

## CHAPTER 5

# LOCAL CROSS COUNTRY LINKS

In an era when boys dreamed of being train-drivers, their parents were no less excited at the prospect of the sight of smoke and steam rising skywards as the iron horse traversed the countryside bringing with it goods and services and a quality of life they had never previously experienced. Rail was acknowledged to be the ultimate in transportation of goods and passengers. To this end, on the completion of the main trunk lines, in the early years of this century, many causes for cross-country connection lines were put forward. Birchip and surrounding districts were no exception. That they failed to achieve their desires was not in any way due to lack of effort by the sponsors. In some instances a decade and more of endeavour was spent in pursuing an elusive goal.

### WYCHEPROOF-BIRCHIP CONNECTION:

In June 1886, a cross-country link from Wycheproof to the then terminus of Warracknabeal, via Morton Plains, was promoted by both the Wycheproof Progress Association and Watchem-Morton Plains Railway Extension League. At that time Birchip was not a member of the League. The latter group considered it as second choice to the Donald-Birchip extension via Witchipool(Litchfield). Subsequently this was dropped in favour of the first choice but not before a survey had been carried out between Wycheproof and the Birchip district in 1888. The ultimate extension proposed was Wycheproof-Birchip-Mildura.

The idea of a Wycheproof-Birchip link was resurrected again in December 1902 when the Birchip Progress League wrote to both the Birchip and Wycheproof Shire Councils pressing for support for a rail connection. This would have a two-fold effect. It would connect the two towns and also provide a linkage of the Mildura and Sea Lake lines. A deputation, including Crs Lockwood and Secretary Gorrie, Wycheproof and Bendigo representatives waited on the Minister for Railways, Thomas Bent, later that month. In the meantime agitation was being mounted in other areas to have the Hopetoun and Sea Lake lines line connected to the Mildura line above Minapre(Lascelles). The Minister agreed to have the

whole matter of all proposals for extensions and connections referred to the Lands Department for survey and to the Water Supply Department for examination.

### WARRACKNABEAL-BIRCHIP CONNECTION:

An inquiry into the inter-connection of the Mildura and Hopetoun lines, was referred by Parliament to the Railway Standing Committee for examination and recommendation in December 1911.

Amongst the nine possibilities examined by the Standing Committee was a Warracknabeal-Birchip connection. Although no survey was carried out, the estimated distance of the line was 34 miles and the cost approximated £102000 based on a wage rate of 9/- per day. No engineering difficulties existed and the flat terrain enabled haulage to be increased by 10% over that below Donald on the Mildura line.

The Railway Standing Committee finally resolved on 8th July 1914 that *"the money required for the construction of the proposed connecting line could be expended more advantageously in other parts of Victoria where there is country to be settled and developed"*.

### CHARLTON-BIRCHIP CONNECTION:

At the Birchip Shire Council meeting on 17th April 1905, correspondence from E. W. Wilson of Corack stated that a public meeting had resolved to agitate for a railway line from Charlton to Birchip and sought the support of the Council. Council agreed to support the proposal. However the support was more in the breach than in the observance for it was not until, 1909 that, chided by Editor Grantley, Council agreed to take up the cudgels once more. It resolved to initiate a movement to have Wycheproof-Birchip and Birchip-Warracknabeal connections made. The decision was referred to the Minister requesting that he refer the proposal to the Parliamentary Railway Standing Committee for examination. The Minister advised that, in due course, if Parliament agreed, after the department had made a recommendation, he would look at the matter further. The Birchip Progress League also bought into the new proposal. Wycheproof and Charlton Councils were asked to form a League to further the cause.

The Railways Standing Committee convened at Birchip on Monday 12th Sep 1910 to take evidence. A large number of local dignitaries comprising Councillors, townspeople and farmers including Messrs Connellan, Lockwood, Dart, Bolden, McLoughlan, Green, Bennett, Everett, Chivell, Cameron, Rossiter and Rankin were

present. From Wycheproof came Messrs Sheehan, McMaster, Allan, Theobald, Gray, Durie, Small, Hogan, O'Keefe, Pearce and McDougall. Statistics and other relevant information were placed before the Committee indicating the extent of the land that would be served to a distance of eight miles on either side of the proposed line.

Almost simultaneously, Minister for Railways Billson, stated that *"until the people without any railway communication had had lines built for them, he thought the State could not entertain these proposals for cross-country lines"*. Nevertheless the Standing Committee continued hearings regarding Birchip-Wycheproof and Lascelles-Hopetoun connections. Estimates were that nearly 300,000 bags of wheat would be produced between the Birchip section and Ouyen and it was therefore important that the two lines under question be inter-locked with the Mildura line. Stock numbers too were on the increase providing more volume traffic. Access to markets at Bendigo, Ballarat and Newmarket would be facilitated by such a linkage.

Further evidence and a motor tour over the proposed lines were carried out by the Standing Committee in April 1913. All further construction was postponed during WW 1 hostilities. It was not until September 1918 that a deputation of residents waited on Minister Barnes at Birchip to put new life into the old saga. It was pointed out to him that the proposed Wycheproof-Birchip line would run within four miles of Corack to give that area much needed rail facilities. Wycheproof concurred in a new alignment as against the previously proposed straight line connection. Many advantages were pointed out including the greater flexibility that it would give the Department in haulage to markets and the seaboard. Mr Lockwood spoke of the amount of business generated since Birchip and Wycheproof had been connected by telephone. He was supported by Mr Lilburne, who had been farming in the district for eight years and had grown 2000 bags of wheat in the past three years. He was now reverting to grazing on account of the cartage difficulties. Mr R. J. Barber confidently recommended the project to the Minister as being of much economic benefit to all concerned as well as the department. Minister Barnes responded by saying that sufficient evidence had been tendered to enable him to put the proposal before Parliament to decide whether the matter should be further investigated by the Railway Standing Committee. That body would then make a firm recommendation to Parliament on the subject. Presently the government was committed to £1,000,000 expenditure on railway lines. On 21st Dec. 1918 Parliament adopted a motion

that all cross-country proposals be referred to the Railway Standing Committee. Additionally a Corack-Bangerang proposal was also to be considered.

In October 1919 a public meeting at Birchip again went into action. Residents from Wycheproof, Thalia and Birchip attended. It finally resolved that the route of the proposed line be as follows *"From Birchip via E. Lee's, W. McMaster's thence south of Mr Le Leveirs's and from there to Wycheproof"*. Delegates were arranged to present the case.

In November 1923 the Progress Association again brought up the matter of the Charlton-Birchip connection via Corack. The meeting on the motion of Messrs Lockwood and Cutts resolved to form a League to sponsor the cause. By comparison to other proposals it was a short-lived exercise. In July 1925, the request to connect Corack-Granite Flat and Wooroonooke with a rail service was refused. In December 1927 the Railways Standing Committee deemed it not expedient to construct a connection between Charlton and Birchip. Hereafter Birchip efforts were concentrated on improving the existing services and were never again to be involved in promoting cross-country connections.

#### **KINNABULLA-MINYIP CONNECTION:**

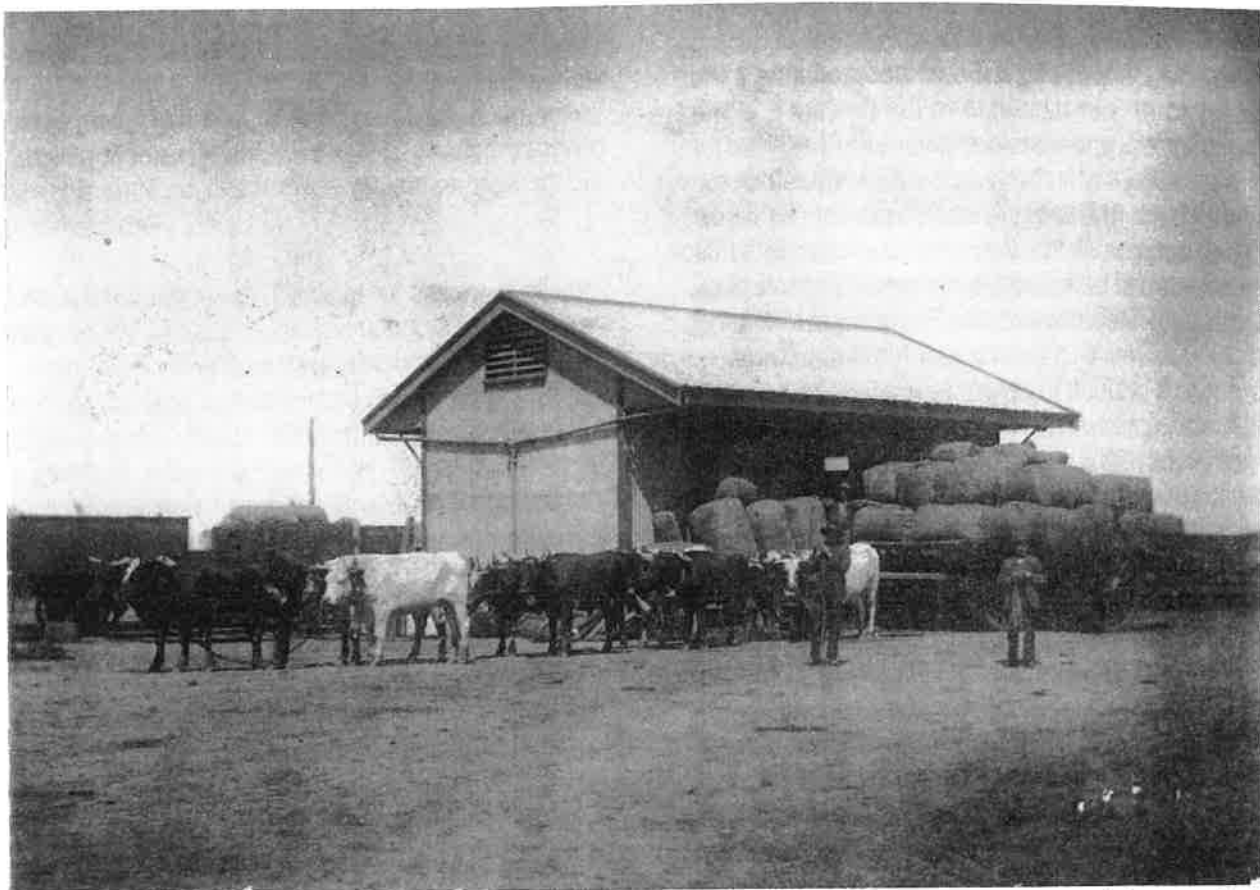
Settlers in the area bounded by the Donald-Birchip line on the east and Minyip-Warracknabeal-Beulah on the western side were many miles removed from a rail siding. Some were close to 20 miles distant, which in horse and bullock days was considerably more than a day's round trip to deliver farm products. It followed naturally that they should endeavour to mount a case for a branch or cross-country link to provide better access. In April 1919 they decided to form a League with other interested parties and promote their cause. The Kinnabulla-Minyip Railway League was born and pursued the objective of a link between those two points or, alternately, a Kinnabulla-Sheep Hills connection.

A series of meetings followed to marshal data required to place a serious case before the Standing Committee when hearings commenced in October 1919. The statistics gathered provided substantial evidence of the productivity and hence, the value of the land. It was priced in evidence as between £3/5/- and £4 per acre. Additionally there was much land made vacant by people leaving the area that could be used for Soldier Settlement if a rail service was available. Mr J. Warren of Reedy Dam was most active in arranging for the Railway Standing Committee to investigate the scheme. He said that he had been in the district for 30

years and declared that the land was equal to any in the State for wheatgrowing. With the cost of carting presently at 1/- per bag it would not be profitable if the price fell to 4/- per bushel from the present 5/-. The farmers were prepared to pay one penny per head for sheep and 3/- per ton for goods carried by rail for the next ten years. The League was also prepared to give the land required for the line free of charge except that if a house had to be moved, that cost would have to be borne by the Department. Mr F. Porter said that he held 2600 acres and had to cart his grain 10 miles. This made it difficult to obtain teamsters prepared to work the long hours needed to do the round trip. He felt that eight miles should be the maximum required to cart wheat. He had to go 13 miles to post a letter. Many settlers had left the district because of the isolation and distances of up to seven miles from school facilities. Mr M. Connelly of Ballapur said that, in conjunction with his brother, Pat, they had 2000 acres. He was 13 miles from Birchip and if a line was constructed he would double his acreage under crop. *"Last week", he said, "it took nine and three-quarter hours to walk lambs to Birchip for trucking. That is no joke"*. Mr Lilburne who had been in the district for 30 years supported the evidence with his own experiences of being 14 and a half miles from the railhead. He was now obliged to graze his land instead of cropping it. From a national point of view he supported the Minyip connection. Other farmers, D. Kent, David Kerr, W.J. Hoare and G. Rogers gave corroborating evidence. Settlers in attendance to give moral support included W. McCredden, J. Rossiter, W. Mitchell, D. Mitchell, M. Bell, O. Gale, J. Wild, Laidlaw, Fraser Bros, Taylor, M. Harhan, A. Bell, L. O'Connor, W. Moss, J. Nunn, Black and H. McCredden.

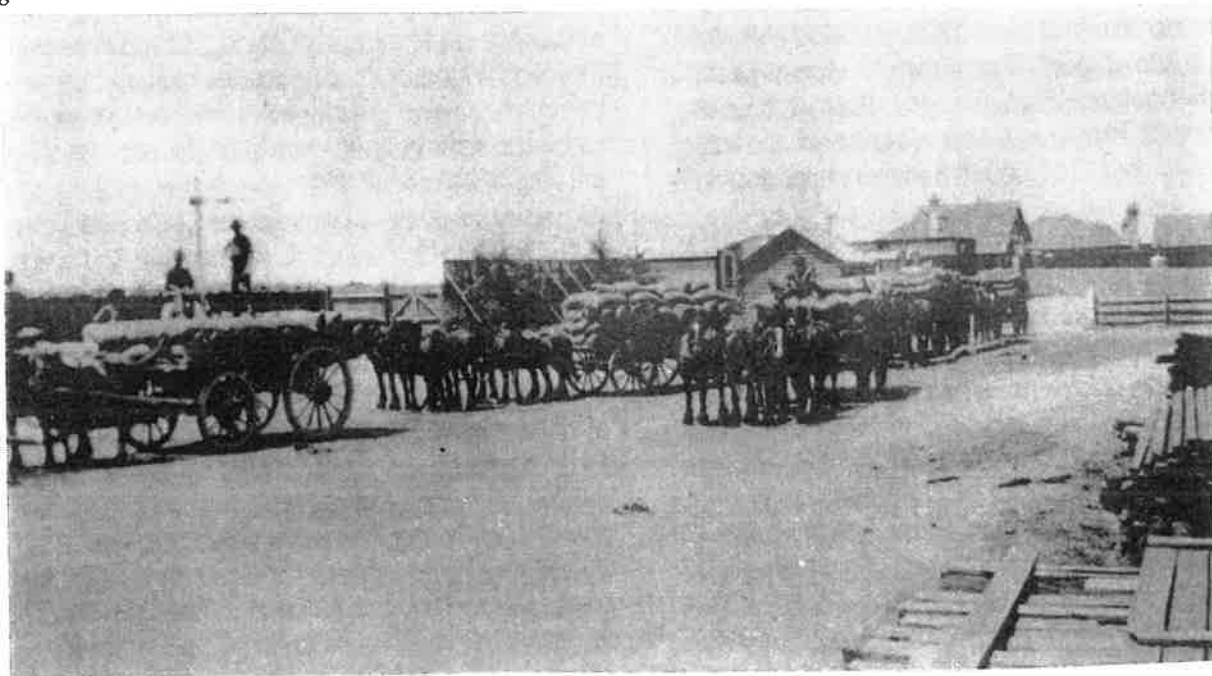
The Railway Standing Committee presented its report to Parliament on 21st Sep. 1920. It stated that the proposed line through Pinegrove or Reedy Dam, Wilkur, Bangerang, East Areegra, Boolite to near Laen thence to Minyip was 46 miles in extent and was estimated to cost £190,000. It had few supporters in

comparison to others but would have better served the area than other proposals but its length and cost made it impractical.



*A load of wool being unloaded at the Birchip goods shed for railing out. The scene indicates late 1800's or early 1900.*

*Station yard at Birchip in 1930's era when the weighbridge and stacks were located on the west side of the track. The second last wagon load is being weighed while others await their turn for unloading. Note the stacks of sleepers and timber used for dunnage under the grain stacks.*



# CHAPTER 6

## RAIL FACILITIES AND SERVICES AT BIRCHIP

With the coming of rail services in 1893, a new era opened up for the people of Birchip and district. Over the next hundred years many developments took place. The rise of rail as the principal medium of transport and communications was finally superseded by the ascendancy of road transport. The subsequent decline of the importance of rail towards the end of the twentieth century has led to consequences never contemplated by the promoters of the first rail services. That the Kennett Government in January 1993 would call tenders for the provision of transport facilities on nine main trunk lines, including the Melbourne-Mildura line, would be beyond the comprehension of those pioneers who fought so strenuously to obtain rail services in the first place.

### DEVELOPMENT OF FACILITIES:

Immediately following the arrival of the line at Birchip deputations and requests for additions and improvements to facilities were actively sought. It prompted one of the Commissioners to suggest that the people of Birchip really wanted a "wet nurse". However persistence paid off and over time facilities provided proved adequate for the needs of the community.

The first station buildings were portable houses. The passenger platform was of earth and gravelled without facing and stood about six inches above the level of the lines. This necessitated the use of step ladders to join or alight from trains.

Hardly had the first train arrived at Birchip than a request was made for sheep and cattle trucking yards. They were at first refused as no necessity existed for them in the eyes of the Commissioners. However, in July 1893, the Birchip Progress Association persisted, urging that immediate necessity did exist. By August, Watchem had been granted trucking facilities and this led to Birchip pursuing a similar consideration. Birchip also sought the erection of a crane and the extension of the goods platform by 100 feet. These were all granted in due course but not without delays causing further frustrations to Editor Grantley of the *Birchip Advertiser*. He was moved to state in the edition of 6th October 1893, in the course of a lengthy discourse on the perceived shortcomings of the Commissioners,

*"we are not in sympathy with the official mind for the reason that our ordinary dealings with practical men who have to make a success of their business or take the consequences; hence perhaps, our inability to justly appreciate the position as explained by the Commissioners. They, like Gods of old mythology, sit far from the 'storm and stress' with which common men must cope and if they laugh at our futile attempts to interpret their doings we must curb our passions and not 'kick against the pricks'. All the same we would not advise giving up the matter for a bad job just yet. Mr Taverner, MLA, has promised once more to brave the thunders of the Olympus of the Railway Department on our behalf. Be it ours to do our little endeavour to second his efforts in the hope that they may be successful".* The erection of the trucking yards was reported to be in progress during November 1893.

Further attempts in 1895 to have improvements to the trucking yards, passenger and goods platforms and goods shed failed. Intermittent attempts to effect improvements to the passenger platform, in particular, fell on deaf ears until November 1905 when the Railway department decided to erect a verandah about 70 feet long by 7 feet wide for the comfort of travelling passengers. This ignored the fact that the level of the platform would remain at between two and three feet below the doorstep level of the trains. The risk of injury to alighting passengers figured largely in the points raised for upgraded passenger platform facilities. A six feet fall could be made by the unwary or infirm. Some accidents had occurred with injuries resulting.

Amended upgrading plans were promised by the Commissioners in May 1907. The platform was to be raised to carriage level and a further 50 feet added to it. In May 1909 the authorities decided to provide a new station building at a cost of about £3000. The platform construction was completed but without the proposed extension. The length of the requested extension is variously stated as 50ft, 60ft, 70ft and in September 1910 it was quoted as being approved at 175ft. The final approved length of the platform was 400 feet. However, a plan of the station prepared in 1925 showed its length as then being 501 feet. It was reduced in the 1980's when the yard was remodelled to its present length of 358 feet. In September 1909, the department advised that work on the station building would not be proceeding during that year. The plans provided for a brick construction with a booking hall 8ft x 15ft and 5ft porches, ample public accommodation, waiting rooms and lavatories of the latest design. The booking, parcels and telegraphic