

Our beginnings

“Be that as it may, we, in common with the whole community, hail with pleasure the inauguration of the Railway in Queensland.”

(Brisbane Courier, Monday , July 24, 1865.)

The world of the 1860's was a time of great social and technological change. In July 1865 the first section of railway line in Queensland was opened, with a great fanfare of publicity, to traffic from Ipswich to Bigges Camp, a distance of twenty-one miles (thirty-five kilometres). Bigges Camp (now known as Grandchester), marked the end of the comparatively easy first stretch of line.

Queensland was faced by a situation where economic development was hampered by the lack of an adequate transport network. In developed countries, railways had been introduced to areas where there was already a substantial road network, even if primitive by today's standards. This was not so in Queensland. Since the fastest road travel was only the fraction of the speed of even slow railway travel, it was natural to consider the possibility of a young colony leaping over road development and investing most of its resources in railways.

The role of the railway in Queensland was to be the development of the country. This was to mean that railways would often be built into rural areas in advance of settlement and lead to the establishment of railway towns, towns which did not exist before the advent of the railway and which were often heavily dependent on the railway for their economic base.

The engineer Abraham Fitzgibbon was brought to Queensland in 1863 and offered the Queensland government a radical engineering solution. He proposed that Queensland should have most of the benefits of rail transport immediately by adopting narrow gauge, (1067mm). This would substantially reduce the capital cost, thus making a railway affordable, within the borrowing capacity of the colonial government. The colony would have to sacrifice speed, yet a railway capable of half the average speed attained in Britain would still provide most of the benefits. In practical terms, 200 miles of narrow gauge rail travel taking ten hours at 20 miles per hour was infinitely preferable to 100 miles of broad gauge traversed at twice the speed followed by 100 miles of bullock tracks.

The main construction work was let on contract, to Peto, Brassey & Betts, contractors with world wide railway construction experience who negotiated a fixed sum contract, rather than a schedule of prices. Their contract extended from Ipswich to Grandchester first, followed by a single contract for what had been advertised as four sections, Grandchester to Toowoomba. Also part of the original plans were Toowoomba to Dalby, and Toowoomba to Warwick. The railway opened to Grandchester in 1865, Toowoomba in 1867, Dalby in 1868 and Warwick in 1871.

In Australia, railway construction was modelled on the lines of railway construction in Great Britain. An imported English railway, but on a smaller scale. Apart from the early station buildings imported from England, everything about Queensland Railways was scaled down, not just the track formation.

Building to the bush - The 1880s to 1900

In those days, the role of the railway was to provide a link between the coastal ports to the hinterland and the bush. It was sea travel that dominated the development of the Queensland Railways. A trunk railway system grew out of this relationship of providing cheap and reliable transport to the coast.

From the 1870s Queensland's growing population, financial base and use of cheaper methods of construction, allowed the development of several mining railways. These were separate far flung railways from ports to mining fields.

At the same time mining railways were being pushed through Parliament, the original advocates of the railways in Queensland were also pushing for lines into the west. These lines that supported graziers were progressively developed. Initially progressing from Brisbane, west to Charleville by 1888.

Then, from Rockhampton, west to Barcaldine by 1886, eventually reaching Longreach in 1892. The railway to Charters Towers, with its branch to the Ravenswood gold field opened in 1884. It was quickly extended into grazing country, opening to Hughenden in 1887.

The 1880s were boom years for rail construction throughout Australia. The newly elected Griffith Government secured a ten million pound loan in 1884, about a billion dollars in today's values. These funds were used to build railways for every interest group. The opening of a railway was seen as to guarantee not only success for farming communities and settlements, but also politicians who advocated railways in their constituencies.

The construction of branch lines which had been begun by the McIlwraith government was greatly expanded. Providing railways for farmers was seen as an experiment and cheap standards were adopted, including building lines beside roads and with sharp gradients. It was the produce, not passengers, that mattered most.

Bringing the railway together

The 1890s depression put a stop to railway building as the colony was unable to complete many of its approved railways. The trunk routes were from Brisbane to Charleville, Wallangarra and Bundaberg, Rockhampton to Longreach and Townsville to Hughenden.

In the far north of the state, John Moffat, mining magnate, began negotiations for the private construction of the Chillagoe Railway. This began a spate of private railway proposals at the turn of the century. These were all strongly opposed by the government of the day.

In 1903 the state had two main railway systems, these were the lines connected to Brisbane from Rockhampton- Bundaberg and from the western towns of Charleville and Cunnamulla. In the north of the state there was the Great Northern Railway from Townsville. There were also isolated railways at Mackay, Bowen, Cairns, Cooktown and Normanton. The Queensland Railways consisted of seven separate or disparate systems.

In 1909 construction by day labour began. These workers were directly employed by Queensland Railways. This meant the Railway Department had a large construction workforce employed on totally different terms to their permanent employees.

Much of the construction by day labour for the railways was into agricultural and dairying districts, with an eye for timber, and creating a network that would ultimately extend the railway story into every area of the rural economy.

In thirty years of construction, most of it in the period 1902 to 1920, branches mushroomed in the south to Dayboro, Canungra, Yarraman, Mount Edwards, Mulgowie, Haden, Cooyar, Cecil Plains, Bell, Jandowae and Glenmorgan, Wandoan and Injune, Millmerran, Goomburra, Maryvale, Amiens and Texas, Kilcoy, Brooloo, Kingaroy, Tarong, Nanango, Proston and Windera, Dallarnil, Gayndah, Monto via both Gayndah and Many Peaks, and Morganville.

In Central Queensland, lines were built to Yeppoon, Theodore, Lawgi, Blackall, extending the Mackay Railway to Netherdale, Kungurri and Owens Creek, and Mareeba to Ravenshoe, and Millaa Millaa. Many of these were to open up land for agriculture, not simply to provide facilities for existing settlement.

A Vision splendid & A time of trial ..

In December 1910 the first and only grand railway plan (since the 1860s) was presented to parliament. Simultaneously parliament approved construction from Rockhampton to Cairns to link the major towns of Queensland along the coast and the Great Western Railway.

The North Coast Railway was originally seen as providing better passenger travel as freight was still largely handled by sea. The Great Western Railway developed out of the plan of the 1880s to build a transcontinental land grant railway from Roma to Port Parker on the Gulf. The connecting line was shifted further west into poorer country meaning long extensions to reach this line which was to be completed along with a railway from Bourke to Darwin. While the North Coast Line was completed in 1924 and proved an immediate financial success, work on the Great Western Railway practically ended in 1917.

The depression era saw major investment on the railway network come to a virtual halt until the mid 1930s. The period of the late 1930's was a time of expansion in the Queensland Railways after the period of contraction of the early 1930's. New locomotives and new carriage stock were placed on order including special carriages for the tourist passenger train through to Cairns; the Sunshine Express.

War came to Queensland in 1941. Until this stage the war had not seriously affected the workings of the Queensland Railways. Overnight this situation changed. Railway staff leave was suspended in December of 1941, as the realisation took hold that the defence of North Australia would be based on utilising the North Coast Railway. The difficulties experienced by railway personnel were extreme at this stage. Running extra trains was possible by reducing turn-around time running engines beyond the normal times for maintenance and overhaul, and finally by running locomotives in need of repair.

The railway workers had borne a major role in the defence of Australia and had played in many ways a near heroic role in keeping the trains going.

In the late 1940s the decision was undertaken to invest and rebuild the Queensland Railways. New locomotives, carriages, rollingstock, lines, buildings, and electrification of the suburban network, were all part of this new vision. With a new government in power in the late 1950s there was a re-ordering of the priorities of state spending towards health, education, and roads. Investment that would continue in the railway network would be for regional, or rural services. Modernisation of the network began with the introduction of new diesel-electric locomotives, new country passenger trains, and new buildings on stations in regional Queensland (such as Charleville), and overdue investment in specific infrastructural works.

Creating a modern competitive railway

Since the late 1960s practically all construction has been to develop mining, and to rebuild or upgrade, and modernise the existing network.

The first major heavy haul operation by QR started with the Moura Short Line completed in 1968, funded by mining companies, and built and operated by QR, as part of its network. Construction under this heavy haul lines now reach from places such Gladstone to Moura Mine, coal spur lines to Utah Mine (Koorilgah), Laleham, Curragh, Gregory and Gordonstone spurs in the Blackwater area, the Goonyella system from Hay Point to Goonyella, and Blair Athol.

Other mineral lines were built to Cobarra near Townsville and Greenvale for nickel ore, and Phosphate Hill in the Cloncurry district. Major reconstruction of the railway between Gladstone Rockhampton Blackwater and of the Collinsville branch was undertaken to cope with increasing amounts of minerals being moved by rail.

In the mid 1980s electrification took place of the main coalfields lines in central Queensland. 1600 kilometres of railways were built, or reconstructed to develop a modern efficient transport system, that would cope with increasing tonnages being moved to export ports in central Queensland. From 1979 electric trains were introduced to Brisbane, and new commuter lines services to Cleveland and the Gold Coast.

Since 1992 QR has invested more than \$6 billion throughout its portfolio of businesses. More than \$2 billion of this has gone on new and upgraded track alone. The remainder has been invested in advanced new telecommunications systems, new suburban and long distance passenger trains, such as the Tilt Train, and additional freight locomotives and wagons. As QR prepares to meet competition, over its network it is also expanding its services nationally, far beyond its traditional borders.