

All Change on the North Coast





Opposite page: A scarred 44214 waits at Yeerongpilly for a call-up to run south on Sunday 23 June 1991. Once synonymous with North Coast Line freight services, their dominance was to last only three more years. Alan Shaw

Above: There is much that is typical in this Sunday morning view—the rails creaking under the weight of a full house, the easy access and the nonchalant attitude of the staff, not to mention the blue sky. Spent Alcos 4469 and 44219 front the Yeerongpilly ‘museum collection’ on Sunday 13 June 1993. Neither locomotive exists today. Alan Shaw

Introduction

In early 1989 a third winter in Canberra seemed a grim prospect. After receiving a job offer I could not refuse, I transplanted myself to Brisbane in the sunshine state of Queensland.

Before long I was exploring the railways that radiated north, west, and south. I was especially taken by the line that connected Brisbane with Sydney. Here I found a single standard-gauge track, some interesting urban landscapes, pleasant rural countryside, the magnificent Border Range (complete with one of only two spirals in the whole country), short loops protected by a working museum of a signalling system, some impressive bridges, and short and relatively frequent freights hauled by near-geriatric Alco locomotives working out their last years. Looking back, this period might be regarded as the good old days. To me it was as near to heaven as I am ever likely to experience.

In the beginning...

The line from Sydney to Brisbane was completed in 1930. It was Australia's first standard-gauge line linking two state capitals, a

distinction held for over three decades. This being Australia, where inward-looking state governments left a legacy of muddled gauges, even this single standard gauge link had to have some stamp of state individuality on it—while the line was operationally a part of the New South Wales system, the section from the Queensland border to Brisbane was owned by Queensland. Queenslanders, more used to their extensive network of 3 foot 6 inch track, were perhaps unwilling to embrace the idea that a standard-gauge line had crossed the border, and took to referring to it as the ‘uniform gauge’ line.

At the time I started taking an interest in it, especially the section from Brisbane to Casino, it was a busy line, with close to two dozen trains a day snaking over its sinuous single track. While train movements were controlled by CTC from Casino southwards, their passage on the northernmost section was governed from one loop to the next with the 19th century electric staff system. Most of the eight loops were fully mechanically controlled, staffed by signallers for at least two shifts a day to make the system actually work and were very short, typically not much more than 400 metres.

Article by Alan Shaw

I should point out now a small confession. I prefer diesels that produce their power at the ratio of one power stroke to every four—I'm a four-stroke man! There's no explanation for this, I simply find that 'bucket of bolts' sound much more interesting than the 'Extremely Monotonous Drone of the Generally Mundane' diesels found on most other systems. So there: I've said it—which will help you understand my fascination with Alcos.

Fortunately for me, I could indulge my excitement for four-stroke diesels by witnessing the aging Alco units that hauled just about every standard-gauge train that travelled the far North Coast Line.

All in all, the whole section was indeed the time machine described by Ken Date within these pages some 15 years ago: an ancient signal system guarding short loops, which for a railfan provided the ideal of relatively frequent and short trains, powered by locomotives that had passed their use-by date. It may have been interesting to watch, but somehow these good old days didn't inspire confidence this was the way to run a railway at the end of the 20th century.

Incursions

It was during our fourth failed attempt to follow a livestock train on the narrow-gauge line to Beaudesert that led Rod Milne and I to conclude that such trains were simply the figment of the collective imagination of Queensland Rail. On this particular occasion, though, we were reluctant to waste the opportunity for photography, so we opted to drive across to Kagaru on the standard-gauge line on the chance we might see something interesting. Happily, the signaller let us know that a southbound was due through within the next half an hour or so.

Waiting for the southbound just north of Kagaru, meant we would be able to hear it well in advance of its arrival—that low distant rumble

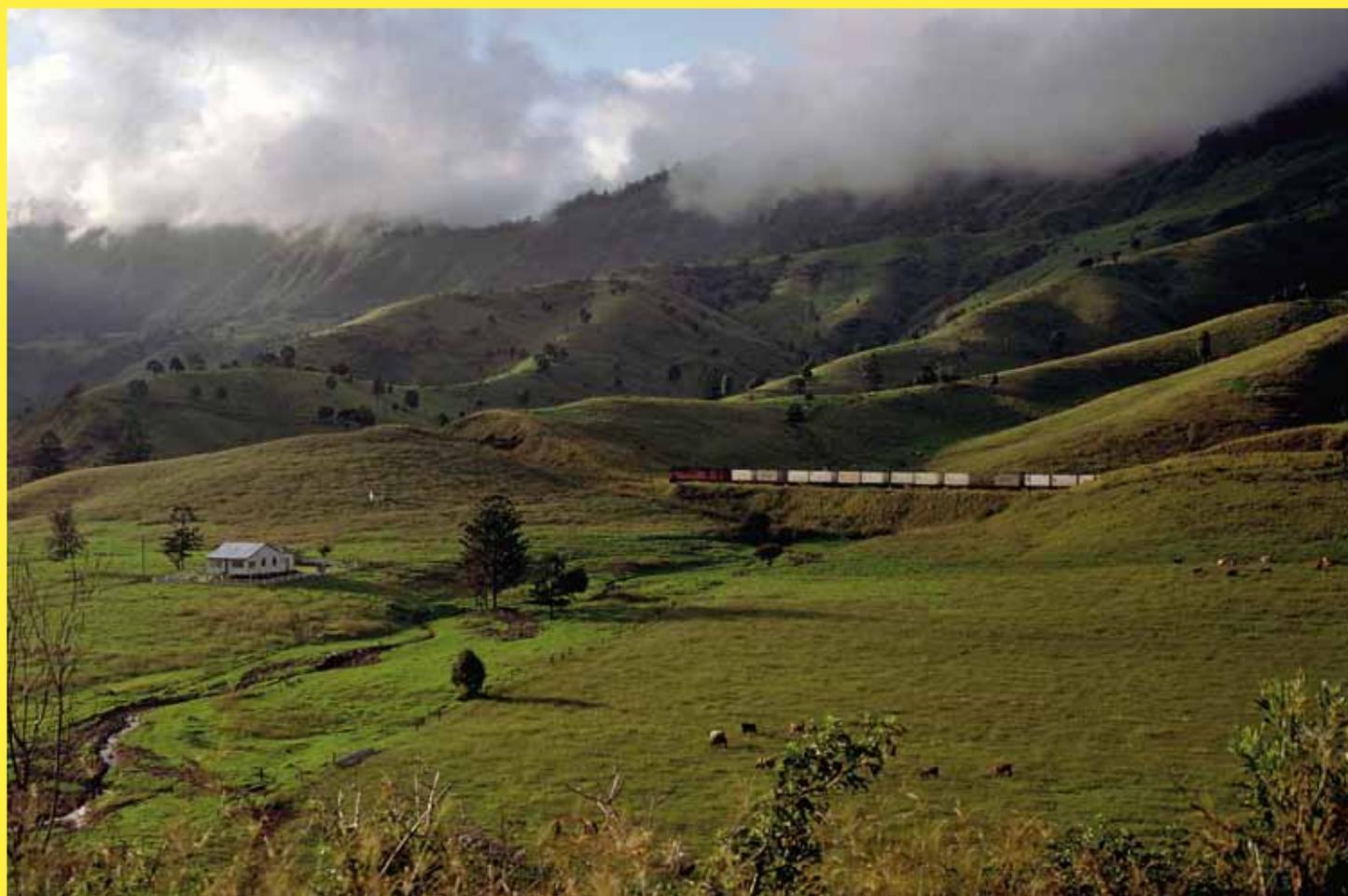
that precedes most trains and leads to a rising feeling of anticipation. We waited and listened, waited and listened, nearly breathless in the hot, humid, afternoon of a Queensland summer day in January. We waited for that first snatch of sound, the sound that makes us wonder whether we'd actually heard anything or just a gust of wind or truck on the distant highway. We waited for the steady sound of an approaching train to dispel doubt and ambiguity. It was just when the sound of the locomotives of the unseen train became distinct and recognisable, that Rod said, "Something's different, wrong—that is no Alco!" And yes, the emerging sound did indeed suggest that there was something at odds with the Proper Order of Things.

By the time the train was over the rise and was fully visible the reason for the difference became immediately obvious. As Rod had predicted, the train was not headed by the usual brace of Alcos, but a pair of 81 Class. After capturing our shots, we were well pleased about being in the right place at the right time to witness the first working of a pair of them on a train from Brisbane. Serendipity!

It was only afterward, over a couple of cold Cascades, and the satisfaction of managing to fulfil our hope of seeing something different having subsided, that the full implication of what we had just seen sank in. This was an incursion, a hit-and-run foray by intruders, the vanguard of a motive power revolution that could sweep all before it, removing the beloved Alcos forever.

In truth it was a long-anticipated revolution, and while the heart said such an event was completely unwelcome the head knew it was inevitable. As 81 Class and then the 82 Class locomotives took over more and more workings, during the twilight of the Alco reign it was not uncommon to see four or five charging their way up to the border spiral, rushing their train towards Sydney.

Below: The hills and valleys around Glenapp, just over the Queensland border from NSW, echo to the sound of a hard-working 442, dutifully hauling a Sydney-bound container freight, as the morning clouds begin to burn-off on Saturday 10 February 1990. Alan Shaw





A sign of the times! This is the train we spotted at Kagaru which foreshadowed the arrival of the EMDs on the North Coast. 8180, on trial, leads the dynamometer car and a resident 442 Class across the more southerly of the two major bridges across Gradys Creek, near Loadstone, with a Sydney-bound freight on Saturday 12 September 1992. Intensive use of the 81 Class on the North Coast Line was still almost two years away at this point. Rumour has it that the trial was inconclusive and the big EMDs had to prove themselves further before displacing the Alcos from the North Coast. The vegetation has really grown since this view was captured, to the extent this view is no longer possible. Alan Shaw

Once the decision to replace Alcos was made, the end came fast, and within a year virtually every train was firmly in the control of 82 Class Clyde-GM diesels. It certainly seemed that things would never be the same again.

Investment

Remember that in Australia railway development had been more about connecting each state capital with its hinterland rather than developing a national network. Very little investment was made in the interstate network that gradually emerged almost by accident as the state systems were connected. The North Coast, for example, soldiered on with minimal funding.

Although it was barely conceivable at the time, the era of the government-operated railway was fast coming to a close in Australia. The creation of the National Rail Corporation in 1992 led to investment in the infrastructure of the interstate network. On the North Coast Line between Casino and Brisbane short loops at Fairy Hill, Kyogle (station), The Risk, Border Loop, Tamrookum and Kagaru were closed and new, longer loops were provided at Kyogle, Loadstone and Bromleton and Glenapp's loop was lengthened—all to accommodate fewer, but longer trains up to 1500 metres in length. Today, a new loop has been opened at Nammoona, Tamrookum Loop is being reopened and Greenbank is being lengthened National Rail's take-up of operations was gradual, with trains being progressively transferred to NR as crews and other corporate arrangements came into place. By 1994 National Rail operated virtually all services to and from Brisbane.

Compared to the parsimonious treatment state governments had forced on their interstate freight operations, National Rail was funded to purchase 120 high-horsepower, NR Class locos. Introduced in late 1996, by sheer weight of numbers they soon took hold of virtually all freight services into Brisbane. The older locomotives were soon a thing of the past, some displaced for duties elsewhere, and others sent to the scrap line.

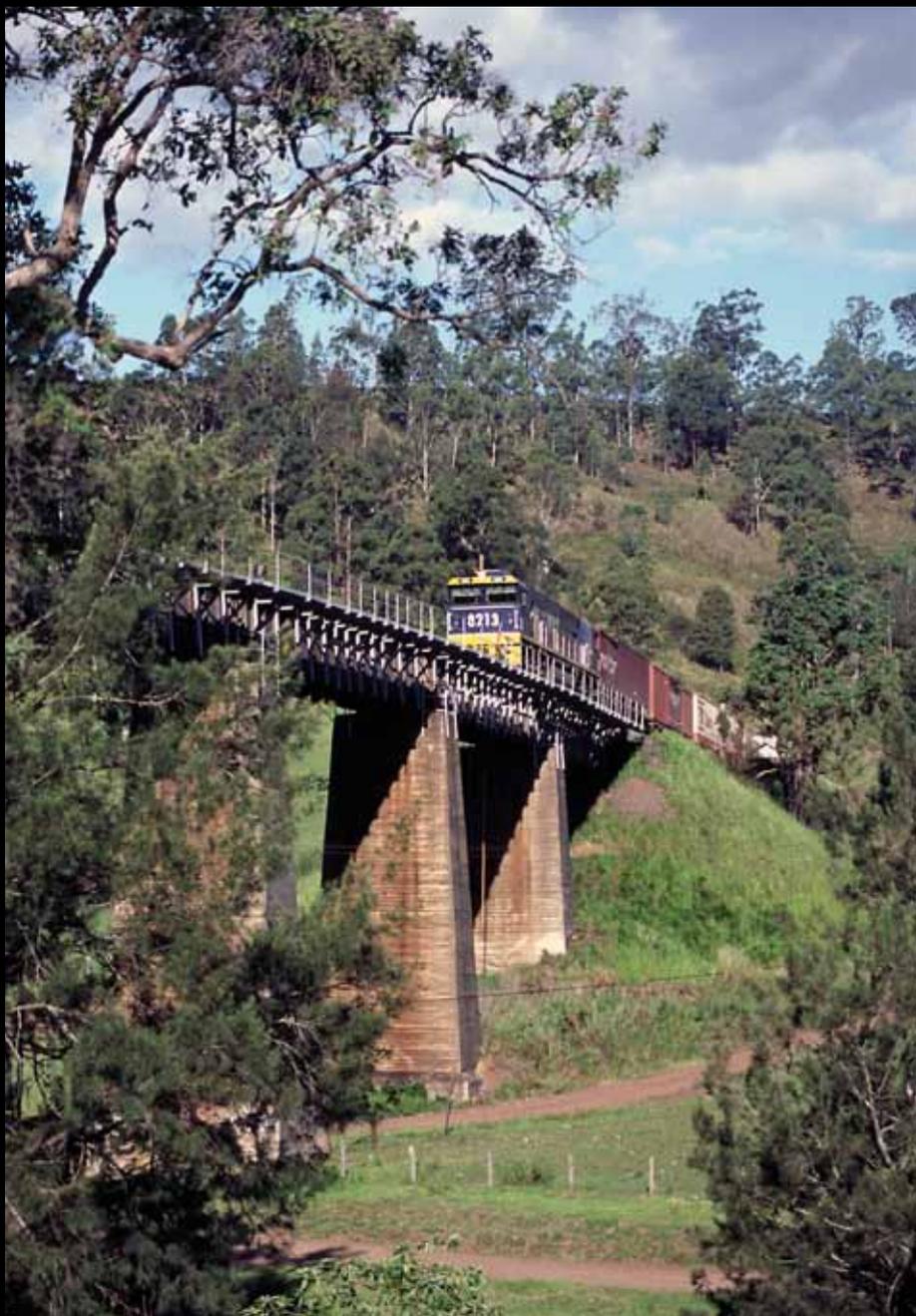
The Clyde-GM revolution was total but short-lived, with more significant changes to the fleet coming. The changes presaged by that early sighting of 81s quickly developed into another revolution. As an observer, though, you can have too much of a good thing, and certainly this is the case where for a long period just about every train was hauled NRs. The return to four-strokes was welcome, although I couldn't quite consider it the same as the days of Alco domination.

The safeworking system was also changed but the money available did not extend to bringing the signal system to 20th century standards, and the replacement was a self-serve arrangement of electric staff working, which, while it may have removed the need for the loops to be staffed, did nothing to decrease the time taken for trains to work their way through. While a train may have been able to pass through one of the old loops in two minutes, trains now take a minimum of five minutes and may spend as long as 20 minutes if a cross is involved. Such is progress on the North Coast Line.

A more fundamental change resulting comes from the simple formula that longer loops + bigger trains = fewer trains. There are now typically five freight trains each way—four intermodal and one steel—plus a daily passenger train. This is the railfan application of Newton's Second Law—for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Right: It seemed that no sooner had the 81s arrived on the North Coast when the newer and more photogenic 82 Class began working the route. 8123 leads a northbound container freight over the more northerly bridge across Gradys Creek on Wednesday 13 December 1995. By the time this shot was taken, timetable changes had started and the number of day time movements on the line was considerably less than just a few short years before. The coming of the 82s brought something of a halt to the 81 Class era before it could really begin.

Alan Shaw



Below: EL57 in the very snappy CFCLA livery leads a sister unit on lease to QRNational on one of QRN's Melbourne–Brisbane services on Wednesday 12 January 2005. This scene is representative of the sort of changes that the competitive nature of the route has seen in recent years, in the afterglow of privatisation. Even five years ago few people would have thought they'd ever see the distinctive ELs running over this route, and much less as part of Queensland Rail's push into the interstate market. While scenes like this were commonplace for a couple of years, such is the pace of change that this view would now be considered less common with yet another change of motive power taking over this service.

Alan Shaw



Back in the day

By mid-afternoon on a typical Saturday afternoon at Tamrookum it was time to expect the southbound *Brisbane Limited*. The northbound freight had been safely put away in the loop. Unusually, the signaller had some transient company that afternoon—a trio of young women from nearby Beaudesert travelling south. As the southbound *Brisbane Limited* came into view, the driver first exchanged staffs with the signaller, and then eased the train forward to collect the passengers. Having done so, the pair of Alcos at the head of a lengthy train of dark red carriages, trailed by a set of more recent stainless steel cars, throttled up and left a trail of exhaust to be swept away by the breeze.

The motley collection of sitting coaches, sleepers, and lounge cars looked decidedly shabby, with an equally motley collection of families, pensioners, and others travelling on concessions, for whom the prospect of cheap travel was more important than rapid travel.

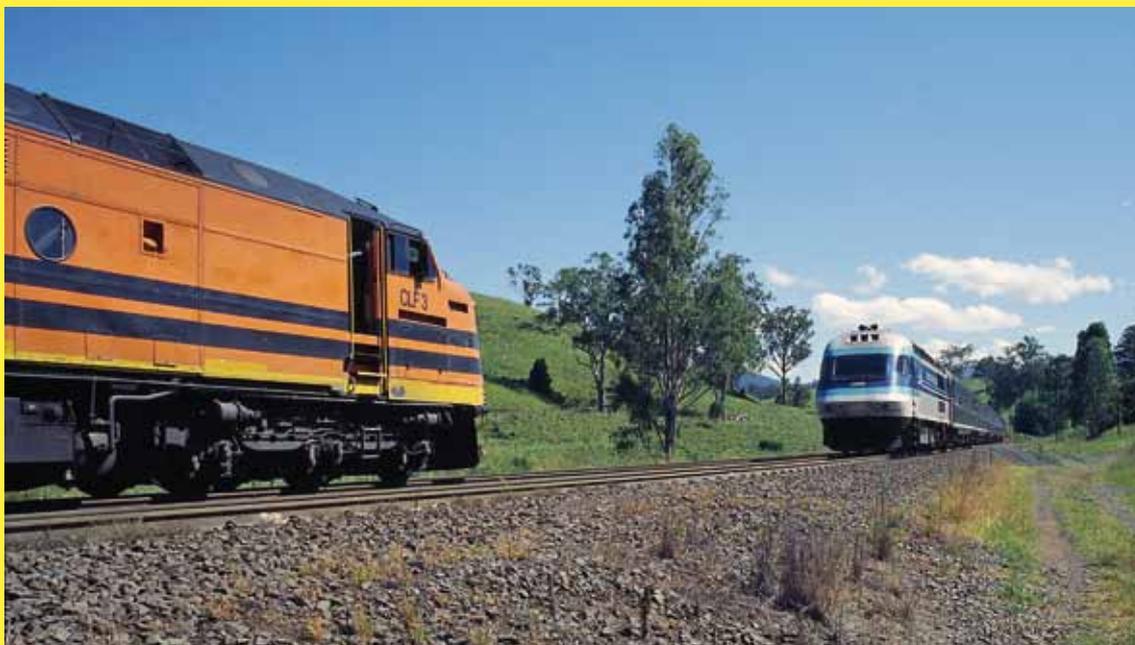
The Sydney bureaucrats who are responsible for the decisions about what trains run where and when had a starker set of opinions about trains like the *Brisbane Limited* and the similar *Gold Coast Motorail* over on the Murwillumbah Line, shaped by balance sheets, passenger numbers and the like. Broader aesthetic and social considerations could be left to the romantics, the traditionalists, and the railfans, and safely ignored. By 1991 the long-distance locomotive-hauled trains were replaced with XPTs.

Despite heated protests, the move was permanent, with the subsequent addition of a sleeper being the only concession provided in response to those mourning the passing of the *Brisbane Limited* and *Gold Coast Motorail*.

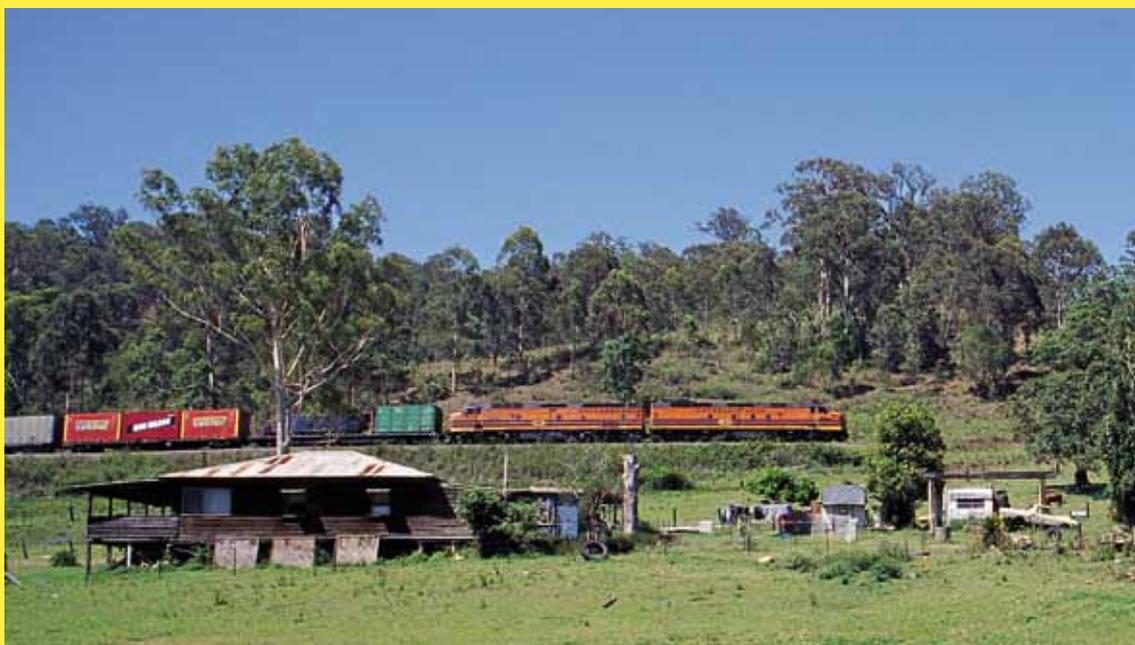
Lost charm

Where would railfans be without engine sheds? By their very nature, they corral locomotives in a single location, and offer unique opportunities to witness a much more intimate kind of activity than watching trains out on the main line. Brisbane was no different. The terminal at Yeerongpilly was a small one: a two-track run-through shed with servicing tracks, a few extra tracks for storage and a turntable that saw occasional use. Other than the shed itself, the ancillary buildings were typical Queensland timber style, surrounded by well-tended lawns. This was a low-tech affair, used only for minor servicing. Top up the fuel, oil, and water and give the windshield a quick clean, and that was about the extent of the treatment any of the locomotives could expect to get.

What it may have lacked in sheer substance, it had two important aspects. It was accessible—park in the parking lot, a quick search for someone ‘official’ for a cursory ‘yeah, righto, mate, just don’t take anything’ type of permission, and you were away. At times, it also offered a tremendous collection of aging locos wheezing and coughing in that distinct Alco style (thrum thrum thrum...pause...cough), like someone with sleep apnoea.



Left: Loadstone is the scene for this view, showing yet another iteration of the motive power fielded by QRNational on its services. The southbound XPT is about an hour and half late on Friday 29 December 2006, as it cruises through the loop past one of the big CLP EMDs on a MB7 service. While the author is no fan of EMD locomotives, I’ve been prepared to make an exception for these units. Alan Shaw



Left: Not long after the previous view was taken, MB7 is on its way on the final run to Brisbane. This scene shows it tackling the Border Loop spiral at Cougal. The striking livery looks magnificent against the verdant countryside while the sound in the valleys commands attention. Alan Shaw

Saturday evening and Sunday morning offered rich pickings, as the fleet of northbounds arrived and the shed filled before Sunday's southbounds started to empty the place again, with as many as two dozen Alcos between runs. Nights were also good, especially in summer where the pungent smell of exhaust and oil would mix with the scent of frangipani in the air. It was a time to watch, up close and personal, the EMD invasion taking hold.

Then suddenly it was over. As part of National Rail's investment program, Brisbane's main freight yard at Acacia Ridge was developed into a Terminal of the Future and included new locomotive facilities. Yeerongpilly was closed in 1997. The railfan thrill had gone.

From a railfan's point of view the shift was not only dramatic, but disastrous. The days of easy access are gone, as the new facility is out of bounds to casual visits. Making matters even worse is the Great Wall of Acacia Ridge, a high acoustic barrier that runs the entire length of the yard that makes observing operations from the adjacent suburban streets impossible. Good corporate neighbourliness: 1, railfans: 0, although in the grand scheme of things that's probably a fair result.

Revolution

While observers could judge the changes taking place on the line that ended the good old days by the nature of the locomotives pulling the trains, more fundamental changes were taking place in state and federal parliaments.

What would become a cyclone of change was presaged by a gentle breeze. The line running from Casino to Murwillumbah was a typical branch that had just about run out of luck. Freight traffic was minimal,

especially as the banana haulage had been lost to roads, and the only other train was the daily XPT that conveyed students, surfers and holiday-makers from Sydney to seaside destinations.

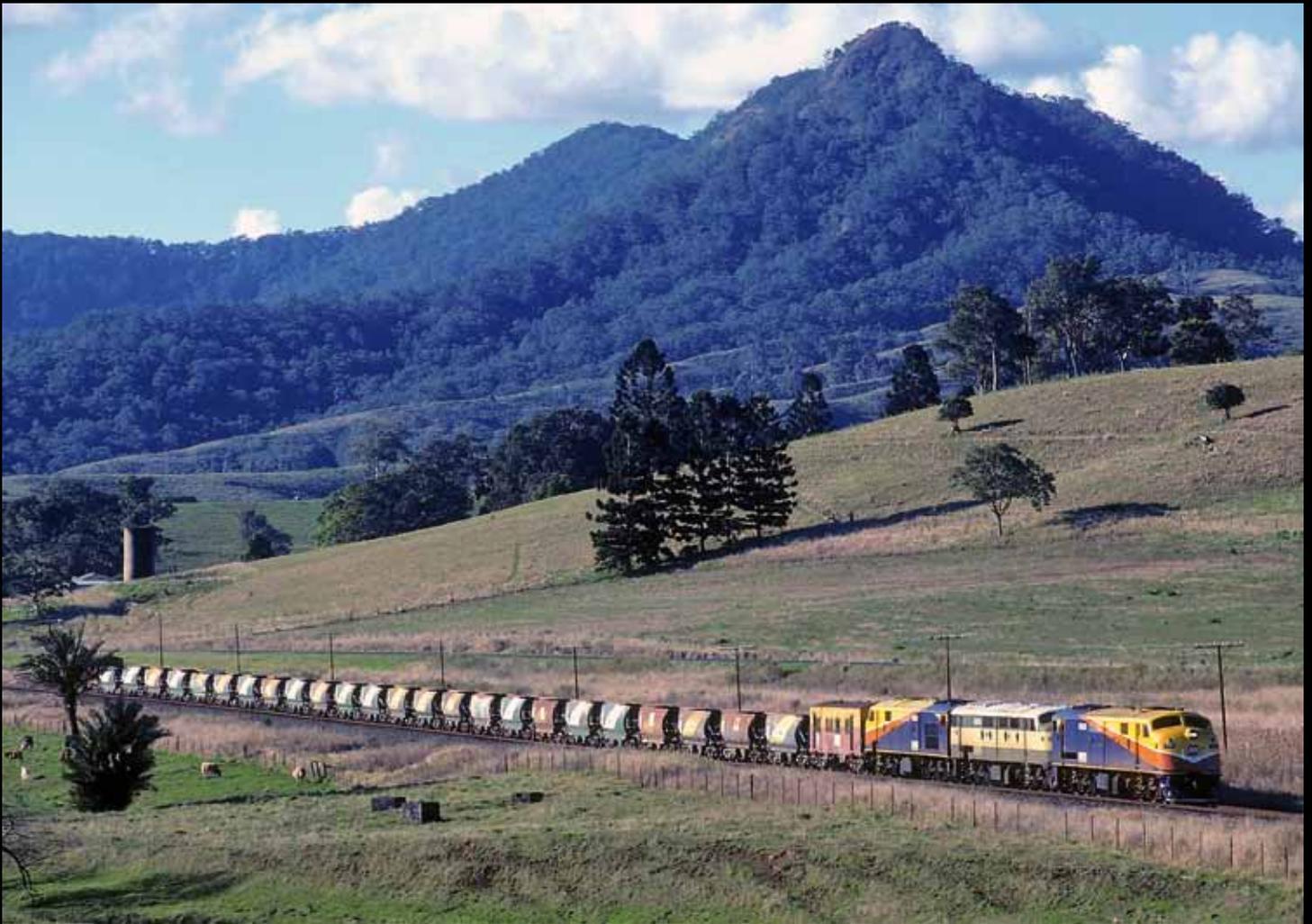
Given the line's scenery and its status as a destination, it is not surprising that it became the site of a luxury cruise train offering a variety of lunch and dinner trips from Murwillumbah to Lismore, with the occasional longer trip to Brisbane. A collection of second-hand carriages and a brace of 421 Class, bulldog-nosed GMs were transferred to run the private venture. Not content to run just this train, the operators also took advantage of an emerging climate favouring open access to the rail network and entered the freight business, trading as the Northern Rivers Railroad. The NRR also provided the motive power for some of the region's other trains, so the attractively repainted bulldogs could on occasion be seen on the line to Brisbane.

Bigger moves were afoot though. Governments collectively were getting out of their rail services and through the late 1990s, the winds of change saw open-access regimes in place pretty much the length and breadth of the country. On the interstate routes virtually the entire infrastructure was transferred or leased to the newly formed Australian Rail Track Corporation. In effect, anyone with the wherewithal to operate trains over the network could now do so.

In 2002 the federal government agreed to combine the National Rail Corporation with Freightcorp and put the lot on the market. The result was Pacific National, a joint venture of Australia's two biggest logistics companies, Toll and Patrick. Fierce competitors elsewhere in their businesses, they may have seemed like odd bedfellows for such a venture, but for three years the company appeared to be successful.

Below: The first spark of the privatisation steel wheel on the North Coast Line, was the inauguration of Northern Rivers Railroad in 1997. Two years later, the Grady's Creek bridge strains under the weight of the company's NL40 *Ritz Rail* special behind 42107/42109 on Wednesday 13 October 1999. A bold venture at the time, a drop in the tourist market ended this service within only a few years.
Paul Vanderstelt





Above: When not catering for tourists or running regular freight shuttles on the Murwillumbah Line, Northern Rivers could often be found performing track and infrastructure related duties, as illustrated by this shot of 42105/42103/42107 working No. 6M22 Up empty ballast at Kilgra, on its return from dropping stone further north on Wednesday 4 August 1999. Paul Vanderstelt

An event that took place in 2002 that looked odd at the time, but its historic significance is now clear. While the Northern Rivers Railroad was at the vanguard of the early move to private operation on publicly owned tracks, it was bought by government-owned Queensland Rail. At the stroke of a pen, Queensland Rail entered the standard-gauge market in its own right, and not just as the silent owner of roughly 60 miles of standard-gauge track from the New South Wales border to Brisbane.

For some time the operation, trading under the name of Interail, was perhaps best described as optimistic. A weekday return service was operated from Casino to the port of Brisbane. Freight services on the line to Murwillumbah ceased. Interail's train was a modest affair, with a handful of cars often carrying as much fresh air as loads, although Interail's old 421s provided some visual compensation. But from small things bigger things grow—within two years the little train from Casino was replaced by a daily round-trip between Brisbane and Melbourne—Interail had entered the interstate freight market and was launched as an entity to take on the Pacific National colossus. The train quickly emerged as a favourite among local fans, and with good reason as the train brought variety to what might otherwise be a very predictable motive power landscape on the North Coast.

Favourites of course are the CLPs and CLFs and even a four-stroke fan like me cannot help but marvel at the events that have led to this possibility still occurring in 2007.

Yesterday, today and tomorrow

In the late 1990s I was married and had started the adventure of raising a family. While I was aware of many of the changes happening on the line, I was content to let others do the documenting. My energies at the time

lay elsewhere! With the children now growing up, I have found a little more time to revisit this old stamping ground. At the corporate level the stoush between the joint owners of Pacific National has been settled with Toll taking over Patrick. Queensland Rail has expanded further, buying almost all of the Australian Railroad Group's 'above the rail' assets as part of its strategy of QR developing into a national competitor over time. In the process it has adopted a new image as QR National.

Out on the line there's more motive power variety with ANs and DLs adding to the mix operated by Pacific National, while QRN continues to field a mix of ELs, CLPs and CLFs, Gs and even Xs on its services.

I feel there's real reason for optimism for this line. Additional investment is taking place that will see the existing CTC system, controlled from Broadmeadow, replace the 19th century of electric staff working, as well as additional and longer loops. For train watchers, though, this will be a mixed blessing. In a world where accessible human contact is virtually a thing of the past, the new system should at least help provide some indication of train movements but the flip side is that train speeds will increase, making the prospect of chasing a train much more difficult.

More significantly, the Australian Rail Track Corporation has big plans to more than double rail's share of the intermodal market between Melbourne, Sydney, and Brisbane. With most trains already at their maximum length, simple mathematics shows that this can only be achieved by additional trains running along the route.

I was fortunate to see the last vestiges of the old system in 'the good old days' and feel that, the line through the hills of the Border Range is now just as interesting for the observer. Unlike that period though, the future seems brighter now than it did then.



Top: The North Coast Line's biggest competitors face off at Casino on 27 August 2005. NR6 and NR103, working a southbound Pacific National superfreighter cross EL57 and a second EL working QRNational's Melbourne to Brisbane container service. Alan Shaw

Above: If all is going well, this is a regular view at Glenapp on Saturday mornings. BM2 enters the scene from the right on 19 August 2006, crossing AB6, which should be safely tucked away in the loop. While BM2 will be through the loop just as fast as the archaic operating practices allow, AB6 will not be so lucky. It has another hour or so to wait to allow the Sydney-bound XPT through, enabling the crew to really get to know the area. The impending arrival of CTC and track improvements on the far North Coast Line may soon make this scene a thing of the past. Alan Shaw

Left: The North Coast Line's 'bread n' butter'—a pair of NR Class Dash-9 GEs work their northbound freight around the famous spiral at Border Loop on a steamy January day in 1999. Alan Shaw

Amongst the many dice rolled in recent years, was that which saw the closure of the locomotive depot at Yeerongpilly. These three monochrome images record the facility's dying years.

Below: Interloper 8155 comes face to face with 'native' 45 Class Alco in 1994. By September that year Alcos had all but disappeared from the route in favour of the newer EMD units.

Alan Shaw



Top right: 4508 pokes its long-hood into the running shed at Yeerongpilly on 13 July 1991. Both 4508 and the depot have now gone. Alan Shaw

Right: A weathered 442 awaits attention at the depot's fuel point on 10 August 1991. Today's Pacific National NR Class locomotives, which fulfil the duties left over from the Alco era, are today serviced at nearby Acacia Ridge. Alan Shaw



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