



SteamRanger's Heritage - an insight into our past

BACKGROUND

A trip on the regular passenger train to Victor Harbor in the mid to late 1960s was certainly a different experience to riding on the contrasting but still most enjoyable Southern Encounter Sunday services by SteamRanger Tours.

Adelaide enthusiast Chris Bridgelands
recounts a trip on the Saturday midday train from Adelaide in the 1960s

BY TRAIN TO VICTOR HARBOR IN THE 1960s

by Chris Bridgland

“Catchpoint” May 1992 No 89 pages 8 and 9

I rode the regular services to Victor on more than 100 occasions, and one service which was always a most enjoyable daylight run was train No.537, the 12.55pm Adelaide to Victor on Saturdays, returning on No.834, the 5.35pm service back to Adelaide that afternoon.

No.537 was listed in the Working Timetable as an 'Express 250 Psgr Motor' and normally consisted of a single 250 class Bluebird or a car-trailer-car Bluebird set, although occasionally the honours went to a 75 class railcar, sometimes a car-trailer-car 75 set.

I made my way to Adelaide Station about noon, often on many Saturdays in a row and proceeded to purchase my ticket from the Country Ticket window in Station Road, just off North Terrace. There were two separate ticket windows; one for southern country and the other for northern country lines, including Broken Hill! Such was the magnitude of rural passenger services.

Down at the platform level other trains were waiting to depart. These were the 12.10pm Angaston which normally consisted of a 75 and trailer, the 12.25pm Kapunda which was almost always a 280/100 Bluebird set, and the 12.30pm East West Express to Port Pirie. The Angaston and Kapunda trains returned to Adelaide the same afternoon. The northbound trains were soon on their way and I boarded the Victor train. Even though it was a Saturday there was plenty of passengers, parcels, mailbags, pigeon hampers, bundles of library books and numerous other freight items.

After leaving Adelaide station we soon past the busy Mile End Goods Yard. No.609/2.15pm Taillem Bend mixed was waiting to leave with its usual centenary or steel passenger car marshalled next inside the brakevan for passengers who would join that train at Bridgewater -after a ride in an earlier Redhen from town.

A brief stop at stations such as Mitcham and Blackwood were often made to pick up more passengers. There was plenty of life at these stations, as well as others such as, Belair, Long Gully, Mt Lofty, Aldgate, Bridgewater and Balhannah - attended almost 24 hours a day with their signal cabins in continual use.

We arrived at Mount Barker Junction at 2.09pm for a one minute stop where the Station Master was waiting on the platform with a Train Order each for the Driver and Guard. The Order for No.537 more often than not read 'Proceed to Victor Harbor, report Finnis. Occasionally it would vary when, for example we would have to cross an extra goods train usually ex Strathalbyn at either Mount Barker, Bugle Ranges or Strathalbyn itself. After leaving the junction we ran down to Littlehampton where a stop was sometimes made for one or two passengers to alight, plus a handful of parcels to be put off. A few minutes later Mount Barker was reached where the local Station Master in his 'black' uniform greeted the train. A few passengers alighted and various items including mailbags were placed on the platform trolley for the SM to wheel back to his office to begin sorting. Before this he gave all clear to the Guard.

After the straight leaving Mount Barker, and plenty of horn noise due to several level crossings, the familiar clickety clack from the bogies is detected because of the short rail lengths. It's a long climb up to Philcox Hill - it still had a short timber step down platform with a Train Control telephone box alongside. The passing and goods sidings had already been removed, and the train very rarely stopped. Several minutes later we arrived at Bugle Ranges, comprising of a passing siding, goods siding, goods platform and shed. This was a provisional stop and occasionally we would pause briefly to allow a passenger to alight or to place a parcel in the shelter shed on the passenger platform.

The line continued to wind around through hilly countryside, although it was downhill, passing through the recently closed Gemmels Siding at 43.5 miles. Magnificent views were gained looking towards Strathalbyn and the plains beyond. Travelling at about 60 mph in the Bluebird was fairly smooth as we headed for Strathalbyn on the long straight. The 75 railcars must have been 'bone shakers' particularly not having a speedo and doing that speed or more! It's the closest I ever came to flying in a train.

Arriving at Strathalbyn, with its SM and trolley, another smaller sign was seen under the station nameboard - 'Change for Milang'. A 75 class railcar was in the back road at the station ready for this run. It was placed into the main platform once the Victor train had departed. A trip on this service was always well worth it!

We then passed the remains of the platform at Strathalbyn Racecourse, about one mile south, then we were on the long straight for about 4 miles. The speed was up to 60 mph racing across the plains, passing the level crossing stop of Lowanna at 54 miles and then through to Sandergrove at 55.75 miles. The Milang line could be seen branching off to the left through the scrub. Consisting of 41 lb/y rail on steel sleepers and little ballast, it was certainly a contrast to the main line to Victor Harbor.

The station building still stood at Finnis, and the Guard reported to Train Control to let the Milang railcar leave Strathalbyn. The female Finnis caretaker, who lived in a house adjacent to the station, collected any parcels from the Guard and also took orders for any rabbits required by the train crew which would be picked up on the return journey. She sold rabbits to train crews for many years, and at only \$1 each, she must have done a good trade.

Leaving Finnis the train crossed the river, and a small timber platform at Gilberts where a stop was made on rare occasions. After passing through the last bit of scrub, we crossed the bridge over Tookayerta Creek at Black Swamp where a water column once existed for the use by steam locos. The train was then in grain and sheep country and a brief stop was made at Currency Creek. The Guard put parcels in the shelter shed as usual. About half a mile further on we crossed the high bridge over Currency Creek, then it was on towards Goolwa. After passing the distant signal the train crossed the Ferry access road which was fitted with hand operated timber gates - previously closed to road traffic by the Station Master

Quite a few passengers would alight at Goolwa, and some would also join the train, as the Guard was kept busy with parcels. Having only about 600 people (at this time) it was like a sleepy little village from the past. It had not been invaded by holidaymakers.

Goolwa still boasted stockyards at the Adelaide end of the yard. The train went through a series of tight curves before reaching the long straight bound for Middleton. A very short stop was made at the seaside stop before continuing on to Port Elliot.

Port Elliot was attended by a Station Agent, who also took charge of the hand operated gates immediately before the platform. After a two minute stop the fascinating part of the journey begins as the sand and sea tries to splash at the wheels of the Bluebird as it winds its way around the beachfront heading for Victor Harbor. On many occasions a provisional stop was made at Adare, 81 miles 25 chains, before continuing to Victor.

We usually passed the Victor distant signal, before stopping at the home signal to pick up the Porter who was admitting the train to the station yard. The large turntable was on the right, and the crew barracks to the left. Normally the 9.00am Adelaide to Victor train consist was stabled at this location - usually railcars or sometimes a loco hauled train. This morning train returned to Adelaide as No.806 at 5.05pm on Sunday evening - its crew being based at Victor Harbor all weekend! What a job!

The train passed through the final level crossing, protected by large heavy wooden hand operated gates before pulling up at the platform at 3.49pm. The impressive station structure was a product of the 1920s Webb era. The remaining passengers disembarked and the railcar was cleared of all parcels and baggage. The motors were normally shut down for an hour or more, before being restrated by the same crew ready for departure at 5.35pm.

I also returned with the crew on that train back to Adelaide. Until the 1950s a number of other stopping places, mostly at level crossings, existed along the line between Mount Barker Junction and Victor Harbor. These were located at: Murapena 39.25 miles; Nonedia 40.5 miles; Panketyi 47.5 miles; Black Swamp 63.25 miles; Murtonga 65.25 miles; Moonoerp 65.75 miles; Wiripana 68.5 miles; Tarooki 71.75 miles; Tinbalang 73.5 miles; and Parangal 76.5 miles.

Passengers on the SteamRanger tourist trains of today to Victor Harbor are certainly travelling over the greatest SAR branchline of yesteryear. This line carried locals, holidaymakers in addition to goods to and from the south coast for almost a century. To have this line, which is steeped in history, back in the condition that exists today is surely a tribute to our pioneers - and the many SteamRanger volunteers who have collectively made it happen!

And so it should be!