The Origins of the Clare Valley Riesling Trail

By John Wilson

An abridged version

For a few years after the 1983 bushfire there were moves to restore the railway as a tourist venture. At the time South Australia already had three tourist railways that were heavily dependent on community funds and labour. There were two imaginative schemes that could have happened only with major public or corporate sponsorship. The first was a plan to relocate the Peterborough collection to Clare and convert the track to narrow-gauge.

Scheme two would have kept the railway to its original gauge, and embarked on the construction of a full-size working replica of South Australia's original 1856 Fairbairn locomotive with matching carriages. Neither proposal could stimulate the required volunteer or financial support and in 1989 the demolition contractor moved in.

After the rails had been lifted the railway formation between Auburn and Clare was developed as a walking and riding trail that is now a tourist attraction for the Clare Valley. Its name "The Riesling Trail" derives from the landscape of vineyards through which it passes and the affinity to the region of the Riesling grape that produces internationally acclaimed wines of that variety. The development of The Riesling Trail happened as a result of a passionate campaign by local winemaker Tony Brady, backed up by a local volunteer support organisation.

Auburn to Watervale

There is a steady upgrade over this section within which there are three separate stretches of 1 in 60 grade that collectively comprise about 40% of the section.

There is a levelled area immediately north of Mulkirri Road that marks the site of the Mulkirri passenger stop.

In the cuttings north of Mulkirri the rock formations are interesting, with some showing advanced weathering, whilst in other parts the rock is of far more durable nature.

There is a straight stretch of formation and it is quite obvious that about half way along there is a change of gradient. The milder grade here is 1 in 398, and it changes to 1 in 60.

The two curves after this straight are as tight as it gets between Auburn and Clare, being curves with 20 chain radius. The curves between Auburn and Mulkirri are not as tight, but there are more 20 chain curves near Penwortham and Sevenhill.

At Leasingham the Trail descends from the embankment for the road crossing. The southern abutment was removed to realign the road. Here we see a black and white "Leasingham" sign that has been erected by the Riesling Trail committee. As a historical marker, this is an aberration, because there was never a station or stopping place at Leasingham.

North of Leasingham the route proceeds to the bitumen road crossing that marks the beginning of the Watervale station yard.

Watervale to Penwortham

The grade is 1 in 60 uphill from Watervale station and then eases to 1 in 140 before the long straight, which is 1 in 64. On the first curve after this long straight there is a short stretch of level.

The Trail veers off the mainline through the Watervale station yard and keeps close to the western boundary of the yard, denying opportunity to observe the features of the station yard.

To the east of the yard is a white house with a green roof that is of a design built extensively by the South Australian Railways in the 1920s. There was never a station master at Watervale, however there was a caretaker and therein was possibly its purpose. Next to this house is a track that leads into the Watervale

station yard and by taking this direction it is possible to access the mainline and the remnants of the platform that was on the west of the track.

At the northern end of the Watervale yard the Trail again re-joins the railway formation. Here is another of the black and white station signs, but well distant from the point on the platform where the original existed.

Beyond Mount Horrocks Road there is a long straight that extends to the road bridge at Penwortham. This is the longest straight section between Auburn and Clare. The diagram of gradients and curves for the railway show that the start and finish corresponded with the 83 and 84 mile posts (miles from Adelaide).

Immediately north of the road bridge can be seen the abutments of the original road over bridge that was replaced c 1961. The Morrison Road crossing marks the point of the Penwortham stopping place.

Penwortham to Sevenhill

There is a short length of 1 in 72 upgrade, then it is 1 in 60 to the summit, 1 in 60 down on the other side until the Hutt River bridge. Then there is a short section of 1 in 70 upgrade to Sevenhill station.

This section commences at Morrison Road.

Immediately adjacent to this crossing, on the eastern side of the line is a small levelled area that marks the location of the Penwortham stopping place. The level area has been paved with locomotive ash, which was a material never in short supply and well suited to these situations.

A large embankment carries the route past St. Mark's Church and Cemetery. On the west side of this embankment a hawthorn bush marks the point where a closed concrete culvert carries the watercourse.

Marvel a while at the magnificent cuttings in this section. Explosives were used, but the rest of the work was done by men with picks and shovels and horses with carts.

The Trail crosses Pawelski Road and curves to the west. At the end of that curve is the Ballast Pit, on the eastern side, and this is where the ballast was produced when the railway was built. At the point where the curve ends, it is possible to identify the formation where the siding for the ballast pit joined the main line. Note that the eastern fence line, marking the railway land, is well to the east at this point.

A straight stretch of 1 in 60 leads up to the Summit Cutting and here is the highest point on the line, notable for being the same elevation as the railway at Mount Lofty.

Just before Tatkana Road, on the eastern side of the Trail, is a collection of large stones that mark the plinth for the TATKANA stopping place.

Shortly after the Tatkana Road crossing the Trail enters a long straight, and it is along this straight that an accommodation crossing is seen. We must remember that the land for the railway was compulsorily acquired, and in many cases left farmers with their holding transected by the line. Looking just east of this point can be seen a ruin, which no doubt was the farmhouse when the line was built and therefore needed a private crossing. The gates on each side of the Trail feature well-weathered sheets of iron that were once signs, in this case painted ones. Enamel signs were fairly common on these accommodation crossings, but those that had not found their way into the hands of collectors by 1978 were removed, along with any other South Australian Railways signs, when Australian National took over. The short version is that there was a forty shilling penalty for not closing and fastening the gate. At this accommodation crossing we see more locomotive ash used as a fill.

There is much to see at the Mintaro Road crossing. On the eastern side is a stone-bordered plinth for the stopping place. This plinth is set back about 15 metres from the crossing, which distance corresponds to the length of the railcar. At ground-level stops, passengers could only join or alight by the rear steps and therefore the position of the plinth ensured that the north-bound railcar did not foul the level crossing. There was never a station board at this point, but the railcar could be hailed at any level crossing and we suspect that it would have been a popular stopping place. When the railway was dismantled, the rails were not lifted at crossings with bitumen roads. Anyone with a tape measure should find that the distance between the insides of the rails is 1600 mm, or 5 feet 3 inches. On either side of the Trail are the concrete bases of the level crossing lights. The plastic conduit set in them testifies that they were

relatively recent. In fact the crossing lights at this site were installed in 1980. Prior to that there was a single wig-wag crossing device on the north-west aspect of the crossing.

Another 200 metres to the Hutt River bridge. On the south-eastern abutment is bolted a length of rail. It seems to have been fixed there to stabilise some movement of the abutment, but this is not the same type of rail as in the construction of fence-posts along the Trail. This is "Bull-head" rail and harks from an earlier era of railway construction. There is more at the Clare Showgrounds. It probably also dates the crack in that abutment to the first few years of the line's existence.

From the Hutt River, there is a short stretch of up-grade, before entering the "Christmas-Tree Cutting". Sevenhill locals long cherished this cutting, where feral pines flourished along the trackside in spite of the regular cull each December. Surprisingly there are now far fewer Christmas trees than in the railway days.

On emerging from the Christmas-Tree Cutting, is the Sevenhill station yard.

The Crane is now located at the Lennon Street Carpark.

Sevenhill to Clare

The grade continues downhill from Sevenhill to Clare, for the first half of the way a 1 in 60 grade, then 1 in 84, and finally 1 in 178.

In the Sevenhill station yard are the remnants of the passenger platform (to the west) and the shorter goods platform to the east. There are still a few timbers of the passenger platform, showing that the alignment of the Trail is to the east of the mainline.

Immediately over the Sevenhill crossing is a bridge that has been constructed of used broad-gauge sleepers. The South Australian Railways for many years used a system of "date-nails" on their sleepers. Date-nails had a large head featuring raised digits to indicate the year the sleeper was installed. There are no date-nails visible on these sleepers because they are upside down. The round drill holes identify the under-surface of the sleeper, whereas the holes of the upper surface are square from the shape of the dog spike.

Then there is the "Cemetery Cutting" which commences a straight section, along which can be seen in the ballast along the side of the Trail the occasional lump of coal, a dog spike or a piece of locomotive firebox brick. Near the end of that straight, a small quince tree marks a concrete drainage channel. Here the concrete has cracked badly and displays the absence of reinforcing.

The bridge at the Quarry Road features an impressive set of concrete abutments and the crossing of both watercourse and roadway is unusual by South Australian standards.

The Annual Reports of the South Australian Railways usually featured photographs of what was new and impressive on the system and the 1918 Report proudly shows this "Combined underway road, bridge and culvert at 87 miles 77 chains." Another photograph of this location is held by the Clare Regional History group and shows the process of pouring the concrete. The mix was all done by men with shovels, working in a large mixing box at the base. The mix was then loaded in barrows connected to a pulley system, with a horse providing the pull to lift the barrow-load to the top of the timber formwork. In contrast to many other abutments along the line, the concrete at this location is well preserved and shows no cracking.

Past the stone wall is another culvert decked with sleepers. This time they are the right way up: there are a couple still with base plates, and one of them has a 1960 date nail.

The Clare Showgrounds had its own platform, and passengers could hail the train here show time or otherwise. There's not much of the platform left, but there are a few lengths of rail that were used as uprights for the platform face. This rail is bull-head rail, and it was introduced about 1860. We know quite a lot about the early rails used in South Australia thanks to an unfortunate railway accident in 1860, and its subsequent investigation. The rail used for the Port Adelaide and Gawler railways in the 1850s was called "bridge rail" because in cross-section it looked like a bridge. In 1860 the vice-regal train set out from Port Adelaide, destined for the city, and on a tight schedule to cross the ordinary down train at Woodville. Approaching Woodville, the Governor's train descended upon track workers replacing the bridge rail with the bull-head rail, causing quite a spectacular wreck, although not associated with serious injury. Bull-head rail was set in cast-iron chairs, and held in place with wooden wedges. When the upper surface became worn, it was turned upside-down for a second go. In South Australia, bull-head rail was used on the lines to Port Adelaide, Kapunda, and the short branch-line from Dry Creek to the Stockade. It continued in general use on those lines until about 1920, which corresponds approximately to when the Clare Showgrounds platform was built. One of these sections of rail has some lettering.

A little further is a loading ramp on the east side of the Trail. Its purpose is not clear, but we suspect that it may have been for unloading stock for the Clare Showgrounds.

Just past "The Tunnel of Trees" is an accommodation crossing. This is the site of the Donnybrook Halt. Donnybrook is an old name for this part of Clare. In the 1970s the winery. now owned by Tim Adams, was developed by one Rick Robertson. In 1978 and 1979, some of Ricko's mates organised jazz trains from Adelaide. The Donnybrook Halt was built to disembark the hundreds on each train.

Past Brice Hill Lodge is a small grove of poplars and to the east is an interesting piece of rail presently serving as a fence-post. Much of the rail on the South Australian Railways had identification cast into it, noting the railway for which it was destined. Curiously, most of the fence-posts along the Riesling Trail are "generic rail" devoid of identification. The lettering is BARROW STEEL 1880 T & P R. This was rail made for the Terowie and Petersburg Railway.

Beyond the skewed crossing of Warenda Road are a couple of matching dwellings. These were railway houses built for employees. The S.A.R. Annual Report of 1922 records the construction of two semi-detached houses for employees. At this point on the Trail is a loading ramp. We suspect that this ramp was for the unloading of furniture. The South Australian Railways used its trains to provide a furniture removal service when employees were transferred from one station to another.

A small wooden gazebo marks the southern end of the Clare station yard. A few metres south of the gazebo is clearly evident the concrete formation of the locomotive ash pit and a little beyond that a small abutment and a hollow mark the site of the turntable. Looking north can be seen the old crane which has been shifted to the Lennon Street car park next to the Riesling Trail.

Sections are:

- Auburn to Watervale 10 km
- Watervale to Penwortham 5 km
- Penwortham to Sevenhill 4 km
- Sevenhill to Clare 6 km.

Clare is on the Riverton to Spalding Railway.

The section of railway from Riverton to Clare was officially opened on 4th July 1918.

Clare's first Train

The locomotive is an "S" class express-passenger engine of the type that worked the Broken Hill and Melbourne Expresses of that era. Its tall driving wheels (6ft 6in) were the largest in Australia, and designed for speed on lightly graded lines. It would have struggled with the steeper grades on the line to Clare. The first carriage is a side-corridor carriage of Victorian & South Australian Railways joint stock car from the Melbourne Express. The second carriage is one of the Mann Boudoir carriages that had been converted into the Vice-Regal carriage.

At the time the railway was opened, the Clare water supply had not been completed, hence the open wagons with water-tanks, which would have carted locomotive water from Riverton.

The Railway line at Clare, it is now the famous Riesling Trail

The declining years of the Clare Railway

The last Annual Report of the South Australian Railways was in 1975 and its traditional meticulous reporting of business at each station gives us a final glimpse of the business on the line for the year to 30th June 1975. Thereafter the South Australian Railways became the Rail Division of the State Transport Authority and underwent a division between metropolitan and country operations, in preparation of the latter becoming part of Australian National Railways.

Livestock traffic was relatively minor, with Auburn generating the most outward bound business with 1,250 sheep. Inwards livestock over the whole line amounted to ten head of cattle and one sheep railed to Clare. Most inwards freight was to Clare, which received 6,229 tonnes, over half of which was oil and motor spirit for the bulk fuel depot adjacent to the Clare station. Auburn received 777 tonnes. The major source of outward loading was the silo at Andrews sending 1,986 tonnes of grain. Clare sent out 667 tonnes, of which more than half was wool. Total freight (in and out) at Spalding was 218 tonnes.

With three trains per week, that tonnage equated to an average load of about 50 inward tonnes a week and about 20 outward tonnes per train. (The load for a single 830 class diesel was 600 tonnes.)

The goods timetable of 1976 still had three services per week, making the journey north on Monday, Wednesday and Friday and the return movement the following morning. Only the Monday train worked to Spalding and the other two terminated at Clare.

On 1st March 1978, Australian National Railways took over the operation of all South Australian country rail services. The rail system that ANR acquired was riddled with antiquities that were overdue for retirement, but the new order had a different way of dealing with these situations. Whereas the old State system would announce its intentions well in advance and ride out the inevitable ire of those affected, ANR made cuts by stealth and reduced the system through a process of steady decay.

About July 1978, a new goods timetable had the three trains on the line terminating at Clare, with the provision to operate to Andrews 'as necessary'. The practical effect of this was that the northern-most section of the line between Andrews and Spalding had been effectively, if not officially, closed.

The other relevant closure of 1978 was the Refreshment service at Riverton. At that stage the Jamestown road-bus that had provided the passenger service since 1954, was still connecting at Riverton with the main-line passenger services.

On 9th March 1979, those three trains per week to Clare were cut to only two, by deleting the Friday train.

In November of that year Clare was hit by a major storm, the effect on railway operations being to bring down the railway telephone lines north of Clare. Australian National Railways did not repair the lines. Thereafter trains working to Andrews left Clare with a train order that authorised both the down and up movement.

1980 was a year of mixed messages for the line. There was a concentrated effort to upgrade the track between Riverton and Clare and the newly-closed sidings at Watervale and Sevenhill found a new purpose as storage locations for track equipment and supplies. On 6th August 1980, the Australian National Railways Commission visited Clare. It was a part of their inspection tour of South Australia's northern grain lines and their train included three 'Overland' sleeping cars, a Club car, Dining Car and the Commission's Special Service Car. Commission Chairman, Keith Smith, was questioned on the then rumour that the Clare line was to be closed. He replied that it would be maintained, however drew attention to the geographical anomaly of the grain facility at Andrews requiring a longer rail-haul, compared to the road-haul to Port Pirie or Wallaroo. He advised that the Commission would not be averse to grain from Andrews being carted by road. In 1981, the South Australian Co-operative Bulk Handling called tenders for road transport of grain from Andrews and Quorn for the following three years. This was the first time that grain silos, located on railway routes, were serviced by road. Quorn, like Andrews, was a location where the rail haul was far longer than the road distance to the port.

In the early 1980s Clare acquired another purpose, as Australian National Railways sought siding space for an increasing inventory of surplus goods rolling stock. One advantage of Clare at this time was that despite the paucity of goods traffic, the station still had a Station Master.

There's nothing like a train wreck to add some spice to a treatise on railway history, but hitherto the avoidance of such topic is entirely a consequence of Spalding line trains sticking tightly to the tracks where they were supposed to be. Speed, or more correctly a lack of it, is probably of some bearing here. A derailment near Rhynie on 21st January 1982 produced a spectacular wreck, but fortunately one spared of serious injury. This derailment occurred during a heat wave and heat-buckling of the track. The result had the locomotive (842) down one side of the embankment and the fuel tanker on its side on the other side of the embankment.

There were two other significant events of 1982. No longer were rates for grain haulage based on the long tradition of rail distance carried, but a new system of rates was based on the direct distance to the nearest port. If there had been any remaining chance of rail regaining the contract for the Andrews grain haul, this new rating policy was destined to squash it. The same policy saw the demise of rail's business at Gulnare, Hallett and Burra.

On 8th December 1982, the new standard-gauge main-line between Adelaide and Crystal Brook was opened. This one main-line became the conduit for northern traffic, whereas formerly there were three major routes north from Adelaide, namely to Port Pirie, Gladstone and Peterborough. After the opening of the Crystal Brook standard-gauge line the remaining northern broad-gauge system was allowed to slip into rapid decline.

In May 1982, the Mile End Railway Museum operated a special Bluebird railcar to Clare, a movement that was to be the last passenger train to operate on the line.

The Ash Wednesday bushfire of 1983 (16th February) started south of Clare on a day of extreme heat and a strong north wind. A wind shift later in the day turned the fire to the east. The damage to the railway line was between the Clare Showgrounds and Penwortham and involved about 2,000 sleepers. There was a rake of surplus rolling stock stored in the Clare yard. One tank car was taken out by road in July and the other vehicles were carefully shifted over the damaged track by an AN truck placer to be lined up on the straight between Penwortham and Watervale. The last train to operate over the line was on 1st August, when engine 842 ran to the 133.5k mark to collect the rake of wagons.

To their credit, the three local councils then responsible for Riverton, Auburn and Clare, undertook to explore the feasibility of establishing a tourist railway operation. Meetings were called, but nothing further happened.

The demolition process did not involve any train movements over the closed railway. The contractor used a hydraulic jig that wrenched the rail up from the sleepers and then a front-end loader recovered and stacked sleepers and rail. The rail was sold to sugar railways in Queensland. The demolition contract included the removal of all bridge structures. After the demolition contractor had finished there were a few remnants. There were the station buildings at Clare and Auburn. The word was that the former was badly affected by termites and was demolished. The Auburn station languished for many years but has been restored. This operates as the wine-sales facility of Mount Horrocks Wines. The people at Rhynie salvaged the old Train Control telephone box and station name-board, both of which are now located near the town's hotel.