

BY RAIL TO ALBURY & DISTRICT

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The railway lines to Albury have been of great importance to Australia, in both peace and war. The fast communication they provided helped cement the colonies into a nation. The lines still have a vital role in the economy.

Australia's first public steam railway was the Melbourne to Port Melbourne line opened in 1854. The first NSW railway linked Sydney and Parramatta in 1855. As early as 1858 – when Albury's goods came by bullock wagon or paddlesteamer – the *Border Post* newspaper called for the railway to be extended to Albury, then a town of only 650 people. In 1860, soon after Albury had been declared a municipality, a town meeting urged the Government to provide a railway to Albury.

Nine years later, when the Sydney line was extended to Goulburn, the dream seemed to be turning to reality. In January 1870, it was announced that the North-east Railway would build a line from Melbourne to Wodonga. The same year, surveyors started to map out a route for an Albury to Wagga Wagga line.

FIRST TRAINS

The railway from Melbourne to Wangaratta was completed on October 27, 1873 and the line to Wodonga was formally opened on November 19. Construction materials had been railed to Echuca, then transported upriver by paddlesteamer to Wahgunyah or Wodonga. When the line to Wodonga was opened, the line from Sydney still reached only as far as Goulburn. This was 41 hours by coach from Albury. Travelling by coach and train, a passenger from Albury could reach Sydney in 51 hours – given perfect conditions.

Slowly the Great Southern Railway was extended towards Albury, reaching Wagga in 1878. That year the contract for the 125 km (77½ miles) of the Great Southern Railway between Wagga and Albury was awarded to Cornwell, Mixner and Co, of Victoria. By April, work on cuttings and embankments on a 19 km (12 mile) stretch north from Albury was well under way. Hundreds of men working a nine-hour day with picks, shovels and wheelbarrows moved thousands of tons of rock and soil. Horse-drawn trucks were also used. One railway camp was sited near Ettamogah. This had a population of 200 living in tents, with a blacksmith, carpenter, butcher, general dealer and licensed "hotel."

THE STATION

Railway authorities decided to build the Albury railway station at the end of Smollett Street, and not at the end of Dean Street, which was favoured by many people. The railway cut diagonally across the town's planned street pattern, one result being to split Alexandra Park. The line from Wagga to Gerogery was opened without ceremony on August 29, 1880, with Gerogery becoming the busy coach-train terminus for a short time.

On December 28, 1880, the first train from Sydney arrived in Albury. The official opening took place on February 3, 1881 when the New South Wales Premier, Sir Henry Parkes, arrived in a special train. About 1000 people attended the opening.

Timetables of 1881 show journeys from Wodonga to Melbourne took about 8 hours and from Albury to Sydney 16 hours. During the next 18 months until the railway between Albury and Wodonga was built, large horse-drawn coaches carried passengers between the two places. One of them carried 18 passengers outside and 18 inside.

Albury's magnificent station – the grandest railway building between Melbourne and Sydney – was not completed until February 26, 1882. It cost 24,000 pounds. At this stage the platform was 122 metres (400 feet) long. The 24 metres (78 feet) clock-tower had no clock for many years, until the Rotary Club installed one in 1981.

In 1882, New South Wales and Victoria finally agreed to share the cost of connecting the two systems with a double line across the Murray, that is, with a standard gauge and a broad gauge line. A temporary wooden bridge was built until the lattice girder bridge could be completed. On June 14, 1883, the official linking of the systems took place. Celebrations were attended by the leading men of each colony. Among the guests was Thomas Boyd, the convict servant of Hume and Hovell, who in 1824 had been the first white man to swim the river.

“ALL CHANGE”

Although the rail link between Sydney and Melbourne was now complete, all passengers and goods traffic had to change in Albury and switch to a train on a different gauge. The New South Wales or standard gauge was 143.5 cm (4 feet, 8½ inches) and the Victorian or broad gauge 160 cm (5 feet, 3 inches).

At first, Wodonga was made the goods changeover station, but soon all goods and passengers had to change at Albury. To enable the NSW trains to pull up opposite the Victorian trains, the Albury passenger platform was extended.

In the 1880s Wodonga became one of the greatest store cattle markets in Australia. Much of the stock still travelled on the hoof. Coach travel between Albury and Wodonga was no longer necessary but operators continued their runs from Albury to Holbrook and up and down the Murray Valley.

During 1884 the iron bridge over the Murray was completed and first used on October 14 that year. Six iron cylinders filled with concrete support a lattice girder structure 600 ft long.

ACCIDENT

The Wodonga-Tallangatta line was opened in July 1891 and later extended to Cudgewa, near Corryong. It was on this line that Australia's worst rail crossing accident happened on May 8, 1943. Twenty three soldiers, a servicewoman and a bus driver died after their bus and a steam locomotive collided. The accident happened on what is now Thomas Mitchell Drive, Wodonga. The bus had been taking the soldiers from Bandiana to an evening out in Wodonga. The locomotive had been heading for Bandiana. A mass funeral was held for those victims buried in the Albury War Cemetery.

The first motor car arrived in Albury in 1901, but for half a century main traffic remained with the railways, largely due to bad roads.

IMPROVEMENTS

In 1930, Albury residents at last succeeded in having a bridge built over the railway from Dean St to East Albury.

The *Spirit of Progress* was introduced between Melbourne and Albury in November 1937, setting a new standard of luxury travel. First hauled by the S-Class Pacific steam engines such as *the Edward Henty*, the Spirit made what was then Australia's longest non-stop run, 305 km (190 miles). Longer trains also led to the Albury platform being extended from 423 metres (463 yards) to 460 metres (503 yards).

Military trains passed through Albury and Wodonga during the wars and others transported troops and equipment for the local bases. There were also many trains carrying American troops on leave.

On September 19, 1949, the new *Riverina Daylight Express* began running between Albury and Sydney. It had air-conditioning and a buffet-diner. In 1951 the first diesel-electric locomotives were brought into use in NSW, and the next year in Victoria.

In March, 1956 the *Inter-Capital Daylight Express* was introduced between Melbourne and Albury. The Sydney-Melbourne run was completed in a record 13 hours, despite the transfers at Albury.

As a result of the Wentworth report, a standard gauge line between Wodonga and Melbourne was built between 1957 and 1961. It was laid beside the broad gauge.

The through Melbourne-Sydney freight service began in January 1962.

The luxury night sleeper, the *Southern Aurora*, began the Sydney-Melbourne service on April 16. This train consisted of roomette and twinette sleeping carriages, a dining car, a club car, a brake-van and power car to generate electricity for lighting, cooking and air-conditioning. On the same day, the *Spirit of Progress* made the last broad gauge run and the first standard gauge run.

“NO CHANGE”

At last interstate passengers no longer had to change trains at Albury. Sitting passengers could use the supplementary night express, the *Spirit of Progress*, which also became a Sydney-Melbourne train, using diesel electric locomotives. This carried a buffet-diner and a composite “through” car between Melbourne and Canberra.

About 1964 the last steam locomotives were withdrawn. On August 23 1982, *XPT* trains were introduced between Albury and Sydney, cutting the travelling time to 7 hours, 20 minutes, 1 hour and 40 minutes less than the *Riverina Express*.

In 1985, trains on the Albury-Melbourne run took between 3 hours, 31 minutes and 3 hours 50 minutes to complete their journeys.

The Albury passenger station was 100 years old in February 1981, and was magnificently restored to mark the occasion.

The centenary of the link-up of the two rail systems was celebrated in Albury and Wodonga on June 11, 1983. The Transport Ministers of the two States, Mr Peter Cox and Mr Steve Crabb, were present as two steam-hauled trains crossed the bridge side by side. The Ministers also inspected the renovated station and unveiled a plaque.

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