1862, John Higgins won the tender to construct one mile 30 chains of tramway from the company's No 3 shaft to the shoreline a few hundred metres east of the point of the Cape. The lifeguard shed on No 1 surf beach at Cape Paterson marks the spot today. By early 1863, the schooner Friends had delivered all but 130 of the rails to the harbour. The ship anchored offshore at the moorings and whaleboats were loaded for the perilous journey through the surf to the beach. A camp at the mine site provided accommodation for the labourers.

On July 22 1863, H. Christopherson, a railways inspector, reported to the chief engineer of the Victorian Railways Department that the line was complete, or as complete as it was going to be for some time. It started 42 feet from the mouth of the mineshaft and ran one mile 30 chains and 50 links to the bluff. Christopherson indicated that neither the cuttings nor the embankments could be expected to last long. Water trickling through the cutting walls was already filling the drains with sand and sand already covered some of the rails. He expressed no confidence in the carrying capacity of the tramway as built. At the time of his inspection, the rails were already depressing embankments through their own weight!

Unfortunately, no use was ever made of the tramway. There was no point in using it given the absence of a substantial pier, at least 400 feet long, to load the coal into ships at the terminus. Although the company was capitalised to £20,000 it had spent almost all of this on equipment, leasing vessels for coal transport, constructing the jetty, sinking the five shafts and delivering material to Cape Paterson.

Exasperated, Levi abandoned the tramway but fought hard over many years to keep the scheme going. He and his estate continued to pay the lease on the land until 1909, two years after his death.

Knowledge of the existence of the Cape Paterson tramway soon faded from memories and, essentially, it became forgotten.

In 2013, 150 years after tramway construction was completed, most metallic remnants have long gone. Even the rails at the boat harbour have disappeared, probably in the name of safety, as Cape Paterson is now a popular holiday location. The line of boltholes that originally secured the rails remains on the rock platform and off its edge, beneath the waves, are a number of the Barlow rails.

Of the mine and the main tramway route, enough remnants remain to make it interesting. The mineshaft is no more; but an innocuous depression hidden in the scrub on the ocean side of the property fence marks its location. The tramway formation is evident 13 metres north of the shaft as Christopherson had reported in 1863! It actually starts around 200 metres west of the shaft in what is now freehold land. It curves past the shaft and angles away beneath the property fence to enter the beachfront reserve where it remains for the rest of the distance to the terminus. Anyone visiting this end of the line needs the permission of the property owner as the only access is through a farm at the end of the appropriately named Old Boiler Road.

The embankments, over the next 500 metres or so, are evident in the thick heath and coastal grasses but with no sign of rails. Scrub has now grown over the alignment and stabilised much of the formation but this is certainly not the case with respect to the cuttings in this section, of which there were several. No evidence of any of the cuts through the dunes remains. Nature has reclaimed its own!

At the bottom of Wilsons Road, a maintained walking track gives access to the beach. It crosses the tramway formation but you have to look hard to find it. The problem here is that the native heath covers everything and has blended the tramway formation into the surrounding landscape. Nevertheless, you can find it; you just have to venture bravely into the thick scrub, scratch around a bit and hope that you will be able to find your way out again!

Closer to the Cape Paterson terminus, the tramway curved around a hill that marked the point of the Cape. The hill has protected a section of formation about 200 metres long from the sand drifts that have obscured much of the remaining earthworks. In this section is a cutting about 4 metres deep excavated on a curve. Coastal scrub disguises it today and, at first glance, it seems like a gully amongst the sand dunes. However, the regularity of the curve and the vague remnants of a tramway formation leading into it point to its true origins.

At the terminus, the point where the tramway reached the beach is now marked by a shed owned by the Cape Paterson Surf Life Saving Club. Interestingly, beside the shed and protruding from the sand bank are four Barlow rails! The tramway was in a deep cutting and on an incline at this location. However, along with most other cuttings along the way, sand had filled the excavation, probably by 1900. The cutting held two sidings in addition to the main line so was much wider than other cuts along the route. Consequently, a remnant remains in the form of an obvious deformity in the foreshore profile when viewed with your back to the sea, although much of the excavation has filled with sand.

When first laid, the tramway extended beyond the cutting onto the beach but some time before 1950 locals removed the rails, again probably for safety reasons. Recently rails have emerged again as the sand dune has eroded back from the shoreline. A tantalising thought is the likelihood that a set of Barlow rail points remain buried in the dunes near the beach.

Mike McCarthy is a member of the Light Railway Research Society of Australia.