

PLOD ESSAY

WONTHAGGI TRAINLINE

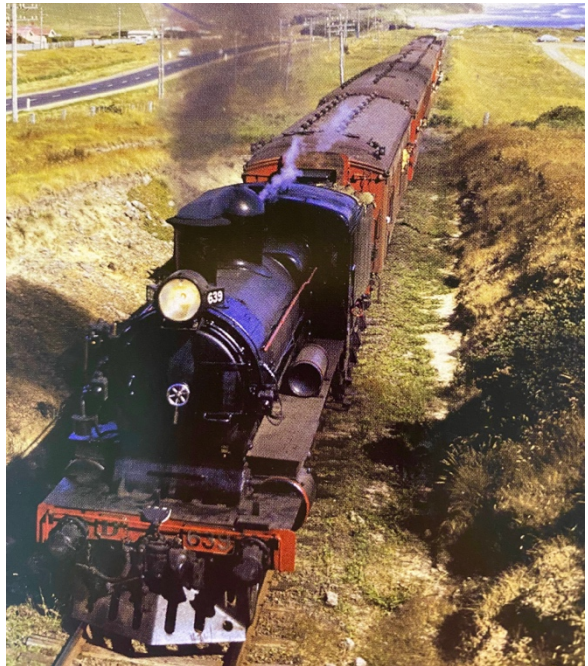
Several weeks ago, Larry and I were on our way to Melbourne and found ourselves, even before we got out of Wonthaggi, behind a long line of slow-moving cars. **Road works!** Immediately, we made the decision to turn off the highway and take the Loch Road, which eventually, if you know the way, turns off towards the Gurdies and soon enough puts us back on the road past Grantville, leaving us relaxed and clear-headed as we drive on to the city.

As the passenger in the car, I was able to survey the gorgeous meandering road, the valleys and steep slopes of the green hills and of clumps of tea tree and tall gums all the time keeping an eye out for the occasional wombat or wallaby. We turned left off the Loch Road onto the Grantville-Glen Alvie road and then turned right towards the store at Kernot which marked the left turn onto Stewart Road that took us across the Bass Valley towards the Gurdies. All along, I watched for signs of where exactly the trainline might have come through from Nyora past Woodleigh to Kernot on its way to Woolamai and Anderson before it ran along the beach and over the Kilcunda bridge, staying south of Dalyston to Wonthaggi, or as it was known before it became Wonthaggi, the Powlett River Coalfields. And I began to think how important it had been to everyone living along the line to have that train connecting town to city. Wouldn't it be wonderful today, if the train were still running, to just hop aboard, stop for a cuppa and snack at Nyora and soon find ourselves in the city relaxed and ready for adventure?

For a kid like Kit Sleeman, going to the city *was* an adventure. He was just old enough to remember the steam trains: "They would toot their horns as they left and arrived at the station and as they approached the level crossing. They made a nice clickety-clack sound, and when I was little, I would stand on the front gate and wave to passing trains. On the steam trains the nicer drivers would wave back and even give a toot sometimes. When those trains left the station, they were an impressive sight and sound as they were accelerating; you could see the effort involved in their clouds of steam pumping out and hear the loud choof-choof-choof noise of the engine."¹

Kit's description of riding on the train was detailed: "Our earliest trips to Melbourne were by steam train. The carriages had individual compartments and there was a corridor along one side of the carriage. Jon and I used to rush into the train and claim the front seats. In that position, we sat next to the driver who had an open compartment and could talk to us while we travelled. Sitting at the front we saw things that other passengers did not. Passing through bush-land near Nyora I always kept watch for wallabies – we often saw them there.

"The morning train left Wonthaggi at about 7:30am and the return train left the city at about 6:30pm. The early part of the trip, from Wonthaggi until Nyora (and the return trip between the same two points) was a 'milk run'. There were many small stations only a few kilometres apart and the train would stop at each for a mail drop and pickup. At some they still loaded and unloaded milk cans filled with cream. While the entire trip to Melbourne was only about one hundred and thirty



¹ Sleeman, Kit, *Sounds of Wonthaggi*, Plod Essay

kilometres, the trip consequently took a slow three hours each way. We never got home until 10:30 or 11 at night.”²

The trains kept coming to and from Wonthaggi, even after the mine closed, right up until 1977 when they stopped arriving, the tracks were pulled up and Wonthaggi was changed forever.

Of course, the importance of the Wonthaggi train was never so much about getting people like us to and from the city. It was about getting coal from Wonthaggi to trains and factories dependent on it in order to keep Victoria’s economy humming, as well as about delivering goods to and from the city.



Active operations in connection with the establishment of the State Coal Mine began 22 November 1909, after a system of test drillings in 1908 “determined the extent of coal deposits in the Powlett River Basin... detection roughly estimated to hold 20 million tons... with extensive seams measuring up to six feet. Three thousand acres of land was immediately reserved by the Government for a State-owned coal mine.”³ The Nyora-Woolamai railway had been under construction since June 1909, and five months later authority was given under act No. 2221 for the extension of that railway to the State Coal Mine in December 1909. Construction of the new Temporary Line, as it was called, proceeded rapidly, one mile of track laid daily, until Temporary Terminus (later called State Mine) was reached on 22 February 1910, only 10 weeks after commencement. It was a direct continuation of the Kernot-Woolamai line and would run to Anderson where a moderate cutting through a gap in the hills to the south was made and then run along the coast to Kilcunda and continue along the coast to the coal fields.⁴

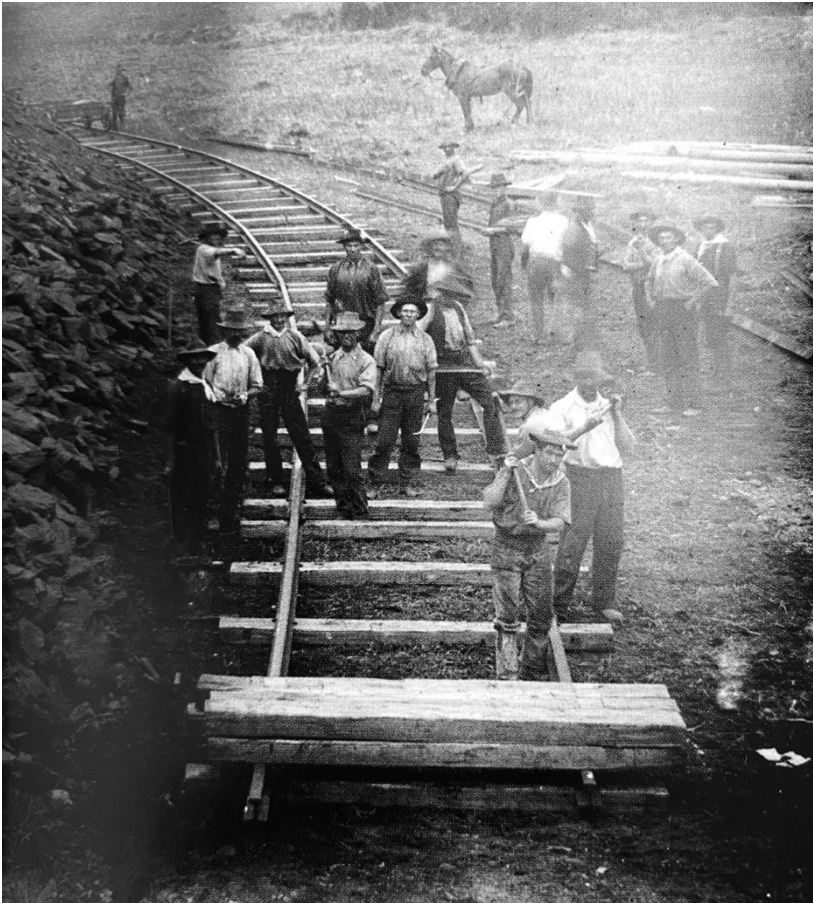


² Sleeman, *Off to the Melbourne Show*, Plod Essay

³ Mark Cauchi, *Rails by the Sea*, pg 5

⁴ *Ibid.* pg. 6

Some 500 men with bullock teams, ploughs scoops, horse drays but mostly pick and shovel laid the line. The working and living conditions for the men, many with families brought into this final section of the line, were appalling. They were camped cheek-by-jowl all along the line from Andersons Corner to Bourne Creek with little or no logistic support. The men working in the summer heat suffered from lack of potable water. Drinking water was taken from any dam at the nearest farm and dysentery was rife. On top of that, bushfires all along the line threatened constantly. However, they managed to lay the last rails to the Mine Terminus on the afternoon of 22 February.



Ten weeks later, “the first passenger train arrived in Wonthaggi on 9 May 1910 with the obligatory water truck together with two Mallee cars and a guard’s van with Messers Deegan and Nugent driving and firing respectively. In 1910, there was no platform, no sidings or loop and the train was backed out to the turning triangle at the SCM, turned and returned to Wonthaggi for departure at 2:20 pm.”

Very soon, the train became the lifeblood of the new town of Wonthaggi, bringing and sending parcels and people, money and mail, machinery and livestock every day of the week. Traffic grew at a rate of knots, creating an urgent need for a station. How the station was built and used and what it has become is another story worth telling in full. Stay tuned.

Information for this essay came from Mark Cauchi’s book, *Rails by the Sea; the remarkable story of Kilcunda railway history*. It is a fascinating book with great photos and maps and lots of information. It is available at the Wonthaggi Historical Society - Tuesdays, Thursdays & Saturdays.

All photos come from the W&DHS Archive.

**Plod Essay July 2024
C. R. Landon**