

THE VICTOR HARBOR TOURIST RAILWAY

[First running of tourist trains to Victor Harbor]

ARHS Recorder November 1986 pages 26 - 33



621 at Victor Harbor Photo Deoff Doecke

October 18th 1986 will go down in the history of the ARMS in South Australia as the day when months and years of planning and frustrations culminated in the first running of tourist trains to Victor Harbor. The weather conditions on that weekend were cold, gusting wind and heavy rain showers, the right conditions to test steam engines, particularly on the heavy grades of the Adelaide Hills.

An Agreement between the State Government and the ARHS was signed on 9/10/86 in which the Society agreed to run tourist trains to Victor Harbor in return for certain Government guarantees.

The weekend of the 18th and 19th October 1986 was chosen to coincide with a number of Jubilee activities planned at Victor Harbor which included a re-enactment of the 1802 meeting of explorers Matthew Flinders and Nicolas Baudin in the Bay which was named Encounter to commemorate that event. The re-enactment was made using visiting naval vessels of the Australian and French Navies. A display of historic racing cars was held at Victor Harbor on the Sunday to commemorate the running of the first Grand Prix in South Australia which was ran at a circuit between Victor Harbor and Port Elliot in 1936.

As the sun rose in the eastern sky over Dry Creek last minute touches were being made to train consists and engines for the first trains to run on the Victor Harbor Tourist Railway Two trains were planned and the first, hauled by 520 was scheduled to leave the Depot at 6.10 a.m. followed by the second train hauled by engine 621 at 6.20 a.m. The AN crews and Guards arrived and went about their preparations and then a problem arose — the headlight on 621 suddenly failed. A scramble to effect repairs as the departure time of Train One came and went, but fortunately repairs were effected and the train steamed out of the Depot at 6.20 a.m. with Train Two hard on its heels. Train One consisted of engine 520 and carriages 66, 62, 56, 81, 65, 54 and 61, a total of 8 for 254 tonnes while Train Two was headed by 621 hauling 704, 606, 503, 602 and GB40, 5 for 194 tonnes. Train One went to Platform 2 at Adelaide Terminal and Train Two to Platform 3 with a line-up for photographers then on-the-dot of 7.10 a.m. 520 moved off with the first 'Southern Encounter' while 621 waited another 10 minutes before departing with the V.I.P.'s.

The crew of 520 showed us of what she's capable, as the full passenger load hurtled up the Hills as if they were not there. A comment was made while taking water at Blackwood that we would make Strathalbyn ahead of 620 at this pace. 4 minutes early out of Blackwood and up to Belair. The signal was at stop and no Train Order was ready. This was quickly arranged while the Overland and a Redhen railcar entered the Yard from Long Gully. Away we went as the Guards radio indicated that 621 is receiving right-away at Blackwood. A fast assault on the remaining grades to Mt. Lofty then down the hills, through Balhannah and onto the branch where the pace slackens noticeably due to track conditions. Water is quickly arranged at Mt. Barker as the Guard goes to the AN telephone to advise Control of our arrival but the phone was not working. Time was lost trying to find an alternative phone before a request was made to onlookers for a car to run the Guard to the nearest Telecom phone for an Order. By this time Train Two was standing at Mt. Barker Junction and it was raining proverbially cats and dogs. After 520's tender is filled it pulled ahead and shunted it's consist back onto the goods siding.

The distant whistle of 621 indicated that the Guard had got through to Control and then it was seen coming around the bend into Mt. Barker glistening in the sun which had appeared momentarily to dry things out. The engine was quickly detached and water was taken before it ran ahead and backed onto the front of 520. The two consists were coupled together making a total load of 13 for 450 tonnes. 19 minutes late away from Mount Barker and soon the engines were working hard as they tackled the steep climb toward Philcox Hill before running on the curving down grades to Strathalbyn. time was lost over this section due to speed restrictions on the poor track and arrival at Strathalbyn was not until 10.22, 25 minutes late where the volunteer crews took over.

The section of the line between Strathalbyn and Victor Harbor is being worked by qualified volunteers and, with an eye to the future trainees are also included in the train crew. Onto engine 621 went Bill Hassam, retired AN Senior Loco Inspector, with Keith Kraft, AN Safeworking Instructor, as his fireman while 520 was manned by retired AN engineman Keith Fitzpatrick and the Running Shift Foreman Steve Hart as fireman while retired AN Safeworking Instructor Roy Meaney took the 'back end'. John Smythe went onto 520 as trainee fireman and ARHS Loco Manager, Ian Johnston, was the trainee fireman on 621. Departure was at 10.28 a.m., 25 minutes late, and the train steamed for the first time onto a track rehabilitated with the aid of a grant under the Federal Community Employment Programme The engines stretched their legs at the hands of the experienced crews to the extent that at Finniss one minute had been gained and a further minute saved by the time that the train passed Currency Creek. A speed restriction past the site of the new Goolwa Depot where switches are being installed in the track and a run through Goolwa at 10.56 which made the train 19 minutes late.

Part of the Society's training programme has been to teach some members of the Goolwa Arts and Craft Society the Crossing Keepers Rules. The Goolwa Arts and Craft organisation have their club and display rooms in the Goolwa Railway Station building. In the days when AN operated this section of the railway all trains had to stop at the approaches to the Goolwa Yard for the train crew to open the gates at the Hindmarsh Island ferry road crossing. By training local Arts and Craft members the rules relating to railway gates it would reduce the delay on the trip to Victor Harbor. Roy Meaney had this task to carry out and on the first day Ray Radway carried out his duties in an efficient manner.

Passing Middleton the train was on the track yet to be extensively rehabilitated. Speed restrictions applied making the train 25 minutes late at Port Elliot. The Channel 9 TV helicopter accompanied the train for the run along the sea coast to Victor Harbor. With much use of the whistles the train approached the Home Signal where Station Master, Bob Johnston signalled it onto the Holding Road enroute to the Platform Road. Trainee Stationmaster, Jack Forbes protected the level crossing. After arrival at 11.25a.m., 25 minutes late the State Premier, Mr. John Bannon, who was a passenger on the train, unveiled a plaque commemorating the rehabilitation of the line as a CEP Project, overhead an RAAF Orion aircraft circled and several naval vessels rode at anchor in the bay.

Shunting then commenced with 621 running around the train to pull the cars from the platform while 520 proceeded to the turntable to turn. The GB was reversed on the VIP consist which was then shunted back onto the holding road and stabled. 520 proceeded onto the main line for water from the local fire brigade and 621 took its turn on the turntable and then lined up for water after 520 ran onto the loco sidings. 1.00 p.m. and time for the first 'Cockle Train' but water still being taken. 1.10 p.m. and 621 thumps out of Victor Harbor heading for Goolwa with the consist of Train One. A quick run-around at Goolwa and a Train Order was taken before running back to Victor Harbor 5 minutes late.

Upon arrival 520 backed onto the consist while 621 eased up the loop and onto the Holding Road for more water. 2.35 p.m. and the second 'Cockle Train' whistled out on time for Goolwa where it took the main line. Loco crews had changed by this time with Keith Fitzpatrick and Steve Hart on 621 and Bill Hassam with Keith Kraft on 520 while Brian Busch took over as Guard on Train One with Trevor Blight as trainee learning the road, the two trainee firemen also swapped engines with John on 621 and Ian in 520.

While 520 ran around the train at Goolwa obtained a Train Order to shunt to the crossing loop to cross the VIP train before proceeding to Victor Harbor. 520 and consist then safely on the loop and another Train Order was taken for 621 to take the main line, cross 520 and its train then proceed to Strathalbyn and take the main line there.

In the distance 621 could be heard whistling for the crossings, then around the corner it came to make the first train cross on the railway. Departing Goolwa at 3.40 p.m., a minute early, 621 headed back to Adelaide. 520 pulled its consist out of the passing siding and pushed it back into the platform to pick up the passengers before leaving on time for Victor Harbor.

Back at Victor Harbor 520 prepared the train for the run back to Adelaide. At 4.50 p.m. 520 moved away on time for Strathalbyn. Despite the speed restrictions across to Goolwa the 119km is covered in good time, arriving at Strathalbyn at 5.46 p.m., 2 minutes early in bright sunshine, the best for the day. The volunteers having completed their part of the journey handed over to the AN crew and the train departed at 5.53 p.m., on time. Time was soon lost on the grades and speed restrictions up the Bugle Ranges and by Mt. Barker the train was 15 minutes late. A quick stop for water and on she went. Some speed was shown on the down grade to Balhannah. However, heading up to Mt. Lofty the beat got slower and slower until on the last leg it came to a halt low on steam pressure. A short delay while it was built up and the train was moving again. A sigh of relief could be heard as it started the downhill run. Approaching Belair the train was delayed slightly at a signal before running onto Blackwood. Intermittent rain showers pelted down and as the train approached Blackwood the Overland was sighted stopped on the Down track near Glenalta. Apparently it had hit an obstruction on the line which had bent the cow-catcher of the leading engine. Behind the Overland was an STA railcar and behind that again was a Down goods train. Busy line!

Some passengers detained at Blackwood and downhill on the last leg to Keswick saw an arrival at 8.55 p.m., 33 minutes late. Passengers quickly alighted and dispersed while the volunteer cleaning staff made a quick cleanout of the cars and closed windows, etc. A relieving crew took over to take the train back to Dry Creek, however, all appeared not to be well. By Dudley Park the train was down to a crawl and at Islington it stopped — no oil — no coal — no steam. A call was made to Control for assistance and after a wait of about 30 minutes it came in the form of d.e. 843 which pushed the train in disgrace to Dry Creek. A cleaning team was waiting to tackle the cars in preparation for the train the next day.

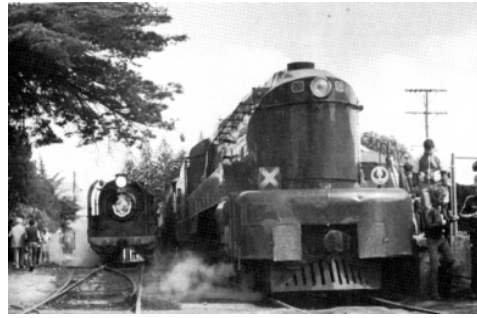
After the public success of the first day not much can be said about the train on 19/10/86 except that it performed faultlessly by any standard. The performance of these inaugural runs proved the capabilities of Steamranger to operate the Victor Harbor Tourist Railway as another important asset for the State of South Australia.



The Premier Mr John Bannon is introduced to Loco Manager Ian Johnston by SteamRanger Director, Dean Harvey (middle).
John Smythe overlooks the scene from the cab of 520.
Mr Bannon travelled on the train to Victor Harbor on 18/10/86 (RC)



The inaugural train on the VHTR pounds past the surf at Chiton Rocks on 18/10/86. Next stop Victor Harbor (GD)



Steam back at Victor Harbor, Examples of SAR's finest are pictured at Victor Harbor on 18/10/86 (GD)



The bridge at Black Swamp plays host to a few hundred tonnes of steaming locomotive as 621 and 520 roll on to Victor Harbor on 18/10/86 (GD)



520 and 621 team up at Mt Barker ready for the run to Victor Harbor on 18/10/86 (GD)



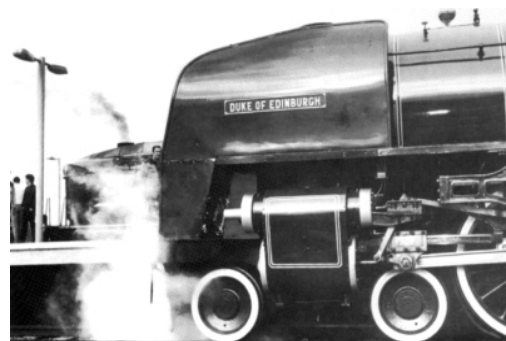
The VIP "Southern Encounter" train at Keswick on 18/10/86 (RC)



621 approaches Goolwa with the first "Cockle Train" on 18/10/86 (RC)



621 and 520 arrive at Victor Harbor on 18/10/86, the first day of operation of the VHTR (RC)



621 and 520 line up at Keswick before the first "Southern Encounter" trains on 18/10/86 (RC)

Photos above by Roger Currie (RC) and Geoff Doecke (GD)

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