

First Rail...Last Post

by JW Shoebridge

Introduction

In their article in LR 194 describing the first incline railway of the Australian Agricultural Company (AA Coy) in Newcastle, the authors raised the question of the type of rail used. Exciting news of a fortuitous discovery made by an alert and knowledgeable researcher has revealed the probable answer, and a tangible remnant from the oldest railway in Australia has been preserved.

At the same time, one of the very few in-situ remnants of the Company's railway system appears in imminent danger of destruction.

The First Rail

Some time ago, Newcastle historian David Campbell, was on foot investigating the route of the A A Coy's 'C Pit incline railway, now lost within suburbia.

The 'C Pit was sunk by the AA Coy in 1842 around the same time that the 'A' Pit closed. It was located at the northern end of Bingle Street and its coal was transported over a short incline or 'jig', connecting with the horse and gravity-worked railway which served the 'B' Pit.

In the debris of a demolished house, David's sharp eye noticed an unusually shaped piece of metal. When unearthed and brushed down, this revealed itself to be a length of cast iron fish-bellied rail. Cast iron was used in Britain for tram plates and rails from the 1700s but by the mid-1830s it was being supplanted by wrought iron, which was less prone to fracture.

David's deduction, supported by several local industrial historians, is that this piece of rail was cast in Britain around 1826, brought to New South Wales in 1827, and eventually laid in place on the 'A' Pit incline in 1831. He believes it was recovered from this location around 1843 and re-laid on the 'C pit line. At some time, perhaps in the mid 1850s when the track was lifted, this length was damaged and discarded, managing by happy chance to escape the scrap furnace. AA Company records indicate that similar rails remained in use as late as 1852 on the line to Pit Town (now Hamilton), surviving until the introduction of locomotive traction.

David retrieved the rail before it was sent to the dump and it was placed in store. On 23 March 2007, this most significant historical artifact was unveiled by Messrs Gaudry (MP for Newcastle) and Tait (Lord Mayor of Newcastle) before an



Newcastle historian David Campbell holds the section of the original AA Company fish-belly rail he discovered. He is standing outside the heritage-listed houses known as The Boltons near the site of the AA Company's 'A' pit during the media event to mark the discovery, held on 14 March 2007. Photo: Rod Caldwell

Industrial History Conference held at the former Honeysuckle Point Railway Workshops.

It was then displayed to the public, along with other historic rail sections, at a Rail Expo organised jointly by the Newcastle Industrial History Association and the Institute of Engineers Australia, to commemorate the 1857 opening of the Great Northern Railway (GNR). This display attracted many visitors and remained in place for 'Steamiest 2007' (20-21 April 2007).

The Last Post

In 1864 the AA Company's extensive railway system was connected to the GNR close to Pit Town Station. This facilitated the shipment of coal via the government cranes and was later utilised by loaded trains from Hebburn Colliery, bound for the Company's staithes. The private railway was closed in 1921 and the northern extension of Gordon Avenue now occupies the route of the connecting line.

Nearby was a cottage originally built for the GNR crossing keeper. Although this building was demolished in the aftermath of the Newcastle earthquake, one of the gate posts where the Company siding passed through the boundary fence remains to this day, together with a 'dog-leg' in that fence line.

Currently (April 2007) with the environs of Hamilton station undergoing upgrading work, there is a serious risk that this tattered old relic will not survive much longer.

Conclusion

In the specialised field of industrial archaeology, recognition of the significance of any discovery will always depend on the background knowledge of the observer. Thus a singular and significant relic of the nation's first railway was saved by an interested and astute person who just happened to be at the right place at the right time.

Sadly, without the intervention of someone with knowledge and authority, how readily will the old post be knocked down, the fence line straightened and the last few traces of the AA Coy rail system further erased.

Acknowledgement

As usual, a number of my friends have assisted me. In this case I am indebted to Messrs Brian Andrews, Rod Caldwell and David Campbell.



One of the last relics of the A A Company's railway system is this former gate post near Hamilton station. Photo: John Shoebridge