

"STEAM RAILWAYS OF THE SOUTH MAITLAND COALFIELDS"

In 1797, when Lt Shortland, R.N. was credited with the first discovery of coal near the mouth of the Hunter River, how could he have imagined the wealth and prosperity his find would bring to the Hunter Valley some 130 years later?

Ninety years after Shortland's find, tales of inland coal lead Government geologist, Professor Sir Edgeworth David to report an outcrop of coal in Deep Creek, at what is now the town of Abermain, near Cessnock. This outcrop was a tip of the Greta Seam, one of the largest and most profitable deep coal measures in the Hunter Valley. Professor David's report provided the foundations on which was based the successful exploitation of the South Maitland Coalfield and the prosperity of the South Maitland Railway.

During the 1880s, companies such as "Silkstone Coal Co." incorporated to exploit the Deep Creek coal deposits and the Silkstone Mining Act was subsequently passed to allow the construction of a private railway. In 1891, the "East Greta Coal Mining Company" formed to mine coal at East Greta, now known as Gillieston Heights, on the road from Maitland to Kurri Kurri. 1893 saw the first coal railed, a distance of some three kms, on the beginnings of the South Maitland Railway system. This was from East Greta No.1 Colliery to East Great Junction and connecting with the Great Northern Railway near Maitland.

Eventually, more companies set up and commenced prospecting at areas now known as Heddon Greta, Stanford Merthyr, Abermain, Neath, Bellbird and by 1912, a double rail line had been built to Cessnock. 1902 saw the introduction of a limited passenger service from Stanford Merthyr to East Greta Junction with a special platform built at Maitland station to cater for the increased traffic. This service was later extended to Cessnock and continued until 1972.

When the "East Greta" and "Hebburn" coal companies merged in 1918, the new company was called "South Maitland Railways Pty. Ltd" and was responsible for lines extending from East Greta Junction to Stanford Merthyr, the Aberdare Railway to Cessnock and most of the intersecting branch lines. The post-war boom period of 1925-30 saw ten thousand men and boys employed in nearly thirty collieries producing an annual coal output exceeding four million tonnes.

However, all was not smooth steaming for trains on the South Maitland lines, for in 1949-50 one of the most devastating floods in the history of the railway, forced traffic to divert along the J & A Brown Company's Richmond Vale Railway to join the Great Northern Railway at Hexham via the tunnels under Oakley Ridge, past Stockrington Colliery and over the Hexham Swamps.

Most of the S.M.R. locomotives were partly submerged at the East Greta Junction depot, Mt Dee, with coal traffic from the mines being hauled by chartered Government locomotives. The largest and most disruptive flood occurred in 1955 and washed away track and embankments with operations at a standstill for over forty days.

One feature of the South Maitland Railways which had endeared itself to the hearts of many generations of Australians, has been the locomotives used by the company, especially the collection of "10 Class" Tank locos. Initially horse and dray, then chartered Government locos were used to haul coal along the fledgling East Greta Co. line. After purchase of some small locos, increased loads demanded more powerful engines. During 1912, the first arrival from Manchester, England was class leader, "No. 10", a 2-8-2 steam tank locomotive.

Manufactured by Beyer, Peacock & Co, this reliable loco was a specially constructed 'tank' locomotive, based to a certain extent on a NSW Government Railway tender locomotive. Water tanks were relocated parallel to the boiler, a coal bunker fitted behind the driver's cabin and an extra axle added behind the eight driving wheels to help spread the increased load on the rails.

At 83.5 tonnes in full working order and able to pull loads in excess of 700 tonnes on a 1 in 60 grade, a total of fourteen "10 Class" locos were delivered between 1912 and 1926. Only minor design changes throughout construction of the fourteen, proved a fine tribute to the skill of the Beyer & Peacock engineers. To 1980, each "10 Class" had travelled between 1.6 and 2.0 million kms even though the longest haul was only 38 kilometres!

Of course, all this machinery required constant maintenance and the workshops at Mt Dee could provide all services from simple welding through spring resetting to complete boiler rebuilds. These workshops are now totally unique in Australia and represent the last intact railway workshop still performing the original functions for which they were built. Many skills practised here are now extinct throughout the Australian industry.

The 1960s brought mass colliery closures and by 1964, coal traffic was at such a low ebb that the "10 Class" were allowed to run down and fears were held for the future of the South Maitland Railways. 1967, however, brought a sudden rush of overseas coal trade and the Company, caught short-handed with only five locos serviceable, had to hire from the nearby Richmond Vale Railway, two of the famous ex British R.O.D. locomotives. Although some five hundred of these large tender locomotives were built for British and European service during WW 1, they had been out of service in Britain since the late 1950s. A crash course in "10 Class" rehabilitation was begun at the East Greta workshops and by 1975, the entire fleet of fourteen locos was again serviceable.

1978 saw the last regular service, on the South Maitland Co's lines of the small four-wheeled waggons known as 'non-air hoppers'. These classic little ten tonne waggons, manufactured in their thousands, were mostly painted red. Their design allowed wharf cranes to lift the timber hopper clear of the chassis and dump coal directly into ships. Because they were not fitted with air-assisted brakes, it was the tedious job of fireman and guard to pin the brakes by hand. The larger, more modern four-wheeled bogie waggons introduced in large numbers in the mid 1970s, were fitted with automatic couplings and air brakes but many railway enthusiasts regretted this move as the delightful sound of the non-air hoppers, once so commonplace about the coalfields, is now but a fading memory.

No tale about railway lines would be complete without mention of passenger stations, signal boxes and signalling. From a total of thirteen boxes, now only two remain with senseless vandalism defacing those which are closed. Most of the original timber signals have been replaced by steel models, electric points and colour light signals have been installed at Pelton Colliery. A novel feature of the signal box at East Greta Junction is the geared mechanical wheel used to raise and lower the adjacent level crossing gates. The original boom gates, installed in 1904, were the first of their kind installed at any railway crossing in N.S.W.

Progress dictated the recent motorisation of this operation. Passenger services, initially run by the East Greta Coal Mining Company and later, by South Maitland Railways, grew steadily throughout the early 1900s with the Company introducing private diesel rail cars in 1961. Unfortunately, a tragic fire in 1930 destroyed nearly all the Company's passenger rolling stock and subsequent passenger trains were Government run. However, improved roads and greater private car ownership in the 1960s caused falling patronage which led to passenger services being severely curtailed and many platforms and buildings were later demolished. The last train to Cessnock ran in May, 1972 but the station remained intact until 1975 when the site was levelled.

Throughout the entire thirty-two kilometre length of the railway's longest run, there is no place more exciting to steam enthusiasts and tourists than the famous Caledonia Bank where double engined trains, pulling over 1500 tonnes, strained to climb a grade of one in seventy.

On the 10th of June, 1983, the last steam train ran on the South Maitland lines. Men were retrenched. Now only State Rail Authority diesel locomotives haul bogie waggons from Pelton and Neath to Port Waratah and Hexham.

To answer why steam stopped, we must look at a coalfield which by World War 2 was producing 60% of the total Australian coal output, a coalfield which could boast a colliery like Richmond Main, where in 1927, a record of nearly 3500 tonnes was wound out in six hours and fifty minutes and a coalfield, which by the mid 1960s, was only a reflection of its former self.

Industrial unrest has always been a problem and there was often a need for police to protect 'scab' labour employed to load coal during strikes.

Waterside disputes: some of which have caused over thirty ships anchored off Newcastle Harbour waiting access to the coal loader.

The South Maitland was a dangerous coal field, with some seams sloping as much as one in three. Over one thousand men and boys were killed directly as a result of gas, cave-ins, fires and explosions. An example was Bellbird Colliery, where in 1923, an underground explosion took the lives of twenty-one men. Mateship and bravery, always a hallmark of coalfields people, was exemplified by the willingness of the rescue team, who on the day of the fire, recovered fifteen bodies. Five more bodies were found a year later when the pit's seal was broken and in 1965, a skeleton was identified as that of Malcolm Bailey, tragically a man standing in for a workmate and due to be married the following weekend.

Many collieries closed in the early 1960s and it was again time for amalgamation. J & A Brown Co. had acquired the East Greta Coal Mining Co. in the 1930s and through a merger with other smaller companies in 1961 became known as Coal and Allied Industries Limited. In 1967 Coal and Allied acquired Hebburn Collieries Limited which had a 40% shareholding in the South Maitland Railways. S.M.R. is therefore a wholly owned subsidiary of Coal and Allied Industries.

No doubt the main reason for the mass colliery closures in the 1960s was the fact that since 1950, Australia has switched from a coal-based to an oil-based economy. Cars and diesel trains have replaced steam trains, oil and natural gas

have replaced coal gas.

The South Maitland Coalfield, often thought of as the 'Bass Strait' of Australia's coal age, produced excellent coals for steam generation but unfortunately, these coals were, in the main, unsuitable for blast furnace coke production required in the manufacture of iron and steel at nearby Newcastle.

Radical changes to the handling and transport of Hunter Valley coal also spelled the death knell for steam operations on the South Maitland lines. Changes, such as the introduction of high capacity unit trains, more suited to the Upper Hunter's giant open cut mines, means that coal is now shifted from Collieries to the Port Waratah coal loader in concentrated bursts interspersed with periods when no trains run at all. These changes made it difficult for the South Maitland Railway staff to be efficiently employed on a full time basis but the situation would have been identical even if the Company had been running diesel locomotives.

Furthermore, since 1982, the coal industry has fallen increasingly into the grip of international recession and this was the final nail in the South Maitland Railway's coffin. By 1983, there was insufficient regular traffic to sustain an independent railway on a profitable basis.

So what of the future of the "mothballed" locos locked away from prying fingers in their shed at Mt Dee? Will their boilers once again sing with steam? Many hope so. In September, 1983, Maitland City Council gained an anti-demolition order over the railway, under which, no part may be removed or demolished without Government permission. The National Trust of Australia (NSW), ex South Maitland employees and many steam enthusiasts have formed a group dedicated to the preservation of the Railway.

Fortunately, the loco workshops and the adjacent engine sheds are still functional. The workshops are required to repair and service the three remaining operational "10 Class" locomotives hauling non-air hoppers from Stockrington Colliery to Hexham.

One may ask how long will this continue? Perhaps if Stockrington fails to maintain a steady coal output, then the future of the last private standard gauge steam railway may indeed be gloomy.

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