

# The Great Southern Line

*Greg Ryan*

A railway line heading south from Sydney was first proposed in 1846. But a decision had to be made about a rail gauge for Australia. In 1850 NSW, Victoria and South Australia agreed on a width of 4 feet 8½ inches. Then NSW changed its mind and proposed a broader gauge (5 feet 3 inches). The other two colonies agreed and in 1853 started work on railway projects. However, NSW changed back to the narrower gauge but the two other colonies were committed and would not change again.

This was the genesis of problems caused by various rail gauges across Australia.

Colonial rivalry between Victoria and NSW was the catalyst for the rapid expansion of rail networks in both states in the direction of the Victoria/NSW border. The line from Melbourne to Wodonga opened in November 1873 and Riverina wool was being diverted to Melbourne via river boats and rail.

Over the second half of the nineteenth century, millions of pounds were spent on NSW railway projects, including the Great Southern Line. The line reached Goulburn in 1869, Yass Junction in 1876 and Wagga Wagga in 1879.

The project was complete when the line reached Albury in 1881. A journey that could take several days from Sydney to Albury could now be completed in about nine hours. The regional economy prospered as local markets now had faster access to Sydney.



February 1881, the scene at the not yet complete Albury Railway Station as the train approaches carrying dignitaries from Sydney to celebrate the completion of the Great Southern Line

The formal opening of the rail line to Albury was celebrated in style on February 3, 1881. Two days later, the *Albury Banner* reported that the event was “the most important event that ever has occurred, possibly that ever will occur, in our local history.”

A procession “headed by the Albury Brass Band, paraded the principal thoroughfares and then made for the railway terminus” to meet a “special train” with the Premier, Sir Henry Parkes, and other dignitaries aboard. In the evening a banquet, also attended by the Victorian Premier, was held in a large temporary shed at the railyards.

On February 26, 1882 the new station building was opened, “a grand symmetrical Victorian Italianate style station building with a tall central tower.” The new building stood “as a symbol of NSW’s colonial pride.” (Pennay)

In June 1883, the Sydney-Melbourne link was completed when a temporary railway bridge across the Murray River was opened. NSW standard gauge trains arrived on the eastern side of the Albury platform, Victorian broad-gauge trains on the western side.