**BUILDING THE HEIDELBERG TO ELTHAM RAILWAY**

The story of the Heidelberg to Eltham railway extension must be considered in the context of Victorian politics in the 1880s and 1890s. Without the means of quick, cheap and efficient travel to and from Melbourne's suburbs, the thousands of building blocks that were sold and resold during the land boom of the 1880s would not have found buyers. This was the key to the building of the railway network to the suburbs and in rural areas of Victoria, much of which was useless, driven as it was by speculation rather than the needs of the population.

Many members of Parliament were only too ready to be bribed by means of advance knowledge of future rail developments, which enabled them and their associates to buy land cheaply and resell after the line went through at a huge profit. The notorious Tommy Bent who became Minister for Railways for a period was a heavy speculator and himself initiated a vast building program financed by borrowings of millions of pounds. These plans enabled even greater fortunes to be made by speculators, and the Victorian debt was estimated at 9 million pounds at the turn of the century, all of which were loan monies which involved interest and repayments over many years. In an effort to clean up the mess, a later Premier set up a board to administer and plan rail development, headed by an English rail expert, Robert Speight. Speight, however, was influenced by the land boomers to such an extent that he recommended legislation known as the “Octopus Act” because it authorised the construction of a further 65 lines totalling 1,170 miles, many of which were never built, and some of which were spectacularly unsuccessful, such as the Outer Circle.

*The Age* newspaper, however investigated the operation of the railways and published scathing criticisms of Speight and his administration. Speight sued for libel, and the ensuing legal proceedings, which extended for 18 months into 1894, resulted in victory for the newspaper.

So it was not surprising that local efforts to secure a line to Greensborough to service the local community were not acted upon promptly by the scandal-ridden government, despite statistics showing that the line was needed by local people and that a high volume of traffic would be likely. E. H. Cameron MLA informed the Legislative Assembly that 3,705 people would benefit; that the volume of produce that might be transported by rail amounted to nearly 99,000 tons, comprising fruit, cereals, root crops and wood. Further statistics were provided to the Legislative Assembly by Mr. Cameron in February 1900.

There are a number of such efforts recorded: a public meeting on 7 September 1883 chaired by the Shire President, Mr. J. Scotland, formed a Railway League, with F. Flintoff as Secretary and Treasurer. It was noted that a survey of a route between Heidelberg and Whittlesea was being made.

Another very well attended meeting of the Heidelberg Railway Extension League was held on 17 February 1888, at which it was decided that meetings with delegates from Eltham and Diamond Creek would be held, and of which Mr. F. A. Nell was elected Hon. Secretary. This meeting took place on 6 March, and it was agreed that statistics would be gathered to support the case. *The Age* of 11 July 1892 reported that a proposal to extend the line from Heidelberg to Hurstbridge via Greensborough and Eltham had been included in the Railway Bill of 1890 and had been favourably viewed by the Railway Standing Committee. The committee reported that the Heidelberg to Eltham section could be built for 60,000 pounds provided that land was given free and the residents would contribute up to 5,000 for expenses if needed. The Minister for Railways had authorised a permanent survey, and no real construction difficulties regarding the land were anticipated. Some offers of free land and timber were reported. The value of the project in providing jobs for unemployed local men was emphasised. F. A Nell, writing as Hon. Sec. of the Central Railway League to the Secretary, Minister of Railways, informed him of the approval of League members of plans and schedule for the construction proposal, and recommended that a Railway Trust and District would be the best means of acquiring the land required, and requested that the Minister so proceed in accordance with the Railways Lands Acquisition Act No. 1288. A submission by the Board of Land and Works Railways Construction Branch to this effect was sent to the Governor in Council on 23 June 1893.

The *Mercury and Weekly Courier* of 20 July 1893 reported that the last session of Parliament had authorised the construction of the extension on condition that a guarantee of 5,000 pounds was made. Mr. James withdrew his guarantee, but offered land in lieu. The Heidelberg and Eltham Railway Construction Trust, chaired by Mr E. H. Cameron MLA, Shire President, was formed to obtain the land required for the extension and to hand it over to the Railway Department free of cost.. A Railway Construction District was proclaimed of 42,000 acres according to the Railway Land Acquisition Act. The trust's duties included classifying the land and establishing differential ratings based on the distance of the land from the line or station, ranging from 2d. to 6d. in the pound.

An article in the *Evelyn Observer* of 13 April 1894 recorded the beginning of the most bitterly contested issue relating to the extension. A deviation from the surveyed route had been proposed by a number of local landholders and recommended by the Trust at their meeting of 26 January 1894, allegedly to lower land acquisition costs. The Minister indicated approval, but said that the decision was in the hands of the Trust. Sure enough, a protest meeting took place on 13 April at which the valuation of the land by the Trust was stated as 1,585 pounds, while claims by the owners amounted to 3,437 pounds. Nevertheless, a deputation of local residents met with the Minister claiming that the Trust acted without consulting them and gave them no chance to negotiate. They indicated that a major ground of their objection was that the deviation would bypass the town of Greensborough by some half to three quarters of a mile, which was not in the town's interest. Furthermore, part of the saving stated by the Trust as a reason for adopting the deviation was owing to an offer of free land by a large landowner whose land would appreciate in value by the line passing through it, an improper procedure which could set a precedent for other such deals, as well as adversely affecting Greensborough landowners. Some Trust members were interested in the deviation, as it went through their land.

A special meeting of the Trust was held on 26 April to receive a deputation from Greensborough. The discussion included the fact that some residents had gone to considerable expense in taking measures that assumed that the line would follow the permanent survey that had been undertaken, as well as the factors previously brought forward. Mr. F. A. Nell was identified as the person who offered land on the deviation route without cost. Others who would have profited from the deviation included the Bundoora Park Estate Company, the Greensborough Estate Company and A. A. Donnithorne. The Trust held to their decision. At a further public meeting at Diamond Creek, a Trust member stated that other advantages of the deviation beside reduced outlay on land were shortening of the distance, fewer level crossings and lower cost of construction and maintenance. The meeting agreed to wait on the Minister to request a stay to enable the deviation to be further evaluated for practicability. A meeting of the Trust on 12 May received a plan of the deviation from the Railways Department, which indicated that a station could be built quarter or half a mile from the township. Mr C. H. James also undertook to hand over the land required of him immediately.

Legal complications regarding the actions of the trust in setting rates, obtaining land and borrowing in order to pay for it before handing it over to the railways department delayed matters for some time. Mr E. H. Cameron informed the Legislative Assembly of the situation on 18 December 1896, and the Premier Sir George Turner agreed to refer the matter to the Railways Standing Committee for resolution No action was taken, some reasons being differing opinions by successive Ministers for Railways on the stalemate, decisions relating to alternative lines to Heidelberg (the Princes Bridge to Collingwood option was finally decided on), criticisms by *The Age*, and proposals to reduce costs by building a narrow gauge line. In the meantime, the Trust proceeded with classifying land, setting rates and commencing negotiations with land holders, however, no decision on the final route had been made. The Legislative Assembly received a further update and more detailed statistics from Mr. Cameron in February 1900. On 7 April, the Trust reiterated its preference for the deviation. Two meetings favourable to the original route expressed support for a deputation to the Minister in April 1900.

In July, some action was actually taken! The Minister for Railways, Mr. Outtrim, together with the Ministers for Public Works and Lands, accompanied by Mr Rennick, Railways Engineer-in-Chief, and MLAs Cameron and Gair, visited Greensborough on 6 July 1900 to enquire into the merits of the routes on the spot. They walked over parts of both routes and the sites of the two stations on the respective routes were also inspected. They were met by delegations representing both routes, and were told that a reliable statement of the lowest prices all landowners would accept was needed, upon which the matter would be discussed with the Board of Land and Works. A fortnight later it was announced that the Board had decided the route would follow the original survey, on condition that the property owners would agree to part with the land required for 1500 pounds. The Trust met on 4 August and, while expressing their preference for the deviation, agreed to accept the Board's decision and proceed with acquisition of the land as required by the railways. The Railways required 2,800 pounds to be deposited with them, this being approximately the amount estimated to compensate owners of the required land, before authorising commencement of work. This was done and work commenced on 9 September 1900, the line being completed for less than the original estimate on 5 June 1902. It was officially opened by the Governor-General, Lord Hopetoun on Thursday 6 June 1902. Initially, two services a day, Mondays to Saturdays, were offered, and a committee was appointed to revise arrangements as necessary in the future

Construction would have been carried out by the Railway Construction Branch of the Board of Lands and Works. Prior to 1890, both Victorian Railways and the private companies that they absorbed, placed contracts with local construction companies to build their railways. A pool of day labourers experienced in railway work was available from British settlers and experienced navvies that had been encouraged to migrate to work in Victoria. This contracting system was abandoned following the financial collapse of 1890, and from 1893, the Railway Construction Branch of the Board of Land and Works took over responsibility for railway construction for Victorian Railways as the client, using day labourers as before. These workers were regarded as "casuals", never as Branch or Railways staff. Despite every effort being made to provide work for the unemployed, few local residents would have been employed unless they possessed specialised skills or equipment. For example, farmers may have been employed to use their horse-drawn carts and scoops for earthmoving of cuts and fills necessary to form the roadbed for the railway, and local timber cutters may have been subcontracted to provide sleepers and fencing to specifications set by the Branch. Records of wages and payments to small sub-contractors have not been found. Contracts were let for girders for bridges such as those supplied by Dorman Long Coy.

Ten years later, in June 1912, the line was extended (single track) to Hurst's Bridge, now Hurstbridge, and electrified, first to Eltham in April 1923 and then to Hurstbridge in August 1929. Through running on weekends to Hurstbridge only commenced in April 1985; prior to this a shuttle service operated between Hurstbridge and Eltham.

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