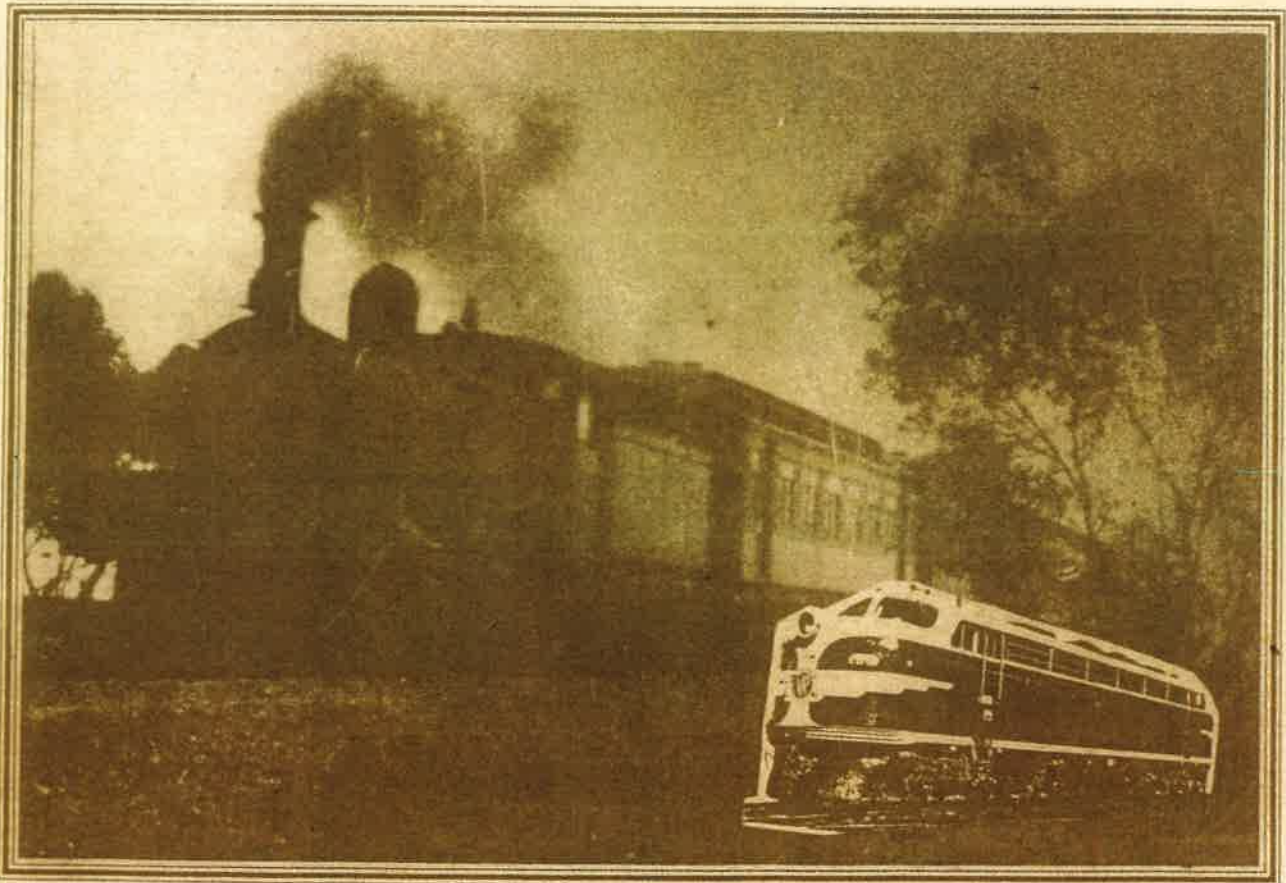


A Century of **RAIL**



**HISTORY OF RAIL SERVICES
BIRCHIP AND DISTRICT
1893 - 1993**

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1893 - 1993**

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Cover Description

The photograph central to the cover design was taken by Mr Eddie Kirsch, now aged 95 years, of Birchip, on a glass negative as the train passed through his property some two miles on the Kinnabulla side of Birchip in 1916. The scene is typically mallee as the train passes through trees on either side of the track. The train is headed by a D class locomotive hauling three W type passenger cars. Mr Kirsch noted that it attained the speed of forty miles and hour on that slightly down-hill section of the track.

The B class diesel locomotive inset depicts the changing pattern of rail transport over the past 100 years.



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FOREWORD

The extension of the railway from Donald to Wurrumbirchip (Birchip) a century ago and later openings to Cronomby Tanks (Woomelang) and Mildura contributed greatly to the development and prosperity of North Western Victoria.

However, from a political perspective, the construction of the line to Birchip had special significance. It was claimed to be the first time that any Government in Australia had commenced the construction of a railway line before the authority of Parliament had been obtained.

Early 1892 was a time of depression in the colony of Victoria and according to the Hon J H Wheeler, MP, Minister of Railways in the Shields' Government "there were thousands of men walking about the streets unemployed" with "many on the brink of starvation".

Members of Parliament were urging the Minister to start works in the interests of the unemployed, with or without the authority of Parliament. The Minister later admitted that the course followed was most irregular and unconstitutional, but the Government, based on advice from the Railways Standing Committee, decided to commence construction of railway lines from Warracknabeal to Beulah and Donald to Birchip.

Land owners along the route to Birchip provided land free of charge and tenders for construction were not called. Instead construction began on March 3, 1892 by what was known as the "Butty-gang" system (piece-work, small contracts and day labour).

Some 600 men were employed on building the railway. Earnings were low averaging only 5s 7d (56 cents) per day, due it was stated, to the number of inexperienced and inefficient men employed.

This railway was also a model for the very cheap construction of a number of lines in Victoria. Eighteen months after opening the total cost per mile was only £2,091 (\$4,182) compared to the St Arnaud to Donald section, built 11 years earlier under contract and costing £3,729 (\$7,458) per mile.

Legislation authorising the construction of the line was finally passed by Parliament in December 1892, just 3 months before it was opened for traffic. Notably, the Act included a provision that it "shall be deemed to have come into operation" on February 20, 1892.

It was to be another 6 1/2 years before the railway was extended north to Woomelang and it finally reached Mildura in October 1903.

The railway through Birchip is one that many rail travellers have rarely seen as they journeyed on overnight trains between Melbourne and Mildura. Through this book we now have the opportunity to learn about the development of the district, the importance of the rail link and reflect on the hard work of the early railway pioneers who toiled in such desperate times.

Alan Brown

**ALAN BROWN
MINISTER FOR PUBLIC TRANSPORT**



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The production of this book would not have been possible without the support, assistance and advice of a great many people. In making this acknowledgment it is hoped that the recognition afforded that legion of well wishers is some compensation for their efforts. Additionally, the satisfaction they may obtain from being part of the process of recording history of major significance to this district is appreciated.

The Historical Societies of Birchip and Donald have been most generous in providing access to their records. In this regard, the contribution of Miss Elaine McCallum in researching the *Birchip Advertiser* from its first issue in May 1891 to 30th November 1945 was a mammoth undertaking in establishing the data base for the publication. Elaine also transcribed relevant extracts of tapes made by late Mr Rob Sanders from the *Donald Times* and *Wycheproof Ensign* prior to 1893. Mr Ron Falla and Mrs Vivienne Davidson of the Donald Society provided much useful information. The records of the Ministry of Transport Technical Library and La Trobe Library were invaluable sources of information. The files of the *Donald/Birchip Times* were made freely available and Miss Janet Lee of the Birchip office has been most generous in researching data. Janet has also provided many photographs from the files and where necessary has, in conjunction with her Donald colleague, Shane O'Shea and other D/BT staff, specifically filled the void. The staff of the Shire of Birchip have been most helpful with information and photo-copying assistance.

The production of this book has brought the writer into contact with a wonderful group of dedicated rail enthusiasts who have spared no effort in obtaining and preparing maps, plans, photos, tickets, graphs and a host of various items included in the text and appendices. The association has been an enriching experience with much encouragement from President, Ian Jenkin and members of the Victorian Division of the Australian Railways Historical Society. Special mention is afforded Jack McLean for his contribution of graphs, historiogram and general information, particularly timetables. Norm de Pomeroy has been the source of many of the photographs included in the book. Author of "*On the Footplate*", Norm appears to have contacts in all corners of the State and summoned up photographs and plans from sources hitherto

unknown to the writer. He particularly called on Neville Gee, Wally Larsen, Ian Barkla and Gavin McLaughlan to supplement his own resources in this regard. Michael Guiney unearthed diagrams used for the stations of the district segment. He additionally provided much sound advice regarding the production while Tom Rigg forwarded many useful extracts obtained from the Public Records Office. Sid Brown of *NewsRail* has been a constant source of support. Gavan Cormick of Ballarat has provided details of engineering works carried out at Birchip in recent years. Bruce McLean of Mildura has been generous with his knowledge of

the Woomelang-Mildura extension project. Information supplied by Charlie Graham concerning Train Order working was most helpful.

Thanks are due to Bob Wilson of the Ministry of Transport for assistance in obtaining the Foreword from Minister Brown. He additionally provided a number of tickets from his own collection for use in the publication.

Input made by local Birchip railway personnel has been appreciated. Mattie O'Neill gave permission for his taped interview on his railway career to be used while Neil Fietz and Norman Goodwin provided useful local information of their practical experiences. Jimmy Richardson has been a fountain of knowledge and has provided several photos and reference materials.

Pauline Maywood kindly made available documents of her grandfather, the late Joseph Lockwood, who was a prominent member of the Railway League which successfully sought the first rail services for the district. Miss Frances Watson, granddaughter of Joseph Watson, provided legal documents in relation to the land transfer for the Birchip station. Others who have provided names and data include Harold Pole and Harry Rickard of Curyo, Len and Dan Doran of Watchupga, Ross O'Donnell, Elsie Davis and Joyce Lockwood of Birchip.

I am extremely grateful to Dr June Senyard for editing and providing advice regarding the book. Her well considered comments have considerably improved the quality of the final presentation. My thanks to Doug Comrie of The Sunnyland Press for his patience with

my deadlines and for his professional production of *A Century of Rail*.

Finally I am grateful to members of my family for their forbearance and encouragement. Brother Kevin, a Victorian Railwayman of forty years, now resident in Queensland, provided much source information. Unfortunately he was too far removed to consult in the elimination of any terminology that may affront the railway mind. I appreciate the help given to me by my son, Len, when the word processor failed to obey my intentions if not my instructions. His response to phone calls for help, often in the middle of the night, always brought a tolerant and successful outcome.

Son Peter, his wife Joy and their family, who have borne the burdens of the farm during the many hours of my absence, are specially acknowledged.

To all those who have helped in any way at all in having this history of an important phase of our development brought to a conclusion and whose names have been inadvertently omitted, I say most sincerely,

"Thank You".

6th Mar 1993.

George Gould

INTRODUCTION

The coming of the railways to the Mallee Districts of Victoria was a momentous occasion and unquestionably the most important development of the late nineteenth century for that area. It compares favourably with the later provision of a permanent water supply in the early 1900's and the supply of SEC power in the middle of this century as an outstanding hallmark of progress. The efforts of the early settlers and townspeople to have the rail connected is a story of much perseverance and faith in the future of the area.

This book forms part of the celebrations of the centenary of that event in the town and district of Birchip. It covers the events leading up to the arrival of the rail at Birchip in early 1893, the extension to Cronomby Tanks (Woomelang) in 1899 and the subsequent termination of the line in the Sunraysia district in the early years of the twentieth century. It provides information and data indicating the rise and decline of the usage of rail services over the past one hundred years in the Birchip district.

The story of Victorian rail commenced from the early days of the colony. In the course of time, railway tracks spread tentacles to every corner of the State. From the completion of the first government line in 1859 to 1883 a total of 1562 miles of track had been opened for traffic. This figure increased to 2763 miles in 1891 when a record 293 miles were constructed and exceeded 3000 miles by the year 1900. An optimum figure of 4807 track miles was reached in 1925 while the maximum length of 4766 route miles was attained in 1942. Use of the 5ft 3ins gauge as the standard was adopted by the Legislative Council in 1853. Lighter gauge 2ft 6ins lines were provided on a few selected lines to a total length of 122 route miles. The best known of these lines is the "Puffing Billy" line of eight miles from Belgrave to Lakeside. It is interesting to note that, in 1991 at a Special Premier's Conference convened by Prime Minister Hawke, it was agreed to the establishment of a National Rail Corporation and the adoption of 4ft 8 and one half inches as the national standard gauge.

Although many ambitious schemes for private development of rail services had been promoted from as early as 1839, very little had been achieved until the government decided in 1857 that the construction and operation of rail services should be a government function. While the very first line to be opened in Victoria, from Flinders St to Sandridge, in 1854, was constructed by the Hobson's

Bay lines, lack of financial resources in the private sector saw the collapse of almost all aspiring private projects leaving the government as the only body capable of such a mammoth task.

Progress under the Victorian Railways Department, formed in 1856, was quite rapid in country areas. The line reached Geelong in 1857, Bendigo in 1862 and Ballarat via Geelong in the same year. The line from Melbourne to Ballarat via Bacchus Marsh was not opened until December 1889. With the completion of the main trunk lines in 1864, a halt to all further construction was made. Costs had become a major concern and with money scarce, measures were put in place to revise the method of construction. The hiatus lasted for seven years. However requests kept pouring in for further extensions to be made to developing areas. Competing and conflicting interests were manifest in all of the subsequent extensions to North-west Victoria.

When all of the various reviews required under the new procedures had been completed, rail construction inched northwards from Ballarat and Maryborough. The sections from Dunolly and Castlemaine to Maryborough had been completed and opened for traffic in 1874. By the end of 1878 it had passed through Bealiba and reached St. Arnaud on 23rd December 1878. Fortified by all of the necessary petitions and other accepted forms of persuasion in vogue at the time, Construction Acts 682 and 1360 of the Victorian Parliament were passed approving of tenders being called for the construction of the line from St. Arnaud to Donald. It reached Donald from Cope Cope in early 1882 and was officially opened for traffic on 22nd April 1882.

It is the intent of this book to provide a detailed account of the developments that characterized the provision of rail services from Donald to Birchip, thence to Cronomby Tanks (Woomelang) and ultimately to Sunraysia. Much of it is unique in railway history. Additionally information and data concerning aspects of the operations of all of the stations within the Shire of Birchip, namely Morton Plains, Birchip, Karyrie, Kinnabulla, Curyo and Watchupga have received attention. Some interesting sidelights concerning railways over the years have been included.

It is hoped that *A Century of Rail* will provide much interest for the general reader and a limited extent of information for knowledgeable rail enthusiasts. Above all, the Committee trusts you will have a great deal of pleasure from reading it. Members of the Book Committee: Dorothy Reid, Elaine McCallum, George Cartwright and George Gould.