



SteamRanger's Heritage - an insight into our past

BACKGROUND

Although not physically contiguous with the Victor Harbor branch line, the Balhannah to Mt Pleasant branch off the main Adelaide to Melbourne interstate line was built in the same era and subsequently closed in in the early 1960s.

This article provides readers with an interesting comparison to the parallel history of the Mt Barker Junction to Victor Harbor line, now retained as an operating volunteer operated heritage railway.

The article concludes with an account of the last trains to run on the Branch.

THE BALHANNAH - MOUNT PLEASANT BRANCH LINE

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North-east of Adelaide, on the Eastern slopes of the Mount Lofty Ranges, is a fertile agricultural district, with Mount Pleasant as the market town and centre of population. Rail communication with this area was first recommended in 1881, during an examination of evidence being collected in relation to the proposed construction of the Nairne railway.

As early as 1882, a report was made by Mr. H. C. Mais, Engineer-in-Chief, on the proposed Balhannah-Mount Pleasant railway, which said - "Works upon this line are light when compared with those upon most of the lines which have been surveyed through the hills as the route follows leading valleys throughout.



It first ascends the valley of the Onkaparinga, crossing the watershed of the Onkaparinga and the Angas Creek near Mount Torrens and then descends the Angas Creek for about 3 1/2 miles, when it leaves that creek and crosses a slight rise into the valley of the Torrens, which it follows to its terminus at Mount Pleasant.

A few sharp curves will be required in places and on each side of the watershed near Mount Torrens there will be continuous gradients of 1 in 50 about two miles and 2 1/2 miles long respectively. These will necessitate the employment of heavy engines, as on the Adelaide-Nairne line, of which this is a branch, and, consequently, the way and works must be of equally substantial construction. The watercourses are numerous but not large, being chiefly perennial in character.

The country being thoroughly settled and thickly dotted with townships, the General Traffic Manager has asked that provision should be made in the estimate for several intermediate stations but, in some instances, these will consist only of sidings and platforms, the standard station buildings being erected only at those points where a large passenger or goods traffic may be anticipated. Further reports were made on the proposed line of railway to Mount Pleasant in 1891, 1896, 1898 and 1904.

A minute dated the 24th December 1904 from Railways Commissioner Pendleton to the Commissioner of Public Works contained a report from the Engineer-in-Chief showing what had been done on a recent trip over the country between

- (a) Balhannah and Mount Pleasant,
- (b) Mount Pleasant and the plains toward Sedan and
- (c) from Mount Pleasant through Blumberg via the Torrens valley into Adelaide.

The opinion was expressed that if a line to Mount Pleasant was at any time seriously proposed it should be that from Balhannah, 21 miles 17 chains in length.

Four estimates had been made for such a line. The first was in 1882, when including expenses for rolling stock of £33,280, it was estimated that a line of similar character to that which runs from Adelaide to Murray Bridge would be constructed for an expenditure of £214,800. The second was in 1891 when, for a similar line, except that the cost of the stock was reduced to £22,510, the cost was set at about £201,000.

In 1896, there was a third estimate for a light line, with 41 lbs. rails, no rolling stock, no station buildings or platforms, no fencing and ballast to be omitted except on steep grades, at £91,200. The fourth was made in 1898 and was a revised estimate of that of 1891, under the same conditions, at £190,000. If the line was to be constructed, it was recommended on the basis of the 1898 estimate.

However, no real interest was shown in the proposal until 1914 and, on the 17th September of that year, Mr.A.B. Moncrieff, Railways Commissioner, having been advised of the intention to introduce a Bill to authorise the construction of a railway from Balhannah to Sedan, reported that the cost of the railway was estimated at £667,000, rolling stock would require an additional £100,075, making a total capital expenditure of £767,075. Revenue was estimated at £33,884, working expenses at £19,575 and interest at 4%, £30,683

The length of the proposed railway was 57 miles 30 chains, the gauge 5ft 3ins, laid with 60 lbs. new rails and six inches of ballast under the sleepers, the ruling grade being 1 in 45. The estimated revenue, including coaching, goods and livestock, was £33,884 and the nett loss on working the proposed line, after paying working expenses and interest, was estimated at £16,374 per annum but, as the nett additional traffic over existing lines would probably amount to £21,745, the nett profit on the undertaking was assessed at £5,371.

Subsequently, Act No. 1180 of 1914, the Mount Pleasant, Sedan and Truro Railways Act, authorised construction of the following railways; Balhannah-Mount Pleasant, Palmer-Sedan (with possible future connection to Mount Pleasant) and Nuriootpa-Truro. All lines were to be of 5ft 3ins gauge and to have 60 lbs. rails.

Construction was started early in 1915 by the Railway Department but a contract was subsequently let for the whole of the line. Construction was relatively easy and no real obstacles were encountered by the contractor (H. Teasdale Smith), apart from a shortage of labour and an abnormally wet winter, which slowed the rate of construction to a certain extent. During the financial year ending the 30th June 1916, alterations were made to the permanent way, signalling, platforms, etc., at Balhannah, to provide a junction for the Mount Pleasant line.

In the following financial year, the work was continued under the contract and the earthworks were in hand to 19 miles, whilst the rails had been laid to 5m. 53c. Trains were evidently using portion of the line, for a photograph in the report of the Railways Commissioner for the year ending 30th June 1917, showed a train about to enter Balhannah from the branch line. Additional signals for working traffic to and from the branch line to Mount Pleasant were brought into use at Balhannah on the 9th March 1917.

By the end of the next 12 months, the line was approaching completion and was opened for traffic on the 16th September

A report in the Adelaide "Register" of the 14th September 1918 says –

"The opening of the railway from Balhannah to Mount Pleasant for general traffic will take place on Monday. There will not be any formal opening ceremony, the Government desiring to save unnecessary expense. The construction of the line was started departmentally and was finished under contract (let in 1915) by Mr. Teasdale Smith. The original purpose was for a railway from Balhannah to Sedan but it was altered by Act of 1914 to the present work."

Weekly Notice 38/18 quotes that the Balhannah to Mount Pleasant railway was opened for traffic on Monday, 16th September 1918. Rails were of 60 lbs., the ruling grade is 1 in 50 compensated and the sharpest curve is of 12 chains radius.

A mixed train, Mondays to Saturdays, provided a service as follows –

		DOWN am		UP pm
Balhannah	dep	9.30	arr	4.45
Mount Pleasant	arr	11.05	dep	3.00

Opening of the line

A report in the Adelaide "Register" of the 14th September 1918 says -
Locomotives worked tender first on the down journey. A composite bogie carriage and a specially-equipped bogie brakevan was stabled at Balhannah for the mixed train; Passengers changed trains at Balhannah, travelling on the Victor Harbour trains. The maximum permissible speed was 40 m.p.h.

Stations and Staff

Stations on the line comprised Oakbank, Woodside, Charlestown, Mount Torrens, Birdwood and Mount Pleasant. Charlestown was renamed Charleston in 1919.

Originally, no staff was placed at any station on the line, a travelling Stationmaster, with head station at Balhannah, travelling to Mount Pleasant and back each day in the specially-fitted brakevan.

From the 28th May 1923, the position of travelling Station-master was abolished and Mount Pleasant and Woodside became stations with resident accounting staff. Mount Pleasant was the accounting station for Birdwood, Mount Torrens and Charleston and Balhannah was the accounting station for Oakbank. On the 1st June 1944, Woodside became the accounting station for both Charleston and Mount Torrens, instead of Mount Pleasant.

Safe Working

From the date of opening, the line was worked by Permissive Block, the block books being placed at Balhannah, Woodside, Charlestown, Mount Torrens, Birdwood and Mount Pleasant.

This system continued until the 22nd April 1940, when Permissive Block working between Balhannah and Mount Pleasant was replaced by Train Order working. Thereafter, all train movements were controlled by Train Orders issued by and over the signature of the Train Controller at Adelaide.

A train order signal was provided at Balhannah for down branch-line working and all communications between Train Controller and stations beyond Balhannah were available, when required, by means of the party-line telephone.

Electric Staff working between Balhannah and Woodside was introduced on the 22nd July 1942. Subsequently, switchstands and staff drawer locks were brought into use on the main-line switchstands leading to the Oakbank triangle.

Train Loads and Services

The triangle at the North end of Mount Pleasant station yard was completed and brought into use on the 24th December 1918. This enabled engines to run chimney first in both directions and the loads for Rx-class locomotives then became the same for up and down journeys, viz., 200 tons for mixed and 235 tons for goods trains.

During 1923, the load limit for up mixed and goods trains between Charleston and Balhannah was increased to 250 tons for mixed and to 300 tons for goods trains.

With the introduction of more powerful locomotives during the Webb era, 700-class engines were permitted to work over the Mount Pleasant branch, the through load between Balhannah and Mount Pleasant, in both Directions, being 530 tons.

During the same era, passenger motors took over the passenger services. Through passenger services between Adelaide and Mount Pleasant ceased on the 6th June 1953, although Friday and Sunday evening trains served the Woodside Migrant Holding Centre until mid-1958.

Probably the most interesting single aspect of the Mount Pleasant line has been the Oakbank race trains each Easter. These special trains first served the Oakbank race traffic at Easter 1920. In the post-war period, as many as 19 trains have been scheduled on an Easter Monday, the locomotive power being predominantly the 700-class type, i.e., 700, 710, 720 and 740 classes, although the 500 and 520 classes were used on rare occasions.

Diesel power on race trains was introduced in 1958 and Easter Monday in 1960 saw only one steam-hauled Oakbank special. All special trains in 1961 were diesel hauled and Easter Monday 1962 saw all trains except one worked with 300 class DPM's. The 930 class D/Es occasionally worked goods trains to Mount Pleasant and twin 930-class units have worked a number of special livestock trains, between Mile End, Mount Pleasant and Tailem Bend. Through loads for a single 930-class between Balhannah and Mount Pleasant are 635 tons and 1080 tons for a twin unit.

The End of the line

In January 1963, the Transport Control Board called for applications for licenses to carry goods and livestock between Adelaide and Mount Pleasant. This followed a notice, given by the Transport Control Board on the 13th November 1962, to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works of its intention to make an order under S.10 of the Road and Railway Transport Act, 1930-1957, that the line of railway between Balhannah and Mount Pleasant be closed.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee approved of the making of the order on the 6th December 1962. The Transport Control Board, on the 5th February 1963, ordered that the line be closed from the 4th March 1963.

To mark the closing of the railway, the South Australian Division chartered two special trains, the last passenger trains to run between Adelaide and Mount Pleasant. The first train departed Adelaide at 9.35 a.m. on Saturday, 2nd February 1963, and comprised Rx-class No. 199, hauling three Centenary cars and brakevan.

The last sentimental journey along the 21-mile picturesque branch line took place on Sunday, 3rd March 1963. Engine No. 717 was done up for the trip but, as the day turned out hot, No. 706, an oil burner and polished up for the trip, was used. Driven by Mr. J. H. Thulborn, No. 706 hauled over 300 enthusiasts, marking a really fitting end to the 44 year history of the Balhannah-Mount Pleasant branch line.

It is of interest to record that the crew of the last goods train to Mount Pleasant, No. 25 (12.01 a.m.) Mile End to Mount Pleasant and No. 964 (9.30 p.m.) Mount Pleasant to Mile End, on Thursday, 28th February 1963, comprised Driver J. H. Thulborn and Fireman T.R. Kemp, with Guard Diamandi. Fireman B. Wiwitowska accompanied Driver Thulborn on the Society special train on the 3rd March last, with No. 706, whilst Guard R.S. Farrant was in charge of the train, with Mr. C.R. Scott as his collector



Rx-class 4-6-0 No. 199 at Mount Pleasant with the South Australian Division's special train on the 2nd February 1963. (Photo: N. J.Castle)

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