



## SteamRanger's Heritage - an insight into our past

### BACKGROUND

An account of an ARHS excursion in 1964 to Victor Harbor, using the final 500 class steam locomotive in service and nine "steel" passenger cars

This article gives in depth information on the history of the line and early SAR services and follows with a detailed mile by mile description of the route based on the organiser's on-train handout.

Details of the running performance of the train are included

### The Victor Vagabond

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*ARHS Bulletin No 319 May 1964 pages 83 to 90*

On the 17th March 1963, the South Australian Division organised a trip to Victor Harbour with a special train, complete with the dining car "Adelaide", which was styled "The Victor Vagabond". It was hauled by locomotive No. 500 (4-8-4 type), the only remaining one of its class.

Historically, the route followed was of special interest. The Adelaide - Nairne railway, the construction of which was commenced in 1879, was by the far the most difficult engineering work yet undertaken by the State. Many cuttings and embankments were required, nine tunnels were bored and two viaducts erected, the latter being works of some magnitude. These structures were of wrought iron and were built on a radius of 10½ chains, the larger viaduct, 360 feet long carried the rails 108 ft above the creek bed

The line was opened to Aldgate on the 14<sup>th</sup> March 1883 and to Nairne on the 27<sup>th</sup> November of the same year, on the same day as the branch to Mt. Barker was declared open. The branch line reached Strathalbyn on the 15th September 1884.

However, the first public railway in South Australia, from Goolwa to Port Elliot, was opened for horse-drawn traffic in May 1854 but, the harbour at Port Elliot being found to be unsuitable, the line was extended to Victor Harbour in 1864. Strathalbyn was linked to the seaport at Victor Harbour in 1869 but, until the construction of the branch line from the Adelaide-Nairne railway in 1884, the traffic was still horse-drawn. From 1st April 1885, steam traction was used over the full length of the line from Adelaide to Victor Harbour. (See Bulletin. No. 199-May 1954).

In 1887, passenger trains, hauled by the Baldwin-built N-class locomotives, worked to Strathalbyn and connected there with a local service to Victor Harbour, provided by the small 20-ton G-class 2-4-0 tank engines, rated to haul 70 tons between Strathalbyn and Victor Harbour. Heavier trains were worked by the old H-class 4-4-0s. By 1907, bridges had been sufficiently strengthened to permit Rx and rebuilt N-class locomotives to work to Victor Harbour.

In the Summer of 1910, the first fast express to Victor Harbour began operations, the journey time of 2 hours 58 minutes being a remarkable achievement for those days. By 1915, the trip was lengthened to three hours and the working timetable gave passing times to the nearest quarter-minute, probably the first use of fractional passing times in Australia. This was a Saturdays-only train, leaving Adelaide at 3.12 p.m. and the return journey on Mondays also took three hours. In 1917, the journey time had been lengthened to three hours 33 minutes but this included a 10-minute stop at Mount Barker and eight further stops before Victor Harbour.

The rehabilitation scheme of Commissioner Webb, with its track strengthening and new motive power, made some changes on the branch line and soon 600-class "Pacifies" were seen at Victor Harbour. These engines permitted considerable acceleration to be made to timetables and the fastest steam working in the history of the line was introduced with a two hour 42 minute schedule commencing on the 2nd December 1929.

This was a very creditable performance, as the possibilities for high speed running exist only in the final 30 miles. With an allowance of 13 minutes for stops, the running time was two hours 29 minutes, giving an average of 33 m.p.h. The only faster run than this was the 9.20 a.m. daily railcar in 1943, when the 75-class ran the distance in two hours 37 minutes.

The falling off of traffic in the years of the depression resulted in an addition of both time and stops to the express running and, by December 1938, three hours 13 minutes was the running time. The fast express on Saturdays was discontinued during World War II and was not re-introduced until 1946. The postwar years have not brought back the sparkling performance of 1929 but, nevertheless, a pleasant journey behind a 520-class in 1952, with the Saturday 8.50 a.m. express, covered the run in three hours five minutes.

Present-day services consist of a train leaving Victor Harbour at 7.30 a.m., Mondays to Saturdays. On Saturdays and Sundays, there is a train leaving Victor Harbour at 5.30 p.m. Trains leave Adelaide at 6.10 p.m., Mondays to Fridays and Sundays, with two trains on Saturdays, at 9 a.m. and just before 1 p.m. Passenger trains are worked by either "Bluebird" or "Model 75" railcars. Freight trains are hauled by 900 or 930-class D/E's.

One of the objects of the excursion on the 17th March last was to participate in one of the last journeys made by the sole remaining 500-class locomotive before it was withdrawn. When I travelled on this train, I was reminded of another trip I had made to Victor Harbour in another special train. To members at present in the 20 and 30 age group or younger, it is all so very long ago, a matter of 26 years, to be exact.

In 1937, the Society was in its infancy and special tours, to cater for the railway enthusiast, were unknown. In the mid-1930<sup>T</sup>s, Australia was just emerging from a worldwide financial depression and, about this time, the Victorian Railways, in an effort to stimulate tourist travel, created "The Holiday Train". Briefly, this consisted of a number of passengers in special carriages, in charge of a tourist officer, travelling by train to various places of interest, where they stayed the night at local hotels and toured by car or motor coach over the local countryside before rejoining the train and moving on elsewhere. This train was the nearest thing, in those days, to the railway enthusiast trips of today.

During Easter 1937, the Victorian and South Australian Railways got together and ran the holiday train to Adelaide, with sleeping cars attached, returning by way of Victor Harbour. In those days, the 500-class locomotives were in their heyday and it was No. 503 which hauled the train between Tailem Bend and Adelaide. In fact, this holiday train was rather like a second division of the "Overland", being diverted via Victor Harbour on the return journey. So it will be appreciated that, to me, the run of the "Victor Vagabond" brought reminders of the former journey.

The load of the "Victor Vagabond" consisted of the dining car "Adelaide" and passenger carriages Nos. 501, 502, 711, 713, 753, 781 and 783, with a brakevan. It is of interest to note that the brakevan was required to carry a "Stop" warning disc, for use in protecting crossings where the train stops while the guard works some manually-operated gates at a level crossing near Port Elliot.

A unique feature of the outing was the watering of the locomotive by the Victor Harbour fire brigade, as the service now operating is completely dieselised, the last regular steam train having run in October 1959. Because of this, there are no facilities for watering steam locomotives and when the 500-class was detached after our arrival at Victor Harbour, it was moved to the Eyre Street level crossing, where the fire tender drew up, hoses were unrolled, coupled to a nearby fire hydrant and water for the return journey pumped into the tender. There were plenty of spectators!

This unusual feature can be equalled by another just as exceptional, on the holiday train trip of years ago. There, the train waited while the passengers went surfing! At a point near Victor Harbour, where the track runs adjacent to a good surfing beach, arrangements had been made for the passengers to hire surfboards and plunge into the surf.

The author has not gone surfing from a train before or since. The only other known instance of surfing from a train was at Coffs Harbour, in New South Wales, where it was once a regular practice.

The distance between Adelaide and Victor Harbour is just over 82 miles, the first miles being over the main Southern line to Serviceton on the Victorian border. On this section, the line passes through the Adelaide hills, rising to a height of 1613 feet at Mount Lofty. From Mount Baker Junction, it is another 51 miles over the branch line to Victor Harbour.

The altitude is still high at both Philcox Hill and Bugle Ranges but the grade falls sharply to Strathalbyn and from there on is gently undulating to the coast. Automatic signalling is in operation on the main line and, on the branch line, the Train Order system is in use. The "Victor Vagabond" journey commenced with a short run through the Adelaide yards, where a few F and Rx-class locomotives may be seen in steam, and then the track turns due South to Mile End, the first of the suburban stations. Here, across several of the tracks on the right, may be seen the brick facing of the platform once used by trains on the North Terrace Line to Glenelg, now only a memory. On the passage to Goodwood, the suburban line to Brighton and Marino branches off to the right and the main line once made a right-angled crossing with the former South Terrace line to Glenelg. Since 1929, this has been an electric tramway, which now crosses on an overbridge. The line is double track to Belair (13 ½ m.). After Goodwood, several suburban stations are passed on a gradually ascending grade to Mitcham, where it stiffens to 1 in 50. Between Mitcham and Torrens Park there can be seen part of the old line which terminated on a short spur at Clapham. There was once an extension of the Clapham suburban services on to Sleep's Hill, worked by four or five trains daily. This has disappeared but there is now a station named Lynton in the vicinity, opened within the last 10 years.

The train is now climbing steadily into the foothills and passes through the Sleeps Hill tunnel, which is 2339 feet in length is the longest tunnel on the route. This replaced two shorter single-track tunnels and two viaducts, the last train passing over the old line on the 16th April 1919. From the train two portals of the disused tunnels and the bases of the viaduct piers are to be seen.

Just past Eden Hills (8  $\frac{3}{4}$  miles), terminus of the double track from 1919 to 1928, there is disused turntable and, a half-mile further on the train passes through the Shepherds Hill tunnel, where a second tunnel was bored alongside the first, the original one being on the down track. The short tunnels through the low ridges, just before Blackwood and what is now Pinera were replaced by cuttings when the line was doubled to Belair in 1928. Six men lost their lives during an earth slip when the bore was removed at Blackwood.

In Blackwood station yard the train passes an old elevated water tank which was supplied from the old Railway Dam in National Park, through a still servicable pipeline. By the time Belair is reached we have traversed a great horseshoe curve which extends roughly from Clapham to Pinera. When looking at a road map it is easy to see why the road distances are so much shorter than rail to such places as Mount Lofty and Aldgate.

From Belair, the line becomes single track and, after a short level section, the line steepens to 1 in 45 at the 14  $\frac{3}{4}$  milepost and is maintained almost continuously for the next 4  $\frac{3}{4}$  miles, through three more tunnels at National Park, Long Gully and Upper Sturt, until the summit is reached at Mount Lofty at 19  $\frac{3}{4}$  miles. Most of the curves in this difficult section are of 10-chain radius, with a compensated ruling grade of 1 in 37.

Mount Lofty station is in a particularly picturesque setting for railway photography and a photo stop was made on the grade coming into the station, with a background of lovely English trees. Then the train pulled into the station and a stop of 15 minutes was made. There is, however, one photographic hazard here, in that a number of tall pine trees on one side of the station, while adding to the scenic beauty, are apt to cast long shadows at certain periods of the day over the track and platforms.

The halt at Mount Lofty gave time to reflect on the fact that the train had made quite a smart run up the mountains, reaching the first photo stop on the grade in 44 minutes, which was seven minutes better than the present schedule of the Diesel-hauled "Overland".

Beyond Mount Lofty, the line falls at 1 in 45-49 to Aldgate, rising slightly past the bridge over the Adelaide-Melbourne highway and then descends mainly at 1 in 45 through Carripook. Coxs Creek, which was the source of water for a large waterwheel near Bridgewater, is crossed at about 23 miles, on an embankment and arch culvert. Bridgewater is the terminus for suburban working and possessed a turntable capable of accommodating the largest steam locomotives used in the State.

Another stretch at 1 in 45 begins at 24 miles and continues around sharp curves through the sixth and largest tunnel on the line near Yantaringa. The line descends to the Onkaparinga River at 26  $\frac{3}{4}$  miles, then begins to rise again on slightly easier grades and, passing through Balhannah (the junction for the former Mount Pleasant line, which was closed on the 4th March 1963), continues upgrade to Mount Barker Junction (31m.).

Some delays were experienced between Mount Lofty and the junction. An unscheduled stop was made at Aldgate to pass an up goods and it was necessary to take water at Ambleside, with some delay in getting the passengers on board again. Staff changing at Mount Barker Junction took one minute and our arrival at Mount Barker was 15 minutes behind time.

From the junction, the main South line leads away to the left, while the Victor Harbour line curves to the right and heads in a generally Southern direction past the brickworks at Littlehampton, where the Adelaide-Melbourne highway is again crossed. About one mile further on is Mount Barker, one of the largest towns on the line, where a refreshment stop was made. It is of interest to note that the refreshment rooms were closed on the 30th June 1963. The station and tree-lined driveway leading up to it are very picturesque. Mount Barker is named after one of South Australia's early explorers and is about three miles away to the East.

The line falls sharply at 1 in 45-47 from the junction to the 35 milepost, rises to Philcox Hill and descends almost continuously for 12 1/2 miles to Strathalbyn. The section from Philcox Hill includes 7 1/2 miles at 1 in 45-47 and frequent curves, largely on 12-chain radius, between 41 miles and 47 miles, with less than a mile of straight track. A stop was made for photographic purposes at Bugle Ranges.

Strathalbyn, the largest town on the railway on the East side of the ranges (excluding Victor Harbour), is the centre of a prosperous district and one of the most attractive country towns in the State. After crossing the Angas River, the station yard is entered and is situated towards the Southern end of the town.

From Strathalbyn, the line leaves the foothills and runs across gently undulating country, which slopes towards Lake Alexandrina and our train descends on easy grades as it heads in a generally Southerly direction towards Currency Creek. After a comparatively long stretch of three miles we reached Sandergrrove, the junction for the Milang branch, which curves away to the left.

The Finnis River is crossed three quarters of a mile beyond Finnis station on the wrought-iron bridge originally built the Strathalbyn-Middleton Tramway in the late 1880<sup>T</sup>s and later strengthened to carry the steam-hauled traffic. The Black Swamp viaduct, originally erected, experienced settlement troubles and was later replaced by a stronger structure.

The Currency Creek viaduct (67m) the first of its kind in the State at the time of its construction in the 1860's. The structure, 280 feet long, has seven spans and the two central piers are 76 feet high. The piers and abutments are of rubble masonry, quarried locally, with brick quoins which have since been faced with concrete except for the bases of the two central piers. The bridge has been strengthened to carry the steam traffic. Other surviving works of the old horse-drawn tramway system include the station building at Finnis - erected in 1869 and still in use, and the abandoned tramway formation to Middleton, still be seen.

In its passage through Goolwa, the line turns through more than a half-circle, the change of direction occurring mainly around a long, 10-chain radius curve at the south side of the town. The "back shunt", which had previously served Goolwa, was remove in 1915. After the curve through Goolwa, line swings sharply to the left and, passes through Middleton, and approaches nearer the sea. Beyond Port Elliot, the line closely follows the coastline and travels within yards of the sea for about two miles.

The reinforced concrete arch bridge at Watson's Gap, a mile past Port Elliot, the first of the type in South Australia. The reinforced beam-and-slab bridge spanning the River Hindmarsh (81 ¼ miles) was the first of its kind to be used for railway traffic in Australia. Probably the best photo stop of the day was made alongside the seashore between Port Elliot and Victor Harbour, 79 ¾ miles, with Granite Island and Victor Harbour in the background in one direction and the rugged coastline of Port Elliot the other.

At Victor Harbour (82 ¼ miles), the terminus of the line, most servicing facilities for steam locomotives have been removed but turntable and the masonry goods shed, still in use, remain to remind us of other train eras, the one of the recent days of steam and the other of the remote days of horse traction.

Victor Harbour's all-too-brief life as a port for oceangoing vessels is recalled by the causeway to Granite Island, the jetties and the breakwater. However, the town has not stagnated since the 1880s but rather has developed greatly as the principal centre of the flourishing South Coast district and one of the most attractive seaside and holiday resorts in the State.

On the return journey, the locomotive was not notable for any really fast running but one or two points may be of interest. The best running was between Middleton and Goolwa and from just before Sandergrrove to a point on the down side of Strathalbyn. The distance between the 76 ¼ milepost and the 72 1/2 milepost was covered in four minutes 10 seconds, an average of 48.1 m.p.h, where the maximum speed allowed is 50 m.p.h. From the 59 1/4 milepost to the 51 1/2 milepost, the distance was covered in nine minutes 34 seconds, an average of 48.6 m.p.h., where the maximum permissible speed is 56 m.p.h.

Strathalbyn was left at 5.28 p.m. and about this time No. 500 developed burner trouble, which could not be immediately rectified and this caused very slow running to Mount Barker. There, the burner cleared and the locomotive took water from the tank, which had not been used for a couple of years and had been specially cleaned out at the Society's request. This supply was from a reservoir a few miles away and apparently, the water, which had been standing in the pipe, was stagnant and caused severe priming, which was responsible for slow running to Mount Lofty.

The journey ended with an arrival in Adelaide about half an hour late but no one appeared to mind. A number of Victorian members, who were participating, detrained at Mount Lofty and caught the "Overland" back to Melbourne, which passed the "Victor Vagabond" at Upper Sturt, on its descent to Adelaide.

As usual, an excellent brochure was provided by the Society for those travelling on the "Victor Vagabond" and much of the information contained in this brochure has been used in this article.