

Phoenix FM Radio Interview Tuesday 13 September 2011

Interviewer: John Hall

Guest: Garry Long, Convenor, Friends of the Bendigo-Kilmore Rail Trail Inc

Questions.

1. **Friends of the Bendigo-Kilmore Rail Trail, the O'Keefe Rail Trail, and a previous railway line. What is the connection with all these?** The previous railway line referred to was the Wallan to Sandhurst (or Bendigo) Railway line built between 1888 and 1889, the O'Keefe Rail Trail was built on a section of this previous railway line reserve, between Agedale and Bendigo in 1993 and 1999. The community group, Friends of the Bendigo-Kilmore Rail Trail initially came together in 2009 with the view of improving the neglected O'Keefe Rail Trail plus also with a vision to extend this rail trail to Kilmore. A rail trail created about 110 years after the railway line was built, and a community lobby group formed around 120 years after the first train ran on this railway line.
2. **You mention the Wallan to Sandhurst Railway line, where did this railway line route run?** This branch line was built under what became known as the Victoria Government's 'Octopus Act', and it was a branch line off the Melbourne-Wadonga line at Heathcote Junction near Wallan, to Kilmore, Pyalong, Tooborac, Heathcote to the then Sandhurst (now Bendigo).
3. **Who built this Wallan to Sandhurst Railway line?** There were three principle contractors to the Victorian Railway Commissioners. Andrew O'Keefe of Barnedown (27.9096 miles for a sum of £88,409-16-0, G.Buckley and Sons £91,996 for nine miles forty chains, and the third being McDermott & Sons who did the section around Pyalong (including the two large still remaining timber bridges there).
4. **Andrew O'Keefe, he must have been an interesting man of the time. What do you know of him?** Andrew's father Edward O'Keefe arrived in Victoria from Ireland in 1854 and moved to Sandhurst goldfield in 1855 with his wife & two children, one being Andrew (1842-1904). Father & son were mainly public works contractors e.g. involved with the Big Hill railway tunnel 1862, sections of the Coliban Scheme (water to Bendigo) commencing in 1867. Andrew then in his own right his first railway contact for a section of the Wallan-Sandhurst railway line (Sandhurst to Heathcote section -1888), built the Laanecoorie Weir (1889), the Eaglehawk tram line (1890), a section of the Great Southern Railway line (Korumburra – Toora) in Sth Gippsland (1891) to name a few, as well as being a landholder such as Adelaide Vale property (with the largest cheese dairy in the colony – *O.K. Cheese*) near Muskerry-Barnedown, Kimbolton Run and three large station properties in the Riverina.
5. **What was the period that trains officially ran on the Wallan-Sandhurst/Bendigo line?** With three contractors building, sections opening between 1888 and 1890. The passenger service Heathcote to Bendigo closed in 1942, and Heathcote to Bendigo goods service closed on 3 Dec 1958. The Heathcote to Wallan/Heathcote Junction services ran for a longer period, following the 1958 close of Heathcote to Bendigo section, as did a section of the line from

Bendigo to Junortoun that remained operational and intact for a number of years. Legislation was passed in April 1975 to dismantle the line, which it was stated 'no longer existed'. Perhaps Andrew O'Keefe would have been disturbed had he realized the short life of his first railway contract.

6. **As well as the actual track being removed, did that also mean that other infrastructure went as well?** All items related to the railway line were tendered for sale and removal. One lost local historical icon was at Axedale, which was the large timber bridge over the Campaspe River. When building was finished by contractor Andrew O'Keefe, it was believed (yet we've not confirmed) to have been the longest at over 2000 feet (610 metres) such timber bridge in the southern hemisphere. Specific quality timbers for the tall piers and piles had to be brought from Newcastle NSW. Sadly, very little remains of the 80 feet (25 metres) section above the river, with nothing remaining through the now golf course (believe those bridge timbers were put into a pile and burnt), yet there are some well weathered piles and cross beams still standing on the adjoining 'Maryvale' property as a small reminder. There are still the two massive Pyalong timber bridges that have survived fairly much intact, yet after 60+ years of neglect these are now in a precarious state of possible collapse.

7. **The O'Keefe Rail Trail, how did that come into being?** As a result of the legislation in 1975, to dismantle and then sell off the railway line assets, the Shire of Strathfeldsaye purchased the section of the railway reserve from the Campaspe River at Axedale to its boundary with the then Bendigo Council. One of the key reasons it is understood was to recover and use the ballast and gravel. Almost 20 years ago, around 1991 the Shire of Strathfeldsaye with State Government funding decided to build a rail trail on this reserve. Later, in 1999, the extension of this trail from McIvor Highway Junortoun to Napier St White Hills was built.

8. **What remains of the original railway infrastructure on the O'Keefe Trail and its now funded extension to Heathcote?** From our research, there is only the Grassy Flat Creek (at Strickland Road) timber railway pile bridge, remnants of the Campaspe River bridge, the smaller failed Wattle Creek railway timber pile bridge near Heathcote, a concrete bridge in the One Eye Forest, approx., three iron telephone poles standing, a few timber plus brick pipe culverts, and one original mile post are all that our regular users of the trail have been able to determine.
9. **Talking of mile posts, your group had a Historic Mile Posts Project on the O'Keefe Rail Trail. What was this?** The original 19th century railway lines were installed with concrete distance markers or mile posts, not only to indicate the 'down' line distance from Melbourne, yet also to assist engine drivers with their speed and trip planning. In most cases when railway lines were closed and the assets were sold off, so those posts also went. Friends of the Bendigo-Kilmore Rail Trail's member Ken Hanson had the idea to replicate these historic concrete posts for the O'Keefe Rail Trail. With the assistance of local businesses and other members, Ken manufactured a complete number of replica concrete mile posts for the O'Keefe trail for when it is extended to Heathcote. With the permission of Council, these white painted with black number posts have been progressively installed along the trail for the Axedale to Bendigo section at this stage.

P2 Andy 22/9/11
215

The final replica 100 mile post (the original line was 100 miles, 74 chains & 34 links from Melbourne to the junction with the Melbourne-Echuca Northern line) can now be seen just near the Rohs Road (East Bendigo) crossing with the O'Keefe trail. Additional posts, for the Axedale to Heathcote section, have also been manufactured. We believe this rail trail is possibly the only current one in Australia that will have a full complement of railway mile posts along it.

10. **The original section of O'Keefe Rail Trail has now been operating for nearly 20 years, so what has it been like to use?** Like most such infrastructure, the ravages of time, weather and use have a major affect on any outdoor facility. The O'Keefe Trail has been no different and with minimal maintenance over the past 12-15 years, its condition was substandard compared to other rail trails attracting high use, and it was very unpleasant to use some sections. The community was wanting better and to have the trail repaired, hence the formation of our Friends group. Also such a trail needs an end destination or town with a diversity to attract visitors for that overnight stay etc. This was currently lacking for the O'Keefe rail trail.

11. **Lost bridges on a trail, now that's a problem!** For building a rail trail, recovered or missing railway bridges are one of the biggest headaches, besides land ownership. As can be imagined, most bridges either spanned a permanent water course and one that carried storm water runoff. So either these missing links have to be spanned by a new trail bridge, repairs to an original bridge, or create a bypass track around these gaps. For the O'Keefe trail's original build, the Axecreek Swing Bridge was constructed in 1993, as well as later the Splitters Creek Bridge. Later, the Grassy Flat Creek (Strickland Rd) original timber railway bridge was repaired and it's deck upgraded to take trail traffic. The other six missing bridges between Junortoun and Axedale were not replaced, so these had to be bypassed, making the trail ride difficult and sometimes hazardous.

12. **Recently, success with major funding for the trail was achieved. Tell us about that.** In 2009, the four founding members of the Friends group (Helen Cronin, Mark Slater, Ken Hanson and Garry Long) set a course to have the O'Keefe trail upgraded to today's rail trail standards. Also the vision of creating a long distance rail trail across Central Victoria was also formulated. The 'sell' campaign started with presentations, a public meeting media releases and lobbying of political representatives. The positive attitude of the City of Greater Bendigo Council Officers and Councilors, together with the then local Minister Jacinta Allen, and Regional Development Victoria department staff assisted this ground swell of community support to achieve a major co-funding agreement for a total of \$3.22M funding over a four year period. This major funding will enable the trail to be upgraded and extended to Heathcote, a distance of approximately 50 kms.

13. **What are the current plans for the O'Keefe Rail Trail?** Under this current funding, six new bridges have already been installed between Bendigo and Axedale. The current Axecreek Swing Bridges is now nearly 20 years old and has its problems. Being set low down under the original railway bridge alignment, access to it is hazardous and the bridge is too narrow for various trail users. It also doesn't allow horses to cross the creek. So earlier in 2011 our group made a submission to Council, recommending Council not spend the originally allocated budget on

attempting to deal with this old bridge and its problems. That was, to replace it with a high level fixed steel span bridge, similar to the other six bridges. Our group now understand that this replacement will occur in the very near future, which we congratulate Council on that decision.

14. Your Friend's group has a vision, to see a Bendigo to Kilmore Rail Trail built. Is it

achievable? Ask that question early in 2009, and the answer would have been "Maybe in about 10 years time at very best!". Well, after just 18 months, major funding to extend the O'Keefe trail to Heathcote had been committed. Yet the next 40-50 kms from Heathcote to Kilmore &/or the Kilmore to Heathcote Junction section may take the balance of that 10 year prediction. Yet we are optimistic, and are now working with the Mitchell Shire Council to see how such a vision may be implemented in the future. Such a 100+km long distance rail trail, linked between two high speed passenger rail service lines (i.e. the Melbourne-Wodonga and the Melbourne-Swan Hill lines), will be quite unique and provide easy transport access for Melbourne, interstate and international trail users.

15. Believe there is another small project being proposed by the Friends group, to follow the Mile Post project. What is this? People who use rail trails do so for different reason, such

as exercise, enjoying the environment, overnight stays, visiting attraction like wineries, and searching out history. Most of the visual railway history on this line has been lost, including where each of the original railway stations and platforms were located. So our group are proposing a project that will highlight where each of these former transport hubs were once located. Hence the Railway Station Signage project. This project idea is to install a large replica type sign at each of the identified sites for the former station or platforms. Such signs will be visible from the rail trail, at all sites between Bendigo and Heathcote.

16. How many former stations and platforms were there between Bendigo and

Heathcote? From our investigations, there were a total of 15 sites yet not all were operational over the life of the railway line. These sites were named the Heathcote RS, Bald Hill Platform (Pf), Derrinal RS, Morabbee Pf, Knowsley RS, Trench & CO Pf, VA Dean/Ingham Pf, Axedale Racecourse Pf, Axedale RS, Longlea (formerly Axcreek) RS, Strathfieldsaye RS, Homebush Pf, Rangelea Pf, Rifle Butts Pf, and the Bendigo Freezer Co Pf. The Bendigo Freezer Co platform, or many may have knows it as VINMA or Mayfair, was on a small railway siding off the main line and is now the only remaining original platform left. It is virtually completely intact today, where it was originally built, yet unfortunately it too is under threat of being demolished for industrial land development.

17. Will anything else be proposed at each of these signed station sites? Our group would

like to see what we call 'Interruptive Boards' installed along the rail trail at important or interesting locations. Interruptive Boards are information boards that provide the reader with an insight into a past era, like a photograph of buildings, a steam train or community event. Such could include a description of an accident "Train derailed off the Campaspe Bridge" or the printed words of an oral story recalling work on the railway line or seeing a huge wagon load of wool being driven to the station. Many people love to look and read this and then imagine what it would have been like, probably standing on the exact location a century later.

18. **Has your group gathered such historical information or photos?** Some of this historical information has come to light already, yet we believe we have only scratched the surface. We are appealing to people to search out such historical links to the old railway line and townships, perhaps from out of that old suitcase or a piece of related history hanging in the old shed. Perhaps it's that old photograph of *Auntie Phyllis* standing at the Axedale, Derrinal or Heathcote Railway Stations waiting to board the train for the appointment to her doctor in Bendigo or Melbourne, or could that be race goers alighting from the train at the Axedale Racecourse Platform bound for the horse races at the Axedale Racecourse! Even a story about travelling on the old 'Beetle' from Heathcote would be great. We wouldn't be keeping such original material, that would be scanned and then returned, the detail later etched or printed onto metal information boards. Contact with our group can be made via our web site www.bendigokilmorerailtrail.com and follow the links, or phone myself on 0409565404.
19. **You mentioned previously the old 'Beetle' as a piece of history. Was that an animal?** Many of the branch lines didn't run steam train plus carriages for short haul passenger services. They used rail motors, usually single or twin carriage type. The Beetle was marriage if you like, between a converted truck for the driving power and a train carriage for the passengers, all on four steel rail wheels. This unit ran along that railway line providing lower cost, probably for low numbers, passenger service. We believe this rail motor was sold off from the Heathcote Station and the buyer took it to the Elmore district, to be used for accommodation. We would love to hear from anyone who may know if this rail motor still exists, perhaps so that one day it could be returned to Heathcote as a static display item alongside the rail trail.
20. **When will the extension of the O'Keefe rail trail get into Heathcote?** Our group has been in discussion with Bendigo Council Officers, about building the new trail from both ends. That is, start building the new section at Heathcote and working towards Axedale, and vice versa from Axedale to Heathcote. Council planning is continuing, with some expected draft sectional trail routes to be presented to the public at Axedale and Heathcote in the near future. Community and individual feedback will definitely be sort. There are landowners of the previous railway reserve that will be consulted very early in this process, to ensure they appreciate the benefits and importance that a successful rail trail along the original alignment will become for smaller communities and towns along its route. It is understood that there could be some different points of view about this trail extension, with many similar views being raised and resolved when other rail trails across Victoria and Australia were built. Our community group hopes that it represents a cross section of views and welcomes both input as well as new membership to assist the Council achieve the best outcome for the communities in this part of Central Victoria.