



SteamRanger's Heritage - an insight into our past

BACKGROUND

A useful article on the building of the first stages of the Hills Railway from Adelaide to Aldgate (1879 –1882)

Included is a report on the official first train on 14th March 1883 and photos of the challenging Sleeps Hill viaduct.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE HILLS RAILWAY CONSTRUCTION

A.D. Presgrave

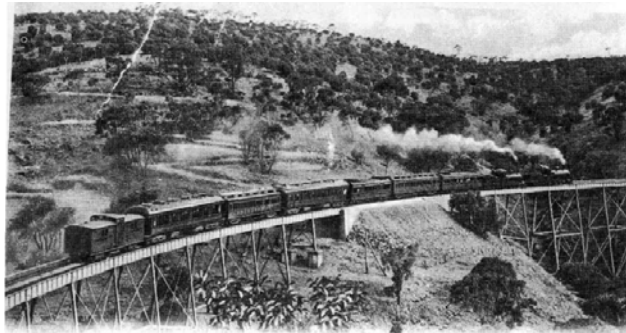
"The Recorder" April 1977 pages 110, 111

Construction of the first section of the Intercolonial Railway to Aldgate Pump was commenced in 1879. At this stage the only towns on the line were Mitcham, Belair, Upper Sturt and Aldgate, and the line went near Crafers (Mount Lofty). Stations were planned for Mitcham, Belair, Mount Lofty and Aldgate. The Belair station was to be situated halfway between the towns of Belair and Coromandel Valley the present Blackwood station. Blackwood did not exist at this time, the few houses in the area being generally described as Coromandel Valley or "near Belair".

Construction commenced from Adelaide and after the junction of the privately owned Glenelg Railway at Thebarton, turned south along the edge of the parklands. After crossing the Victoria Square to Glenelg railway on the level at Goodwood the line turned south east and ran to near Mitcham village and then commenced the climb through the hills. Two tunnels were required at Sleeps Hill and these were bored and left unlined.

Simultaneously with construction from Adelaide, work was also begun from a locality near where the Belair station was to be sited. A brickworks was established and the contractors started working backtowards Adelaide. The first work was the boring of a tunnel which was lined with bricks from the works nearby. This tunnel is the down tunnel at Eden Hills. The next major work was the construction of a viaduct at Sleeps Hill. The viaduct was in two sections the first being 270 feet long and 76 feet high and the second 296 feet long and 100 feet above the gully.

Before 1879 an inn was established near Belair by Robert Burfield who named it Blackwood Inn, now the Belair Hotel. He was also responsible for naming the nearby locality Blackwood in 1880. Blackwood township was built up around the station which had been built as Belair, so the station was renamed Blackwood and a new station built at the village of Belair.



Adelaide Express to Melbourne crossing the Sleeps Hill Viaduct about 1906.

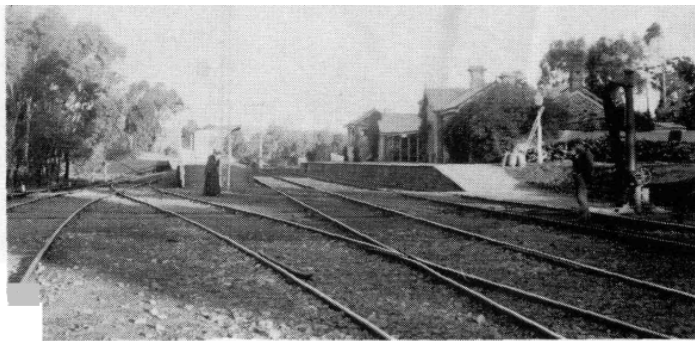
The line was completed to Aldgate in early 1883 and the Official opening was on the 14th March 1883. when a special tram carrying the Governor and his party along with other notables and others left Adelaide for Aldgate. All went well until just after Mitcham when the engine began making heavy weather of the climb. Stops were made to raise steam and after much huffing and puffing the tram finally ground to a halt in the Black-wood tunnel. The train pushed back and had another run. this time it made the grade and rolled into Blackwood. A lengthy stop ensued while the other engine at Mitcham was called for. While all this was going on, and unnoticed by the passengers, the engine and vice-regal carriage were uncoupled and suddenly departed unannounced for Aldgate. leaving the other passengers to their own devices. The banquet for the opening was duly held in the goods shed at Aldgate and the line declared well and truly opened

The engine concerned in the opening farce was N class no 53, one of a batch of engines imported from Baldwins in America specifically for the hills railway, and the failure of the engine cast suspicion not only on the locomotives but also on the railway administration.



Sleeps Hill Viaduct in course of construction.

Photo: S.A. Archives



Blackwood station in 1900

Photo: A. D. Presgrave collection