ORBOST & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

P.O. BOX 284 ORBOST VIC 3888

NEWSLETTER

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Continuing the railways theme, this Newsletter features an article by Harry Grosvenor titled "The End of the Line". His article, together with the photographs in this Newsletter, was presented to the Historical Society.

Harry was an avid train and railway enthusiast. His model railway, which he spent many hours handcrafting, was often a feature of local exhibitions. Harry enjoyed demonstrating its intricacies to both children and adults alike.
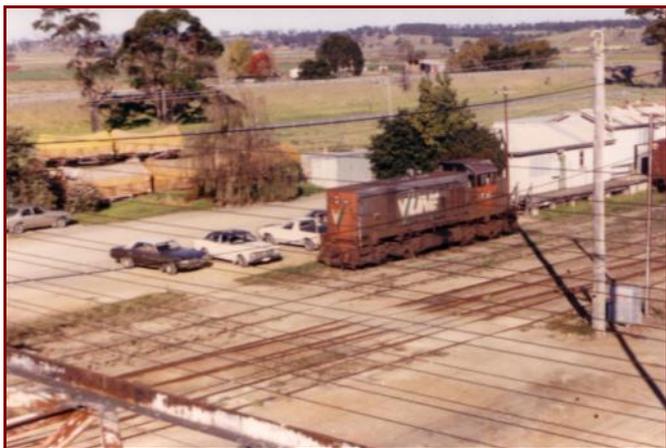

Left:
'Snowy River Mail'
Wednesday, August 9, 1989

The finishing touches — Mr. Harry Grosvenor displayed a superb model railway layout at the Show on Monday. The layout, with some 63 feet of track, took over eighteen months to complete. Harry built almost the entire system, including the rolling stock.

ORBOST: "THE END OF THE LINE."

ORBOST RAIL YARDS - A view from the Gantry Crane during the last days of operation.

Most people in the Orbost area will be aware that the task of taking up the rails on the Bairnsdale to Orbost section of the railway line has now been completed. This final act really signifies the end of the line. Perhaps this is a good time to reflect on some history relating to the line. We are told that planning for a railway beyond Bairnsdale, began around 1890. (Samuel Richardson's diary, 29th March 1888, mentions a meeting of the railway league, re extension to Orbost). There were two suggested routes. One was via Bruthen to Omeo, and the other to Orbost via Swan Reach and Colquhoun. Inevitably there was bickering amongst the locals along each of the preferred routes, but finally a decision was made, and the Orbost route via Bruthen was chosen. Surveying the route from Bairnsdale to Orbost began in 1906. The finally, the Bairnsdale to Orbost Bill was passed on the 22nd December 1909. The track was to be 60 miles (100 km) and to cost £391,360, $782,720 in today's currency.

THE GANTRY CRANE — capacity 10 tons

The first sod was turned on the 11th January 1912 by Mrs Kilmartin of Bruthen, and construction began using horses, ploughs, skips, picks, shovels and explosives. It was a mammoth task, with bridges needed over major rivers such as the Nicholson and the Tambo, and also for the many creek and gully crossings. In addition, many large cuttings were required. Townships along the way benefited with the workers' wages often being spent in the local shops. Canvass towns also sprang up along the way to house the workers, and the task of meeting their needs created additional employment and revenue. Mr Ern Hofen of Newmerella used to service some of the camps in this area, and carted water in a square, 400-gallon tank mounted on a dray. The water was taken from a spring in Hofen's paddock to the camps and placed in small tanks. Cattle were slaughtered in yards close to the line, and the local butchers delivered the meat around using a horse and cart. Bread and milk were delivered in the same way.

DEISEL ELECTRIC LOCOMOTIVE - This is a Series 3 'T' Class Locomotive often used in pairs to haul the timber trains out of Orbost.

The Bairnsdale to Orbost railway was officially declared open on the 10th April 1916. An associated industry to the railway was of course the cutting of the railway sleepers. This industry was of great importance to the people in the area, and provide employment and income for numerous families along the way. The industry continued to be of some importance until the demise of the line in August 1987. Sleepers were cut from ironbark, yellow stringy bark and mahogany trees, using tools such as the axe, crosscut saw, hammer and wedges, and of course the broad axe, which was used to trim and square the sleepers. A notebook that I have in my possession, and which originally belonged to my father-in-law Arthur Towns, records some of his sleeper tallies in 1929. On the average twelve to fourteen sleepers a day were cut, but the book records seventeen sleepers cut on Tuesday 6th August 1929. Listed also is the amount of sleepers cut in the Stoney Creek area. Details are: 120 mahogany, 3 hardwood, 187 yellow stringy bark, for which Arthur received £45-15-shillings ($91.50). As

SLEEPER OPERATIONS - A Wooden Bodied QR Wagon often used for the cartage of sleepers.

time went on, the sleeper cutters lightened their work load by using swings saws, trucks, tractors, and still further down the track, the chainsaw. But it was still hard and exacting work. It would seem that since the advent of the concrete sleepers, the art of sleeper cutting will pass with time, as so many of our pioneering skills have done.

The railway was of great benefit to the Orbost area economically when it first began. Trains carried produce such as beans, maize, potatoes, and produce from the local butter factory in the form of butter and cheese. It also transported freight such as mail, parcels, newspapers and livestock such as cattle and pigs. In later years, every Monday morning, would see from between 100 and 200 boxes of fish arrive from Eden, and once a month, up to 20 trucks loaded with cattle would depart from Orbost. Passenger traffic at one stage was per motorised rail car. A report published in "News Rail" of March 1994, gave details of an inspection of the rail car service in Orbost during 1924. The District Superintendent reported at the time that the South Australia Railways Rail Motor operating at Orbost was a very suitable type for the line with its fine, roomy interior, ample space between seats and a wide corridor. The car was constructed almost entirely of pressed steel, which he considered an advantage in the case of fire, because there was practically nothing except the cane seats to burn. With Gippsland's mild climate, the car

SLEEPER OPERATIONS - Only a few sleepers left during the last days.

shouldn't be too hot in summer. Of interest is the introduction of possibly the first "unisex" toilet in a rail vehicle operated by the Victorian Railways. The closet, as it was called, was located at one end of the car, (the opposite end to the smoking section). As the ladies sat at the toilet end, the gentlemen were reluctant to walk past them to use a toilet, and the ladies didn't care to avail themselves of the facility, because the little compartment wasn't marked to indicate its purpose. So neither sex used it, they preferred instead to wait until they reached a station.

RAIL TRACTOR - These Fordson powered Rail Tractors were used for Shunting.

The rail motor was powered by a Leyland motor of 48 H.P., and used a gallon of spirit (petrol?) for each six miles (10 km). The railway people were very proud of their rail motor, and I quote from the report ".... We have already driven the road cars off the road. Four road cars of value £800 each, previously running between Orbost and Bairnsdale, are now lying idle…..". The road service must have made quite a comeback though, because in 1935 the passenger service ceases as a general service. Occasionally in later years, a coach would be attached to a goods van for an "excursion special" and used for school or kindergarten trips between Orbost and Nowa Nowa.
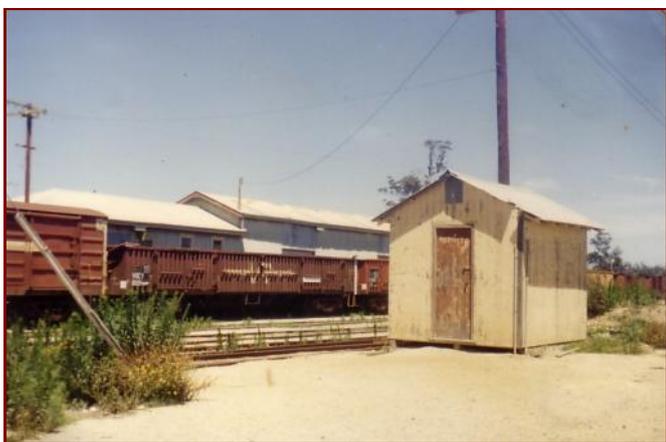

GOODS SHED - 1979 - The West end with the Rail Tractor.

Ted McNamara, who joined the railways in 1942, worked as a fireman on the steam locomotives from 1948 to 1965. For rail buffs, he mentioned to me that mostly D3 and K class locos were used on the line,

but on occasion an N class would be seen. Generally 5 tons of coal were used on the trip between Orbost and Bairnsdale, and they topped up with water at Nowa Nowa and Bruthen. Sometimes, if coal was running short, extra fuel in the form of wood would be taken on at Nowa Nowa. Ted tells the tale of how one day after a snake was killed in the Orbost yards, it was thrown up onto the coal in the loco tender. When the train got to Nowa Nowa, instead of handing the "staff" to the Station Master, who was a gentleman of ethnic origin and quite unused to "Aussies", they handed him the snake. The joke got quite out of hand when they realised that the Station Master had taken the "staff" for the next section with him and the train could not proceed beyond Nowa Nowa. Two hours later, the poor man was coaxed out of the station building where he had locked himself in, and the train headed off for Bairnsdale. That little episode resulted in a flurry of "please explain" letters and also a couple a couple of hefty fines.

YARD OFFICE - Showing a full yard - 1979.

It was a long day for the steam train drivers. They are expected to be at the engine shed at 4.00 a.m. to light the fire under the boiler and gradually get up the pressure of steam needed to drive the engine. The morning trains left Orbost at 8.00 a.m. and travelled through to Nowa Nowa, the trip taking 1 hour and 15 minutes if there wasn't a stop. The crew then travelled to a further 1¼ hours to Bruthen where there was a crew change. The driver and the fireman waited at Bruthen for the incoming train from Bairnsdale and then took it over for the return trip to Orbost. Sometimes it would be as late as midday before the Orbost train left Bruthen and the crews got home to Orbost between 4.30 and 5.00 p.m.

YARD OFFICE & YARD - 1979

Dieselisation saw "T" and sometimes "Y" class diesels in use, often double heading on the timber trains out of Orbost. Thirty big timber wagons were specially built for the carriage of timber between Orbost and Westall. They were 67 feet long, and each could carry 42 tons of timber. In later years, a smaller wagon was interspersed between these giants to spread the load on the ageing trestle bridges. The Bairnsdale to Orbost line has two trestle bridges of note. The first one over Stoney Creek west of Nowa Nowa had the distinction, until a line closed, of being one of the highest (19 metres) and longest (276 metres) bridges in the State. The trestle running across the flats at Orbost is reputed to be the longest in the State. For statisticians; it has 159 trestle banks in the main section.


VFTY TIMBER WAGON - Thirty of these large wagons were built for the timber traffic between Orbost and Melbourne.

Sadly, economics, or so it was said, brought about the closure of the line. Quite a good crowd of locals and visitors turned up at the Orbost railway station on Friday 21st August 1987 to see the last train leave at 4.45 p.m., under the control of driver, Bill Buckley. Ron Hayward, who drove the first diesel into Orbost, was there to see the end of an era. Driver Don John's, now retired and living in Orbost, was the man who drove the last goods train into Orbost on the morning of the 21st August 1987.
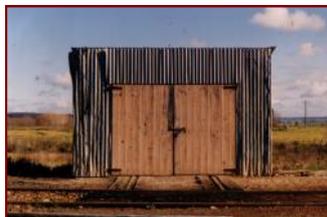

THE GANGERS SHED

SUPER STORAGE SHEDS

So is it really the end of the line? There has been much talk in recent years about viability of a very fast train between Melbourne and Sydney. Once again, history repeats itself, as interested parties along both of the suggested routes jockey for position and lobby for their particular route. If the plan does come to fruition and the Gippsland route is chosen, we may again see trains pass through our area on their way to either Sydney or Melbourne. Orbost though, won't be at the end of line.
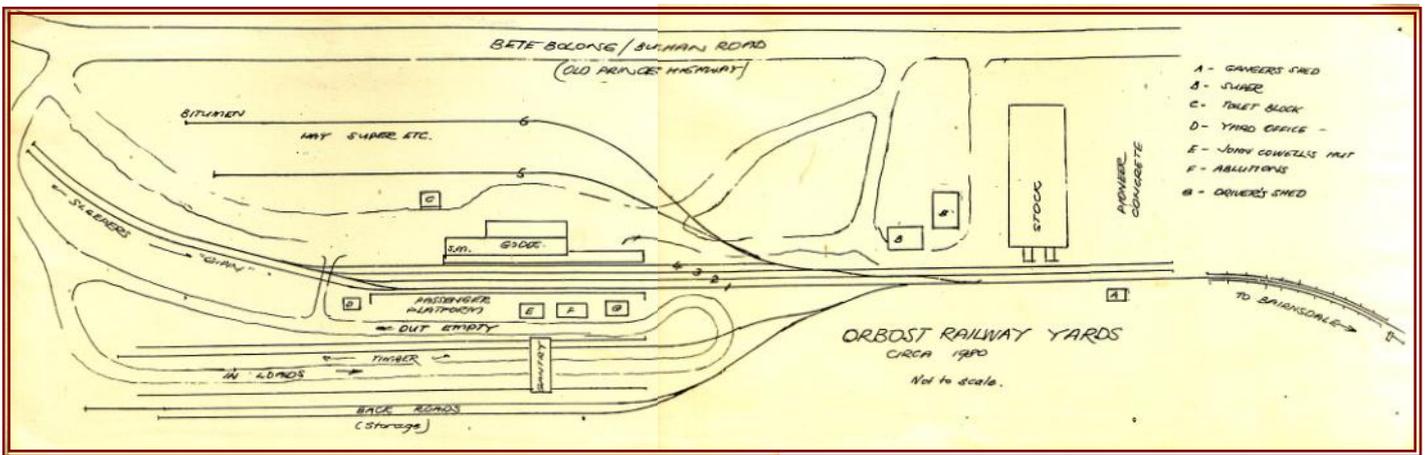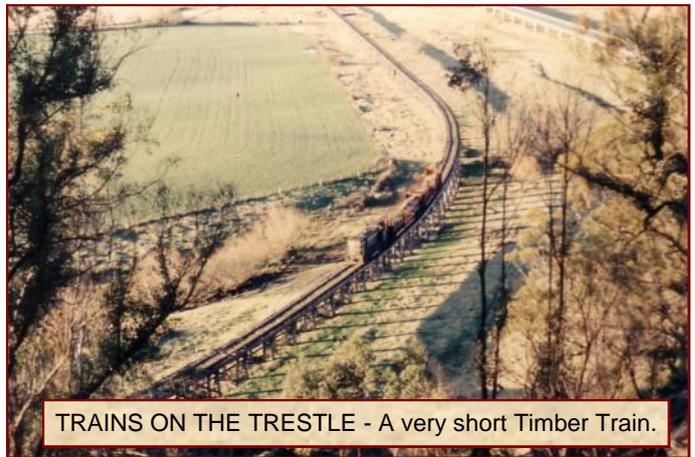
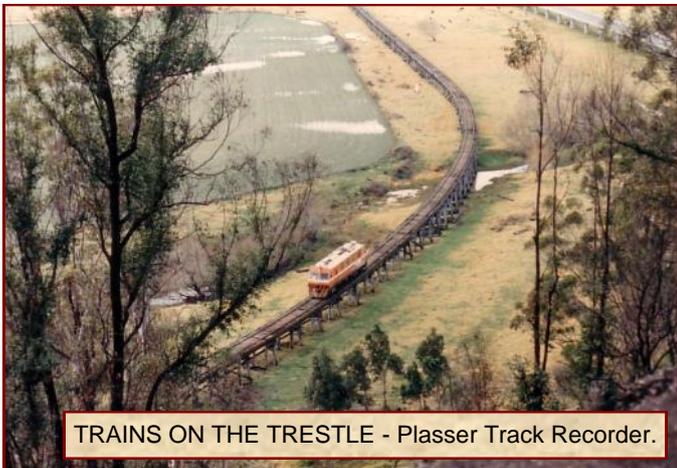LAYOUT OF THE ORBOST RAILWAY YARDS — circa 1980 — Drawn by Harry Grosvenor

BELOW ARE MORE OF HARRY'S PHOTOS
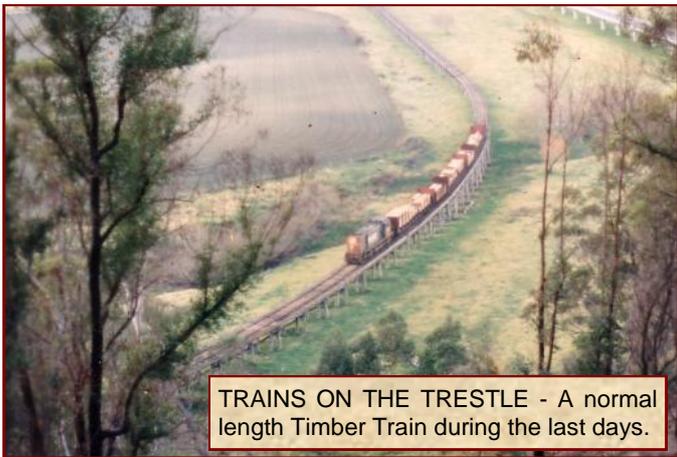
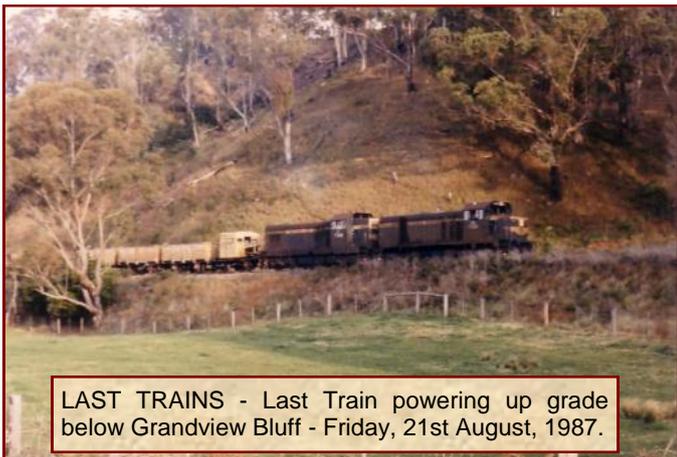TRAINS ON THE TRESTLE - A normal length Timber Train during the last days.

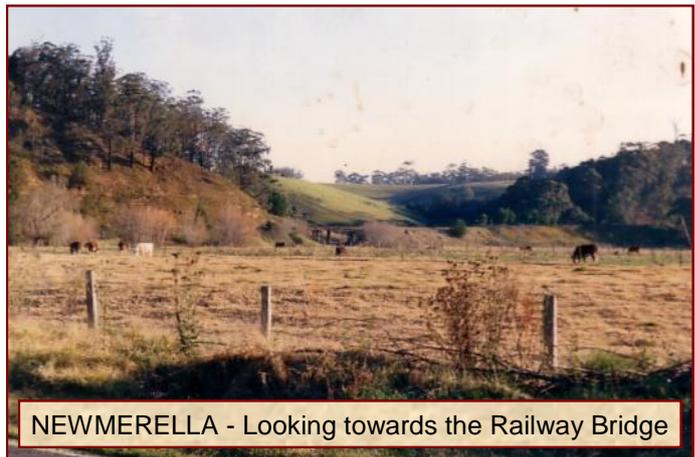TRAINS ON THE TRESTLE - A very short Timber Train.

TRAINS ON THE TRESTLE - Plasser Track Recorder.

LAST TRAINS - Last Single Header leaving Orbost - Wednesday, 19th August, 1987.

LAST TRAINS - Last Train powering up grade below Grandview Bluff - Friday, 21st August, 1987.

NEWMERELLA - Looking towards the Railway Bridge