

# **GYMPIE AND THE RAILWAY**

**Presented at the Gympie Heritage Forum, May 23 2012**

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**1\***

Today I'll be broadly outlining the history of the railway in Gympie from the 1880s -1990s. I'll be discussing the evolution of the Gympie Station site from a dead end railway terminus to a large complex and major station. I'll also discuss some aspects of the broader railway network in the region including the Mary Valley branch railway and the precinct surrounding the station. Overall I hope to be able to give you an impression of the fundamental role the railway has played in moving goods and people in Gympie.

**2**

By November 1867, barely a month after the establishment of the Gympie goldfield, the idea of a railway linking Gympie to a port had been raised in newspapers. Various proposals for a starting point including Maryborough, Brisbane and Tewantin were promoted. Ultimately, the campaign for a Maryborough-Gympie route was successful. The powerpoint shows some of the options for getting to Gympie prior to the railway. The original track via the Mary valley, the 1868 Gympie road, or steamer from Brisbane to Maryborough or Tewantin, connecting with coaches to Gympie.

**3**

By the end of the 1870s, an intensive phase of underground reef mining was underway in Gympie. Gold exports made up 20% of Queensland's economic output by 1870, outperforming wool in 1875. The increasing influence of the mining industry, and its ability to compete with other interests jostling for a rail link was evident with the Queensland government's approval in August 1877 of three railways connecting mining towns to their principal ports: Townsville to Charters Towers; Bundaberg to Mt Perry; and Maryborough to Gympie. The Maryborough-Gympie line was the first in the colony to run in a north-south direction rather than westwards from a port; now this is very significant because it is essentially the beginning of Queensland's coastal route.

**4**Originally a terminus was planned for Commissioner's Hill, where most of Gympie's government finance buildings were clustered, but in 1880 a more central site between Tozer Hill and Caledonian Hill was approved. Prior to this decision there had been considerable debate within the town between commercial and mining and community interests as this report from the 1877 edition of the Queenslander shows. The eventual site had previously been used from 1877 by the Gympie Agricultural and Pastoral Association for Gympie's earliest shows.

**5**

After just over three years of construction with up to 12-1300 men being employed at one time, the railway to Gympie opened amid great fanfare in August 1881. The railway soon became the dominant transport artery for the movement of goods and people in and out of Gympie. Within three months of opening, the traffic between Gympie and Maryborough required two trains daily. Timber, both sawn and as logs, extracted from the abundant softwood and hardwood stands surrounding Gympie was the main product to be transported from the town for many years. The station buildings at Gympie and Maryborough were positioned at the terminus of the track line, marking the railway's dead end status. Within a year of the line opening Gympie representatives had begun lobbying for a rail link to Brisbane. Brisbane commercial interests also pushed for better access to the Gympie market. A route was surveyed in 1885 and by 1886 the first section of the North Coast line from Brisbane-Caboolture had commenced construction. In 1888 construction of the remaining sections commenced simultaneously from Caboolture and Gympie. The Gympie-Brisbane line was opened in mid-1891, linking a route extending from Brisbane to Bundaberg. To enable the extension to proceed, Gympie's station building was moved from the end of the track and re-sited within the yard on the southern side of the line.

**(\*numbers correspond to powerpoint slides)**

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## 6

The rail determined aspects of Gympie's mining infrastructure and their location. Stops at Nashville and Monkland were in the heart of Gympie's mining localities. In 1898, Gympie's powder magazine, built in 1887 to store explosives used in the mines was moved to Traveston in response to community concerns and previous incidences of explosions in the town. When the magazine buildings were moved to Traveston, James Nash, who by then had seen better days, and his daughter went with them as caretakers. When Nash retired in 1912 he was granted a government pension of £100 per annum, in honour of his services to Queensland and died the following year aged 79. Later becoming the Traveston Memorial Hall, the front of this building gives no clue of the rare building into which it has been incorporated

## 7

The passing of the North Coast Railway Act in 1910 facilitated the linking of the separate regional divisions of Queensland Railways into one network, through extending the state's coastal route. The passing of the Act (together with the Great Western Railway Act) provided a major impetus for increased spending and construction works on Queensland railways. New stations were built along the main lines in places such as Brisbane, Gympie and Townsville between 1910 and 1917. A corresponding development of improved locomotive technology, rolling stock, and railway infrastructure in general characterised this period, along with the construction of new rural branch lines throughout Queensland. Major improvements and additions were undertaken at the Gympie station from 1911 to 1915. While the wider railway network factors I've just mentioned were important, the people of Gympie continually lobbied throughout the early 1900s for improvements and a new station.

## 8

In 1912 plans were drawn for a substantial new passenger station building, within the architectural section of the Railway Department's Chief Engineers Office, where Vincent Price was in charge of the architectural section. The station was based on the Queensland Railways A series 'Pagoda' standard design. From the 1860s, Queensland railway stations were predominantly built in timber, with only a small number of masonry stations built in major urban centres like Brisbane and Toowoomba. The Pagoda design series saw Queensland Railways adapt stylistic elements of what is often described as 'Federation style' to its existing timber tradition. Federation style architecture, broadly dating from the 1890s to 1915, incorporated a wide range of stylistic influences including the Arts and Crafts movement, Art Nouveau and the American shingle styles. Some of the distinctive characteristics employed at Gympie included the use of decorative timber detailing, windows with small upper panes of coloured glass, ornate platform brackets, and Marseilles tiles on a picturesque roof form featuring half hipped ends, projecting gables and lantern vents.

9 Other passenger stations built in the 'Pagoda' style included the much smaller Cooyar, Yarraman, Dirranbandi and the Brooloo stations.

Gympie's station appears to be the largest timber passenger station built by Queensland Railways during the twentieth century and can certainly be argued that it is one of the most stylish and elaborate within the context of timber railway architecture in Queensland.

## 10

Construction of the station commenced in early 1913, with the new building commencing operations from 1 December. Positioned on an island platform, the long narrow chamferboard-clad building housed a bar, refreshment room and servery, waiting room, ladies room, station master's office, telegraph and booking office and sheltered ticket sales area. A smaller upper floor housed the kitchen, scullery and pantry for the refreshment room, serviced by a hand operated lift, and a concrete underground cellar was provided behind the bar. Cantilevered platform awnings with decorative riveted iron brackets extended the length of the building on both sides, from which lamps were suspended for lighting. Upon its completion, the Gympie Times described the station as '...certainly the most attractive of government buildings in Gympie...which lends distinction to its surroundings'.

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**11**Next to the station on its north end, a smaller timber building following the Pagoda design style housing a lamp room, porter room, guard's room and toilets was completed around this time.

## **12**

Other major work included the triple-gabled, open-ended engine shed built in 1912, which survives today although with alterations and extensions; the construction of a subway and luggage lift to provide pedestrian access from the southern end of the island platform to the station entrance, and an adjacent underpass to replace a gated crossing between Station Road and Mellor Street. Large excavations were required for this undertaking, and concrete walls were built to line the underpass and the station entrance. A set of concrete steps between the entrance and underpass linked to a small timber footbridge running parallel with the railway, connecting to Lady Mary Terrace. Two half-through plate girder bridges were constructed to carry the rails over the underpass.

## **13**

In 1915, a large timber two-span overbridge with steps leading from the island platform and steps alighting onto Lady Mary Terrace and Station Road was also completed. Timber screens were attached below the bridge to reduce pedestrian exposure to train smoke.

## **14**

The Gympie goldfield passed through its most profitable period from 1901 to 1906 and in 1903 produced its peak annual output. After 1906, production declined and by 1925 the last of the big mines had ceased operations, ending a 50 year phase of deep reef mining in Gympie.

By this time dairying and agriculture (especially fruit production) had emerged as key contributors to the economy of the Gympie district, strongly influenced by the opening of the Mary Valley branch railway in 1915 and the resulting influx of new settlers. These industries were heavily reliant on transport by rail and increasingly informed activities within the station complex while shaping the development of the surrounding precinct. The Wide Bay Co-operative Dairy Company was located on Tozer Street from 1906 and in 1925 built one of Australia's largest butter factories, a reflection of the region's prominence in dairying.

## **15**

Before discussing the railway precinct a little more I'll briefly discuss the cream sheds on the Mary Valley line that were also heritage listed last year. While these buildings may not have the grandeur of the railway station they are an important part of the region's railway history. The Mary Valley branch railway cream sheds, located at Dagon, Amamoor, Kandanga and Melawondi, were built between the 1920s and 1940s along with sheds at every other stop on the line, in response to the strong growth of dairying in one of Queensland's most important dairy producing regions of the twentieth century.

## **16**

Cream was transported on the Mary Valley line from its very beginnings. By 1921 there were 93 dairies located between Dagon and Brooloo, with an average herd size of 31) and producing 586,016 pounds of cream.

Prior to road networks, transportation by rail was a far more efficient way of delivering cream to butter factories than by road, with contractors and individual farmers able to deliver their cream direct to the nearest railhead. Following delivery and washing of the cans at the factory, they were returned by rail, with each can inscribed with the name of its owner for identification.

## **17**

The expansion of dairy production from the early twentieth century led to the construction by Queensland Railways of cream sheds at stations and sidings throughout the state. Cream sheds were built to a standard design; clad and lined with horizontal hardwood boards separated by open spaces, with the interior boards offset to cover the outside spaces. The spacing of the boards improved air circulation, resulting in a cooler storage space, reducing

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the risk of the cream spoiling before reaching the butter factory. Double doors opened out to platforms on either side of the shed for placement and retrieval of cream cans. Sheds were set on low stumps and were sheltered by a gabled roof.

Dairying was geographically Queensland's most widespread agricultural industry in the 1930s and the state's second most profitable export industry from 1936 to 1941, accounting for 20% of primary production. By the late 1930s, around one in eight Queenslanders were living on dairy farms. In 1937 the Gympie District was Queensland's largest milk and butter producer, with the greatest number of dairy cattle in milk. By 1939 the 12 butter factories in the Wide Bay Burnett region produced almost 1/3 of Queensland's butter. In the same year, 4 500 cream cans were forwarded from Kandanga alone.

The rapid increase in production in the Mary Valley during the interwar period made a significant contribution to the Gympie region's status as one of Queensland's top dairy producing areas. The provision of cream sheds along the length of the line demonstrates the extent and expansion of dairying in the Mary Valley. The cream sheds illustrate the historical importance and role of railways in transporting dairy produce in Queensland.

### **18**

The Gympie district was the largest producer of bananas in Australia in the 1920s and from the 1930s an important pineapple and bean growing area. Fruit trains began operating from Gympie to Melbourne from 1923 and in 1929 the Gympie Fruit Growers Co-operative Association erected premises opposite the station on Tozer Street.

### **19**

The opening of the Townsville-Cairns section of the North Coast line in December 1924, the final link of Queensland's coastal route, sent more goods and people through Gympie. This increase in traffic determined further substantial alterations to the complex in the second half of the 1920s. Plans were drawn for an extension of the refreshment rooms in 1924, the northern end platform was extended in 1927 and the subway lift shaft at the south end was altered for a new electric lift. Other work included the installation of an electropneumatic signalling and interlocking system and triple storey signal cabin, addition of more rail lines within the complex, a new turntable and coal chutes. The platform shade extending from the south end of the station building to the subway entrance was built by 1932 the earlier single storey signal cabin at the north end of the platform was in use as a signal maintainer's 'hut'.

### **20**

By the 1930s, the Gympie railway station complex had evolved into one of Queensland's most substantial and busy railway complexes. Extending beyond the main yard into adjacent streets, a range of structures existed to meet the needs of railway staff and customers. Such structures included engine and wagon repair shops, storage and maintenance sheds, loading banks and trucking yards, offices, union rooms, station masters residence and guards, loco, inspectors and waitresses quarters. Within the yard were some 11 miles (17.6 km) of railway line.

Gympie was the terminus for passenger services from Brisbane and Maryborough and the administrative boundary between these railway districts and operated as a crew change point, train examination, shunting and re-marshalling centre. During WWII, Gympie became an important depot and meal stop for troop trains.

### **21**

After the war the local small crops industry continued its expansion and in 1955 agricultural loadings worth a total of £1,494 000 were sent from the Gympie station including 900,000 cases of pineapples, 85,000 cases of beans and 20,000 cases of bananas. This in turn further shaped the surrounding precinct. We can see the chronology of the development of the precinct on this powerpoint.

### **22**

In relation to pineapples and back to the Mary Valley Queensland's production of pineapples doubled between 1952 and 1956. In 1955-56, the Mary Valley produced 527 041 cases of

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pineapples, more than any other district in Queensland. Of this total 178 319 cases were consigned from Kandanga. The Kandanga Fruit and Vegetable Growers Co-operative shed built in 1952 is evidence of this phase of growth and the reliance on rail for transport. The shed was used for the storage of grower's supplies and the co-ordination of fruit loading activities, conducted by the Committee of Direction (COD) of Fruit Marketing on behalf of the Kandanga Fruit and Vegetable Growers. Evidence of the importance of pineapple growing has increasingly disappeared from the Gympie region's rural landscape, as former farms grow over or are replaced by other crops.

### **23**

Over time, a range of factors including the transition to diesel from steam, competition with road transport and changes in rural industries impacted on the operations of the Gympie station and informed changes to the complex.

### **24**

In 1970 the 24 hour refreshment rooms dispensed with evening trading, before the service stopped altogether in 1972. In the 1930s, the rooms had employed two cooks, a manager and 15 waitresses. The closure of the refreshment rooms and other operational needs saw the internal spaces of the station building used for other purposes.

By 1981 the main station building accommodated spaces for records and other storage, porters, fitters and driver's rooms, loco crew amenities, inspector's office, switchboard and CTC control room. The former kitchen on the first floor at this time housed the station master's office. The porter's room on the platform was in use as an electrician's hut. The platform was further extended to accommodate longer air-conditioned trains. The three storey signal cabin was made obsolete around 1980 with the introduction of CTC signalling and was removed circa 1989.

### **25**

The Gympie station had been operating for a century by 1981 but by the end of the 1980s was rendered largely redundant. As part of the upgrading and electrification process of the North Coast line between Brisbane and Rockhampton, an eastern deviation was constructed by Queensland Rail. A new station 'Gympie North' was built as part of this project, opening in early 1989 with the inauguration of electric train services. Gympie Railway Station was relegated to a goods and freight depot from 1989 before officially closing as a Queensland Rail station in 1995. By this time many of the structures within the complex had been removed.

### **26-28**

For over a century the station complex was intrinsically linked to the economy of Gympie and the surrounding area and played an important regional role in Queensland's rail network. While facilitating the movement of goods, the site was also an important social space, for the wider community who greeted and farewelled family, friends and distinguished visitors at the station, for rail travellers passing through, and for the hundreds of employees connected to the station. A cursory search of the digital resources demonstrate the many events that have occurred at the station – arrivals note the mention of the emu feathers in the hats, departures – not always by choice, conflicts – the strike shows the impact of shutting down the railway prior to decent roads

### **29**

The closure of the station occurred in the same year goods trains ceased operating on the Mary Valley branch railway following its gradual decline in previous decades. The line however, was not formally closed and in 1996 the Mary Valley Heritage Railway Board negotiated to conduct tourist steam train services on the line and in 1997 became the custodians of much of the Gympie Railway complex. The Mary Valley Heritage Railway commenced operations on the former Mary Valley branch line on 23 May 1998. The 'Valley Rattler' steam train tours and rail motor rides have since become a major tourist attraction for the region. A large group of volunteers and trainees contribute to the operation and

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maintenance of the line, rolling stock and buildings between Gympie and Imbil. A more appropriate use would be hard to find.

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