

AA Company fish-bellied rail, Newcastle NSW

The article 'First Rail ... Last Post' in LR 195 on the discovery of an original fish-bellied rail from the 1831 Australian Agricultural Company colliery tramway has generated considerable interest from readers. One respondent queried whether the rail shown on the photograph on page 13 was a fish-bellied rail, so colleagues from the Newcastle Industrial Heritage Association have provided additional information about this important discovery.

Rod Caldwell advises that the relic was found within a few metres of where the rails would have been laid for the AA Company 'C Pit mine and it is believed that the rails from the 1831 tramway were used for the incline there. As depicted in the photo in LR, one end of the rail has been broken off - a common weakness of cast iron rails - and, with this piece, the rail would have originally been 4-feet in length. On initially viewing the photograph, John Shoebridge, the author of 'First Rail', questioned whether the item could be a firebox grate bar, but on personal inspection of the item he ruled this option out. Bob Cook advised us that he visited the Science Museum and the National Railway Museum in England during June 2007 where he observed various types of early cast iron rails and from this he concluded that the rail found at Newcastle (NSW) is similar to the types used in England prior to 1830.

For further clarification, we approached English historians who specialise in early permanent way and the rails used for these, via Grahame Boyes. Grahame circulated his group and advised the information about the Newcastle rail discovery had been received 'with considerable excitement.' Michael Lewis, the author of *Early*

Wooden Railways, has provided a detailed response. He described the AA Company rail as an "extraordinary find" and concluded: 'there's not a shadow of doubt that your rail is a rail, and its design is entirely in keeping with a date of 1826.'

A subject of some contention was the scarfed or overlapping method of joining the rails. Michael notes that the most common method scarfing was the one patented by Losh and Stephenson in 1816, but

by a decade later a variety of other methods were being tried. He advises that a specimen rather similar to the one found at Newcastle (NSW) had been on display in the Newcastle Museum of Science and Industry (UK). It was 4ft long with a vertical rib near each end to locate it in the chair, and it ended in a semicircular male lug to fit a corresponding female socket in the next rail. Thus, it seems highly plausible that the rails sent to Newcastle NSW

in 1827 should have been supplied from, or at least designed at, Newcastle UK. The old Newcastle Museum closed years ago and its holdings went to the new Discovery Museum in Newcastle. Contact has been made with the curator at Discovery, who has offered to assist with establishing the provenance of the AA Company rail.

Tramways at Cape Inscription, WA

The Western Australian Museum's Department of Maritime Archaeology has recently released its Special Publication 10: *Report on the 2006 Western Australian Museum, Department of Maritime Archaeology, Cape Inscription national heritage listing archaeological survey*. A copy of this report is in the Battye Library (State Library of Western Australia). Cape Inscription is the northern tip of Dirk Hartog Island, a long island separating much of Shark Bay from the Indian Ocean. Two sites of light railway interest are featured, the most well known being the Turtle Bay to Cape Inscription Lighthouse tramway. Built in 1908 the tramline ran 4.8km from a jetty, up a horse powered winch incline, and along the crest of the island to the lighthouse. Much of it is still extant although very derelict and the Turtle Bay cliff-top car park access partly runs along the tram track. The report recommends that alternative vehicle access and parking is provided to protect the tramline remains. The lighthouse became unmanned in 1917 and the tramway became man-powered with the incline winder equipment operated by up to eight men (photographic evidence exists according to the report). Interesting operational and current photographs accompany the text.

The second site is known as Irwin Station and was a government outpost staffed by the 99th Regiment in 1850-51 to ensure that guano was not extracted from the island by any party who had not paid government fees. As well as accommodation buildings, a limestone base jetty approximately 100m long was constructed. There are a few pieces of light railway track in the vicinity and it is possible that a line was laid along the jetty for transporting supplies and equipment. No evidence has been found of tramways being built for the short lived guano extraction industry on the island.

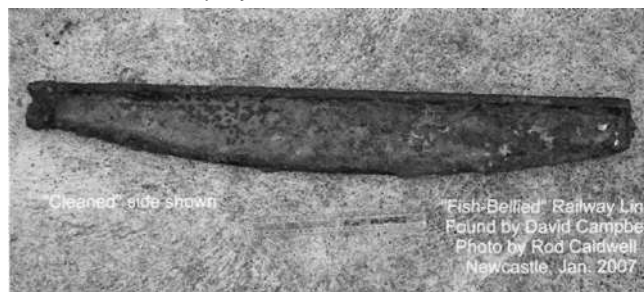
David Whiteford



Scarfed ends of fish-bellied rails in an iron chair displayed at the Science Museum, in London.
Photo: Bob Cook



The fish-bellied rail display at the Newcastle Museum of Science & Technology, with the rail on the left having scarfed ends that closely match those of the AA Company rail.
Photo: Michael Lewis



Photograph by Rod Caldwell of the cleaned side of the fish-bellied rail discovered in Newcastle by David Campbell against a 30cm ruler. The scarf on the right-hand end has broken off.