RRP $4.95
Incl. GST

—Contents—

In 1961, Ballina was a "Town Without Trains", as detailed in Ian Manning's article in this issue. But it wasn't always so. The Ballina line was built late (1930) and shut down and closed early (1948/1953). Not all towns were as unlucky as Ballina - it was one of the few lines not built under the Public Works legislation and thus could be closed on a whim. Many lines built by the PWD are still officially "open", although cows now graze on them. The cows started early on the Ballina line—see them outside the waiting room in the picture on the map on our rear cover.
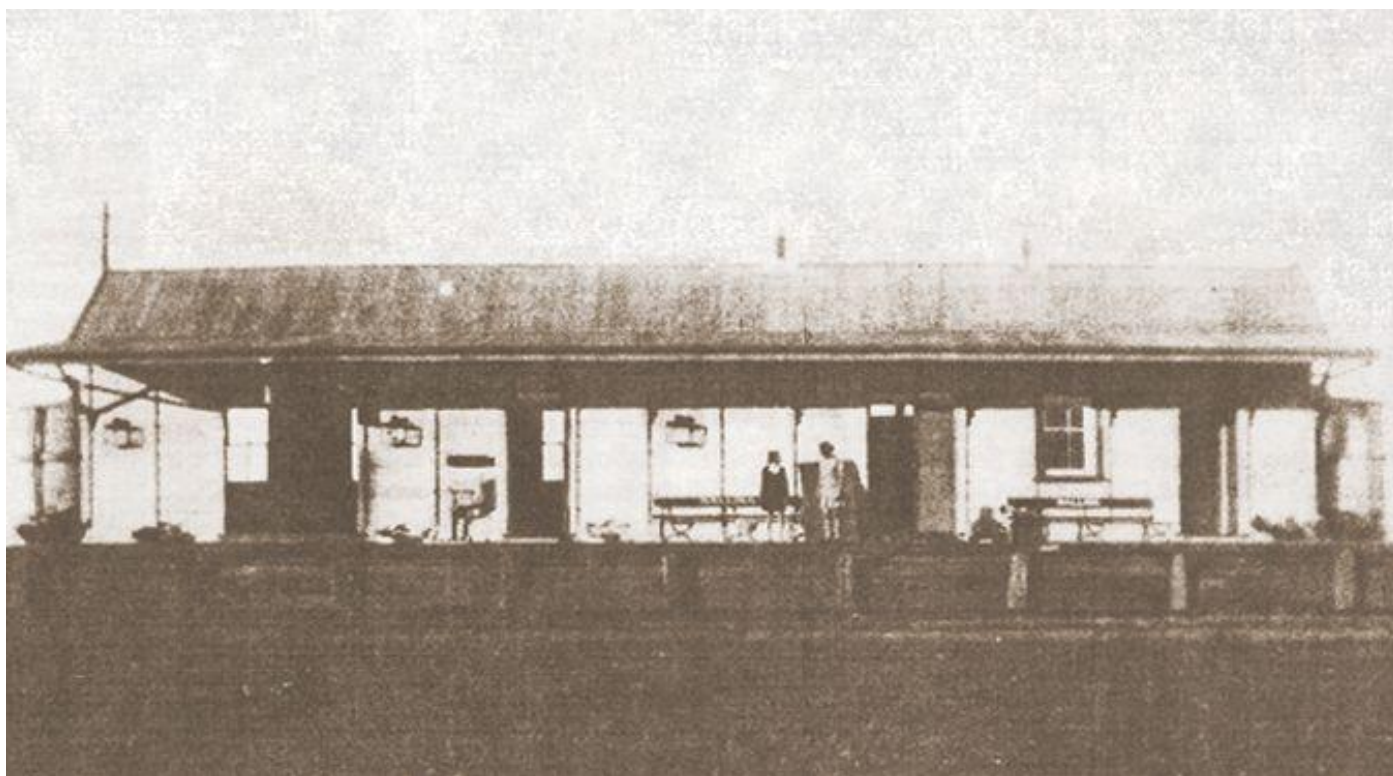
Broken Hill

James T Wells

AN INTERESTING DEVELOPMENT IN **NSW** TrainLink's coach network is a new service from Broken Hill to Adelaide. The timetables are at right. "C" means Central Standard Time; "a" means stops if required.

The Adelaide Royal Hospital is at the Western end of North Terrace; the Central Bus station is just to the east of Victoria Square (about 750m from the railway station). Passengers wanting to use the latter might find it more convenient to use the Hospital stop. On Tuesdays the northbound service only starts at the Bus station if required – strange.

Of note is that no intermediate towns are serviced; nor is there any reference to a refreshment stop. The journey is long – nearly seven hours. South Australia's Stateliner does not service this route.

[Editor's note: the 585 service was not on the live map nor on TripView on 16th September 2020—possibly because of COVID? Routes internal to NSW were present.]

585 Broken Hill to Adelaide

Valid from: 24 June 2019		Creation date: 07 Aug 2020 NOTE: Information is correct on date of download.
Monday to Friday		
Day Restrictions	**MF**	
Service Information	**C**	
Broken Hill Town	07:00	
Adelaide Royal Hospital	**a**13:30	
Adelaide Central Bus Station	13:45	

586 Adelaide to Broken Hill

Valid from: 24 June 2019		Creation date: 07 Aug 2020 NOTE: Information is correct on date of download.
Monday to Friday	♿	
Day Restrictions	**Tu**	
Service Information	**C**	
Adelaide Central Bus Station	**a**12:00	
Adelaide Royal Hospital	12:15	
Broken Hill Town	18:45	
Sunday	♿	
Adelaide Central Bus Station	**C**12:00	
Adelaide Royal Hospital	**C**12:15	
Broken Hill Town	**C**18:45	
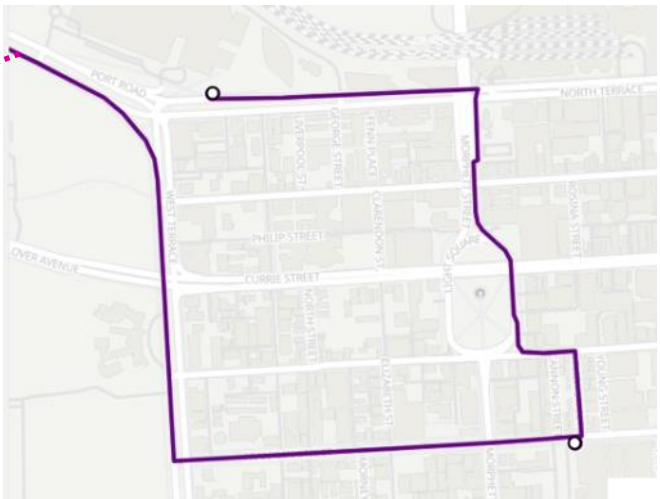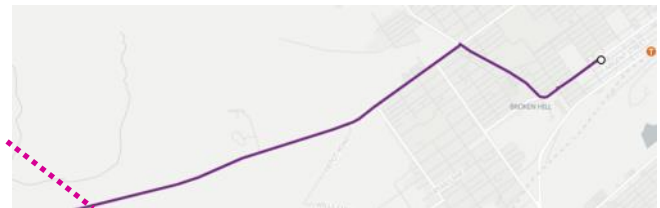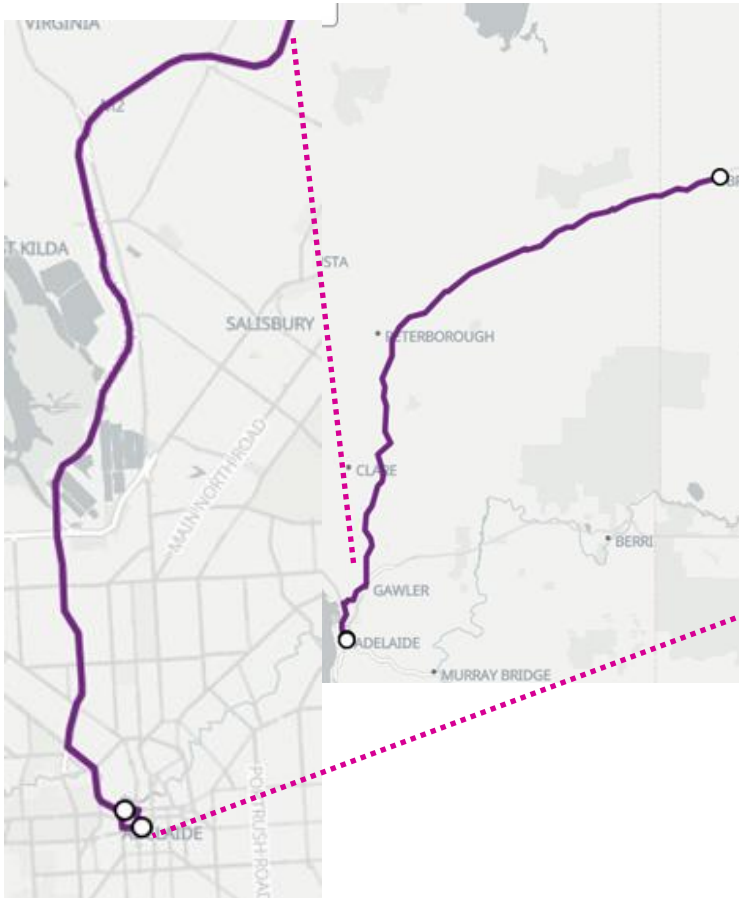
Broken Hill Rail: (This section is based on ARTC's 24th May 20 Master Train Plan.)

So you are happily sitting in the coach barrelling along the Barrier Highway. What chance is there of seeing a train on the closely parallel railway on the northern section of the journey? The Westbound Indian Pacific passenger train leaves Broken Hill at 08:20 on Thursdays. The Eastbound arrives at 17:25 on Tuesdays. The prime purpose of the original railway from South Australia was the conveyance of ore to the Port Pirie smelters. This traffic is carried today from two mine sidings to the west of the town. Departures from Perilya are:

- Tue 05:55, Thu 08:50, Sun 10:10

and from Bemax:

- Tue 17:30, Thu 11:25, Fri 19:20

These trains are operated by Pacific National with lengths up to 965 metres. Westbound intermodals, running up to 1.8km in length, are:

- Wed 05:15, SCT Perth, Wed 15:30 PacN Perth
- Thu 16:27 PacN Adel
- Fri 00:21 PacN Perth
- Fri 22:15 PacN Perth
- Sat 05:35 SCT Perth
- Sat 16:04 PacN Perth
- Sun 01:30 SCT Perth
- Sun 09:40 PacN Perth
- Sun 14:30 PacN Adel

The Perth trains originate in Sydney (Pac National), Parkes (SCT) and Brisbane for the two Adelaide trains. The remaining trains are the steel ones, originating from Morandoo (Newcastle) bound for Whyalla and operated by Pacific National (length 1.5km).

- Tue 11:45
- Wed 13:00
- Thu 17:00
- Fri 13:45
- Sat 16:30
- Sun 17:22

So in total there are 23 trains a week, or just over three a day on average.
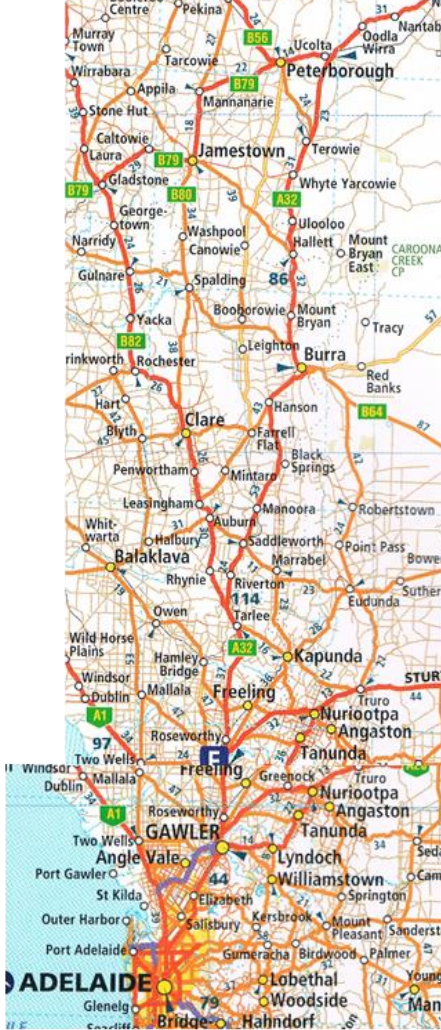
Timetable making

*Reprinted from [NAOTC's](#) "**The First Edition**", Volume XXXVIII, No. 5-6, September-December 2015*

IN THE OFFICE OF PASSENGER Trainmaster Howard Bellis at Jamaica there is a file of notations on train performance, passenger loads and ideas for better service. It is a growing file, getting bigger every day.

Shortly, the file will be summarized and the older material will be stowed away. But a new file will start to grow in its place. Soon that one, too, will be whittled down to a summary, and the process will be started all over again. It goes on like that all the time.

The files and summaries are the beginning of work on a new timetable that will be distributed to the public and the thousands more of the heavy employee timetable books will be handed out to the people whose job it is to keep trains running.

Spring is six to seven months away, but the work of constructing the new

timetable is actively under way now. Each bit of information in the Bellis file will play a part in the final determination of the times trains will arrive and depart at terminals, the stops they will make and the number of them there will be on each line of the railroad.

The file includes such information as the performance of individual trains, as reported by Assistant Trainmasters who ride them and check their movements; the number of passengers carried, by actual count, the requests and ideas of passengers who write into the railroad. There is also additional material funneling from Traffic Manager Henry Weiss' office, and still other proposals come from other officials and employees of the railroad.

MANY FACTORS INVOLVED

A month or so from now, Mr. Bellis will sit down with a couple of aides and start sketching out on huge sheets the proposed new working timetable.

Each branch operation will be worked out carefully, with an eye to the amount of equipment necessary to handle the passenger load and the availability of track space to accommodate the trains.

Thus, there will be sheets covering the Main Line and the Montauk, Long Beach, Hempstead, Oyster Bay, Port Jefferson and Port Washington branches.

Then comes the toughest job of all, and the one which inevitably calls for the shifting of schedules on the many branches - the integration of branch movements with those of trains at Jamaica, at Brooklyn and at Pennsylvania Station.

On paper, a timetable proposed for the Hempstead Branch may look perfect. Not a soul in Hempstead would ever have a complaint about the number of trains, the frequency of them or the number of seats available.

But the whole thing falls apart when
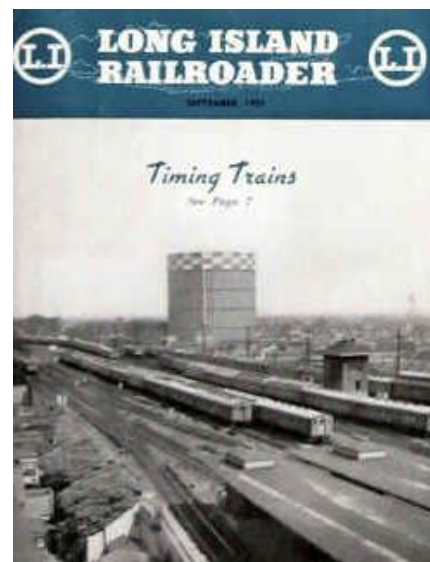
the Hempstead Branch reaches Floral Park and the Hempstead trains must be fitted in with those on the Main Line and Port Jefferson, Montauk and Oyster Bay branches. For the westbound Hempstead trains must weave their way across the four Main Line tracks and if the schedules call for a train from Hempstead, one bound for Oyster Bay and a westbound from Port Jefferson to be at Park Tower at the same time, something has to be stopped. Either the Hempstead branch train can be moved a couple of minutes ahead or a couple of minutes back, or both the others can be shifted. OK- you've licked that one by shifting the Hempstead train to a time two minutes earlier.

COMPLICATIONS DEVELOP

But now look at what has happened on the Hempstead end of the branch, where you have only a single track between Garden City and Hempstead terminal! That westbound Hempstead train, which you now have leaving two minutes earlier, is on single track, so an eastbound has to hold up at Garden City. The eastbound loses about five minutes from your perfect timetable, so you change its schedule to conform, moving it up five minutes on its whole run from Brooklyn. Simple isn't it?

But is it? Now you have the eastbound
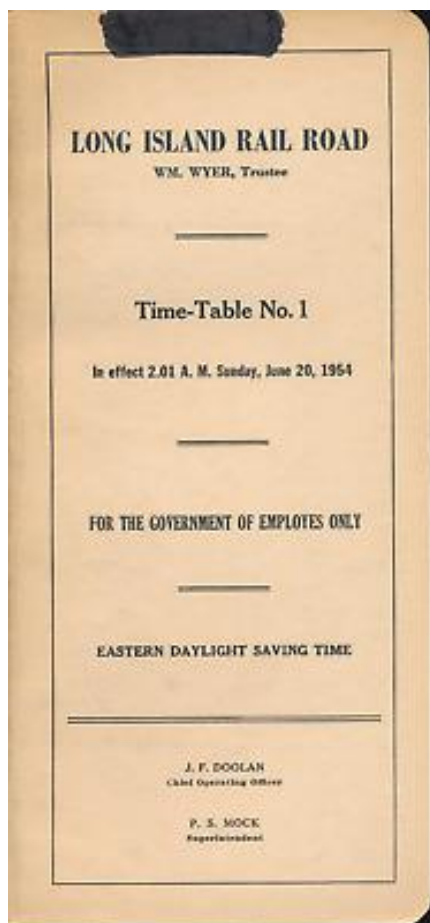
Hempstead train pulling out of Jamaica five minutes earlier than you had originally planned. What about the connection coming in from Pennsylvania Station? You had it scheduled to arrive at Jamaica three minutes before the Hempstead train was to depart. But now you have the Hempstead leaving five minutes earlier, or two minutes before the connection from New York gets in. So you have no connection.

Well, that is not too hard -just move the connection up about four minutes so there will be two minutes of transfer at Jamaica. The connecting train, by the way, is actually one bound for Babylon, and it will get passengers who have come from Brooklyn on the Hempstead train.

Now your Babylon train is four minutes earlier getting out of Jamaica. That's the end of the problem. Now let's try another one.

Hey, wait — what's this? Here's a train for West Hempstead and one for Long Beach on the original timetable scheduled to leave Jamaica three minutes ahead of the Babylon train, which you've moved up four minutes, is due to run on the same tracks with them, and just a minute ahead of them.

You have Automatic Speed Control on the line, however, and you can't run trains that close together. Now what? You need three minutes between trains and you have two eastbound to use for three trains. So you can't do anything else but move the Long Beach and West Hempstead back two minutes to avoid conflict with the Babylon.

MORE COMPLICTIONS

Hold on a minute. Let's double check that. You moved the eastbound Hempstead train five minutes and the Babylon four minutes. But you have moved the Long Beach and West Hempstead two minutes, although they were originally scheduled to leave Jamaica three minutes ahead of the Hempstead and Babylon. Now you have the Hempstead, Long Beach and West Hempstead trains all in Jamaica at once, and the Baby is right behind, trying to get in one minute later.

Since you have only three tracks available for the double connection at Jamaica, you'll just have to sort them out all over again.

But remember, whatever you do, this whole thing started because of a crossover movement at Floral Park, and you can't shift any of those trains much one way or another without inconveniencing several thousand passengers.

At this point, the average person might be justified in throwing his hands in the air and declaring: "It can't be done. The heck with it; just let them run anyway they can."

Now stop to realize, too, that in all this you been dealing with only eight trains, and you haven't even considered them for their entire runs, out of more than 600 scheduled passenger trains that must be squeezed into a 24 hour pattern. You also have to leave room somewhere for at least 128 extra trains, the deadheads that run in and out of Pennsylvania station, not to mention a score of race trains

and specials to Roosevelt Raceway at night.

A monumental task? You're not kidding.

IT'S A NIGHTMARE

Timetable construction on any railroad is one of the most complicated operations anyone can dream up. It's latterly a nightmare on any heavily traveled road. It's not at all uncommon for a timetable man to wake up in the middle of the night from a horrible dream in which he finds nine or ten trains trying to get past a junction point at the same time.

On the Long Island, which has the heaviest commuter traffic in the world, with nearly all its branches feeding into a single junction point, Jamaica, it's amazing that anyone could ever work out a timetable at all …

Of course, a timetable isn't built just by taking any junction point like Floral Park and working around it. The real basis of a Long Island timetable is a combination of track capacities at Flatbush Ave. in Brooklyn and Pennsylvania Station.

First, a so-called "perfect pattern" is worked out for both terminals a movement program or trains that permits an ideal amount of time at platforms and determines the time necessary between trains to assure a smooth flow of trains.

In case of Pennsylvania Station, complications develop because the tunnels under the East River are actually PRR property, as is the station itself, and Long Island trains must

share tunnel trackage with PRR and New Haven trains.

At Flatbush Ave., the program must permit the movement of empty trains out of the platform tracks and into the Vanderbilt Ave. Yard as fast as possible in the morning and from the yard into the station at night, with no interference with arriving and departing trains.

FOUNDATION IS LAID

The "perfect pattern" for Pennsylvania Station is submitted to PRR officials who go over it with a fine tooth comb and see how it works into their own and the New Haven's operation. With any corrections or changes they feel are absolutely essential, it and its companion pattern for Brooklyn become the foundation on which the rest of the timetable is built.

Just to make life a little tougher for the timetable men, though, is the little matter of being certain that the final pattern isn't set up so that a whole string of trains serving any one branch comes in and goes out at once. For instance, the outgoing traffic during the evening rush hour must be divided up so that trains bound for Babylon, West Hempstead, Long Beach, Rockaway Park, Port Washington and Hempstead are interspersed. Then, in addition, there is the necessity for seeing that certain of those trains all make connections at Jamaica with diesel drawn trains for the Main Line and the Port Jefferson, Mon, Montauk and Oyster Bay branches and they don't get over crowed in the process.

The "perfect pattern" is only a so-called "perfect" one because, although it looks good on paper, it never works that way when the Jamaica connections are considered.

If, for example, you have four trains from different outlying points converging on Jamaica in the morning, all at the same time, you'll have three or four going on to Brooklyn and New York, perhaps with two arriving in Pennsylvania Station within a couple of minutes of each other. Then there will be a gap of several minutes until the next one or two come in from Jamaica after making connections.

This situation was a major headache until April of this year (1952). There were gaps of as much as eight minutes during the morning rush hour at Pennsylvania Station, with other congested periods when four to five trains would be coming in within three to four minutes.

GAPS TRIMMED DOWN

The timetables were given a thorough overhauling, and at the same time Automatic Speed Control went into service on the Montauk Branch to Babylon. The gaps were trimmed down and the congestion was eliminated as much as possible, with trains running much more evenly spaced. Now there is a steady procession of trains in and out, morning and evening.

To get that spacing, however, some trains had be moved four or five minutes one way or the other, and that changed their connections at Jamaica. The net result was that some trains had their running time cut, others had it lengthened. Some were given longer waits at Jamaica for connection and others were made through trains, not stopping at Jamaica at all.

A timetable man's job is really never done. Even after the drafts are all worked out, and the printer has returned the proofs, and they have been checked against the original figures, and the whole thing seems as foolproof as it can be, there are

changes to be made. Then the final corrected proofs go to the printer and the finished timetables are run off.

But the work goes on. The files in Bellis' office continue to grow and be whittled down to summations and to grow again, only to be summarized again. Only now the information serves a double purpose - first to lead to additional changes as the timetable, now in force, develops minor "bugs" here and there, and later to pave the way for the next change, per to lead to additional changes as the timetable, perhaps a year hence.

A timetable, unfortunately, cannot be given a dress rehearsal, like a play or radio or television show. You can't try it out to see what minor changes will have on passengers' travel habits. So you put it into effect and watch carefully to see just what develops.

PASSENGERS 'SHOP AROUND'

There are bound to be some trains, which you had figured pretty carefully as to the number of seats, cropping up with a hundred or so standees. But you can't be certain for the first few days that the condition will continue, either, for some passengers probably are "shopping around," among a couple of trains to see which would be better. It's not for a week or two that you begin to really see where the problems have appeared.

Then you wrestle with the timetable all over again in an effort to provide some means of getting seats for all the standees. Sometimes it is fairly easy, sometime it's virtually impossible.

The trouble lies primarily in the fact that the Long Island is essentially a commuter road. That means that the bulk of the traffic wants to get into New York and Brooklyn within the hour from 8 to 9 a.m., and the biggest part of it descends upon both terminals between 5 and 6 p.m. Obviously, not everyone can get into town at the same time, and just as obviously, not all can get home at the same time.

Occasionally a group of commuters will ask for additional service after the timetable has been put into effect. From their standpoint, it appears there is no problem involved, for at the most outlying stations, there is plenty of time between trains to insert another.

Unfortunately, practically all such requests come for extra trains in the middle of the commuting hours, morning and night, and those are just the times when there is no more room at Jamaica or New York or Brooklyn. Even the mere addition of a stop or two on certain trains will make them lose enough time to mess up connections at Jamaica or cause conflict at junction points.

WEATHER IS ALSO CONSIDERED

Weather is another thing the timetable man must keep in the back of his mind when he assigns station stops, he not only must allow sufficient time for a normal load of passengers to get aboard or leave the train, he must allow enough time to account for the considerably heavier traffic the railroad gets when driving conditions are bad and those who usually use their cars or buses flock to the nearest rail station.

Sometimes, although it takes a bit of juggling, something can be done comparatively easily to relieve overcrowding that develops right after the timetable goes into service.

For instance, when the railroad started operating the present timetable in April this year [1952], a certain morning train to Brooklyn became very seriously over-crowded from Jamaica in. Investigation showed the train actually was getting Brooklyn

bound passengers from several trains with which it had no advertised connection. Commuters being resourceful people, a lot had discovered that the train was there every day, although the public timetables didn't show it as their connection. They ran out of their way at Jamaica, down stairs, across the concourse and up onto another platform to make it.

Nothing much could be done to prevent that, so three trains were jiggled by a couple of minutes each and an extra train, running from Jamaica to Brooklyn only, was put on. All the trouble with overcrowding disappeared at once, but there are now four trains running to Brooklyn with the time previously allotted for three, and they are closer together than ideal conditions would call for.

A great deal of assistance in making any necessary changes in timetables during the year as traffic changes comes from members of train crews, who are in the field every day and can note any shifts in passenger loads that may take place. The men often volunteer such information and make suggestions which are incorporated into the next general timetable if they cannot be carried out at once.

Timetables are expensive things, too. Every time a ticket clerk hands out one of the eight different forms of

timetable the railroad provides, he is giving away something worth three to five cents. Every time one of the employee timetables is handed out to an operating man, he is receiving a book that cost $2.68 to prepare and print.

In 1951, the Long Island distributed 1,050,000 copies of the various folded timetables covering all branches of the road. It presented 6,500 employee timetables to officers and employees, as well as to representatives of the New Haven and PRR. And riders pick up a total of 10,210,000 of the little individual station timetables that each carry advertising messages. There are 98 different kinds of the little "forms" provided by the advertising company that prints them, at no cost to the railroad.

——————

*I doubt that when a passenger or collector picks up a timetable they realize what effort and cost was expended to prepare and print the form. The article above sheds a little light on the subject. The article was submitted by NAOTC member Richard Schulman and it appeared in the September 1952 issue on the Long Island Railroader—*__John Wilkins, Editor, First Edition__

Comment on this article – Letter to the Editor, Facebook

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Towns without trains

Ian Manning

AUSTRALIA BEGAN AS A SERIES of export-oriented colonies each of which built railways to carry produce to its ports. With time, most of these separate lines were integrated into state systems which, with the obvious exception of Tasmania, had by 1917 been connected across state borders. From the 1950s onward, with the rise of road and air transport, these systems were gradually dismantled and nowadays it is hard to imagine how widespread they once were. Though reductions in coverage began in the 1950s, the 1961 Census provides a readily-accessible source from which to assess gaps in passenger service coverage during the last decade or so of universal rail services.

Rather than list the places which could be reached by train, it is instructive to list those which could **not**. The smaller the place, the more likely it would be off-line, so the following list of places not served by rail is confined to towns with 2000 population or more. The 1961 Census lists the population of all localities recognised as such by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), with the proviso that Aboriginal populations were not counted properly. Suburbs are counted as part of their city, which leads to the usual conundrum regarding towns on the fringes of cities: when is a locality sufficiently distinct from the metropolitan area to be regarded as a town in its own right? This list of towns without passenger rail service follows ABS judgements.

In NSW:

- Ballina (pop. 4129—photo below) – this town once had a railway, but it closed in 1949. Seaside resorts never generated much freight traffic

and were early candidates for bus services.
- Bega (pop. 3858) – in the heady days of railway construction it was considered that the far South Coast of NSW was adequately served by coastal steamships.
- Port Macquarie (pop. 5952) – the North Coast railway was routed inland. By the time it was built it was considered that buses and trucks could provide a sufficient service to nearby resorts.
- Raymond Terrace (pop. 3962) – in many ways an outer suburb of Newcastle.
- Terrigal/Avoca (pop. 2384) and
- The Entrance (pop. 6006) were new beach resorts not far from the Short North railway, considered adequately served by buses.

In Victoria only two significant towns lacked railway stations. These were:
- Rosebud (pop. 3726) and
- Sorrento (pop. 2152),
both of which were resort towns on the Mornington Peninsula which generated little freight traffic but were well served by private buses. However, six significant towns had railway stations from which passenger services had been withdrawn with privately-operated bus services substituted. These were
- Beechworth (pop. 3508)
- Mornington (pop. 4816) (passenger service revived 1966-1981)
- Myrtleford (pop. 2123)
- Orbost (pop. 2613)
- Queenscliff (pop. 2659) and
- Yallourn (pop. 5010).

In Queensland several towns lacked rail service.
- Thursday Island (pop. 2218) was obviously never a candidate for a rail connection.
- St George (pop. 2209) considered itself poorly done by. It was the largest town in inland Australia without a rail connection.
- The other towns without rail connections were all coastal resorts which in due course would become

much more urbanised. On the Sunshine Coast:
- Caloundra (pop. 3495)
- Maroochydore (pop. 3068) and
- Tewantin (pop. 2015).
On the Gold Coast:
- Burleigh Heads (pop. 2092) and
- Surfers Paradise (pop. 4319).

In addition, Coolangatta (pop. 2550) and Tweed Heads (NSW, pop. 3291) were about to lose their rail services in 1961 and Southport (pop. 12,746) lost its service in 1964, there being limited freight traffic potential and it being thought that private bus services would be adequate and cheap. The gradual re-introduction of rail services to the Gold Coast began in 1996.

Finally, Beaudesert (pop. 2930) had a freight railway without passenger service.

In SA two large towns lacked rail services.
- Whyalla (pop. 13,711) was the largest town in Australia which, in 1960, was not connected to the national integrated network, though it had a privately-owned freight line to convey iron ore from its hinterland to its port. It was connected to the national network in 1972 and passenger services were provided 1972-5 and 1986-90.
- Port Lincoln (pop. 7508) was the fourth-largest Australian town not to be connected to the national integrated network. It was, however, the headquarters of a Division of the SAR with around 570 km of track and four different outer terminal stations. There were six passenger services a week out of Port Lincoln. The isolation of the Port Lincoln Division from the national integrated system was due to short-sighted defence planning. Had the transcontinental railway been built ten years earlier, or ten years later, it would have followed the Eyre Highway and made use of around 250 km of Port Lincoln right-of-way, but it was deliberately built to the north to be out of the range of the guns of 1910-model battleships.

In addition, Millicent (pop. 3401) had a freight railway without passenger service.

In WA:

- Mandurah (pop. 2172), then a coastal resort, lacked a railway till 2007.

There were three significant towns with freight rail services where all passenger services were provided by bus, namely

- Busselton (pop. 3495)
- Collie (pop.7547) – admittedly with a daily 'goods train with brake coach attached' and
- Manjimup (pop. 2978).

In Tasmania:
- George Town (pop. 2820) had no railway in 1960, though a line was opened to connect it to the Tasmanian freight system in 1974.
- Queenstown (pop. 4601) lost its connection to the Tasmanian system in 1960 when the line between Regatta Point and Zeehan closed. A passenger service was provided to the port of Regatta Point until 1963.

In the Northern Territory :
- Darwin (pop. 12926) was the second -largest city in Australia (after Whyalla) not to be connected to the national system. A connection had long been planned and Darwin was indeed one of the colonial ports from which a line had been built inland. It was connected to the national system in 2004.

Table 1 provides a summary. In 1960 92 per cent of Australian cities and towns with population of 2,000 and more had railway stations connected to the national or Tasmanian networks for freight service, and 88 per cent had passenger connections. Half of the towns without passenger connections were seaside resorts and a third of the towns without passenger connections had freight rail connections.

Since 1961 there have been massive withdrawals of country rail services. Large towns have also been established in places that never had rail connections – chiefly seaside resorts but also a few mining ports in remote WA. The national population increased by a factor of 2.35, so it would perhaps be fair to raise the bar from 2,000 to 5,000. In Table 2 the bar is raised even further – the table relates to cities and towns with at least 10,000 people. More or less one-third of these cities and towns are disconnected from the national rail system. The level of disconnection is similar for freight and passengers, though some towns which have passenger service have no freight service, and vice versa. It should also be noted that the services offered by *Journey Beyond* are not traditional

passenger services, being limited to the luxury cruise market. Again, some services (notably to Toowoomba) are no more than nominal. Table 2 includes (in brackets) revised estimates if these services are discounted. It should, however, be remembered that many of the remaining services are faster, more frequent and more comfortable than those offered in 1960.

Several factors affect the level of connectivity, including the following:
- Lack of rail connections, generally to seaside resorts.
- Slow rail alignments, so that bus services are much faster, an issue particularly in Tasmania and for services east out of Adelaide and west out of Brisbane, also (at least potentially) for all services out of Sydney.
- Political decisions, e.g. the Commonwealth decision to isolate Mt Gambier and more generally the lack of SA government interest in rail services outside suburban Adelaide.

Comment on this article – Letter to the Editor, Facebook

state	Not connected (passenger)	Not connected (freight)	Total towns	% unserved (pass)	% unserved (freight)
NSW	6	6	108	6%	6%
Vic	8	2	59	14%	3%
Qld	8	7	53	15%	13%
SA	3	2	15	20%	13%
WA	4	1	14	29%	7%
Tas	2	2	12	17%	17%
Territories	1	1	3		
Australia	32	21	264	12	8
Source: ABS Census 1961.					

Table 1 Towns and cities with population of 2000 or more, by whether connected to the Australian or Tasmanian rail passenger networks, 1961

state	Not connected (passenger)	Not connected (freight)	Total towns	% unserved (pass)	% unserved (freight)
NSW	9	11	34	26%	32%
Vic	2 (3)	5	18	11 (17)	28%
Qld	4 (5)	6	18	22 (28)	33%
SA	6 (8)	4	8	75 (100)	50%
WA	7	4	10	70	40%
Tas	5	1	5	100	20%
Territories	0 (2)	0	3		
Australia	34	31	96	35	32

Table 2 Towns and cities with population of 10,000 or more, by whether connected to other cities by passenger rail, Jan 2020 (brackets, excluding Journey Beyond).

Time warps and Thai curry:

Taking the 11-hour train trip from Melbourne to Sydney by **Brigid Delaney ,** *with commentary by* **Geoff Lambert**

I GET INVITED TO GIVE A TALK at the Opera House, which I say yes to, before wondering how the hell I'm going to get from Melbourne to Sydney during the pandemic.

In usual times the journey is a cakewalk. Just fly! There were once so many flights, with Melbourne-Sydney the second busiest airline route in the world.

How different things look now. Virgin, administration. Tiger, disappeared. Qantas, one flight a day.

The first hurdle to cross: could I even leave Victoria?

A quick check of the laws – and yes, I could leave. The borders between the states had never been closed.

But looking at flights a few weeks before the event, I had a shock. The cheapest one-way direct flight leaving on the Friday was $800. The other flights, costing in their thousands and taking 23 hours and 50 minutes to get from Melbourne to Sydney, actually went via Perth.

Could I even get into Perth with the borders closed or would I have to go into quarantine?

As an unlicensed person, I couldn't drive to Sydney, and a quick search on the Greyhound website revealed they had suspended their Melbourne-Sydney bus services.

Pre-Covid, moving between the two capitals had been so easy that a sort of magical thinking formed that really Melbourne and Sydney were only an hour apart.

The virus – in the way that it operates on so many levels by unspooling time, taking us back to another age – meant that the trip would have to be taken an old-fashioned way. By rail.

Shudder. The train. Maybe unfairly, the Melbourne to Sydney train has a grim reputation. Slow, overly long (at 11 hours and 17 minutes, making it

'I sit in a room called "Travellers Aid", in a socially distanced configuration. It's like a grim, 1980s version of an airport lounge.' Photograph: Brigid Delaney

longer than the Melbourne-Shanghai flight), uncomfortable, dull – it's never made the list of the world's great rail journeys.

"*Railways and ships are the two forms of travel where the journey is commensurately as exciting as the destination*" wrote the late, great travel writer AA Gill, who obviously hadn't travelled on the line.

Even train nerds are decidedly a bit cold on it. One colleague on secondment from England had been excited to take the journey between the capitals by rail. He couldn't understand why people kept urging him to fly instead, until he took the journey and realised it was slow and mostly boring.

Preliminaries

Southern Cross is bleak at 6am. The pandemic has emptied it of commuters, and at this hour it's not only eerie but very cold, and there's nothing open. The train leaves at 7am but I want to give myself time to check in – just like I would at an airport.

But when I try to find the Sydney train on the departures board, it's not there! Have I got the day wrong? No. The time? My ticket says 7am.

I got to a Vline counter and they laugh. They literally laugh in my face – not in an unkind way, but at my expectation the Sydney train would conform to a timetable.

I go to another ticket booth. They tell me the train is now scheduled to leave at 8:30am – but that may change. I start to complain and the man cuts me off. I am lucky there is a train! There was going to be a bus! And they just decided at the last minute that there'd be a train – so just be grateful, OK?!

The Vic countryside looking in good health as we pass by on the train

OK. I sit in a room called "Travellers Aid", in a socially distanced configuration. It's like a grim, 1980s version of an airport lounge. There are heaters and showers and a television showing the ABC breakfast show – but nowhere to charge your phone and no wifi.

Then finally, a departure announcement. People on the platform, socially distanced, wearing masks, are carrying bags and bags of food. It's alarming. Have people starved on this train before?

The journey

9am to midday

I am sitting in first class – at a cost of $160 one way. Like everyone in the train, we are socially distanced, with eight seats for every one person. That means it actually feels like I am on an empty train, except for a man who I can just glimpse ahead of me, diagonally to the right.

This also means that unlike movies such as *Before Sunrise* where people have romantic or chance encounters on the train, I will not be able to get near enough to anyone for this to happen.

Instead we have the conductor's voice for company. She is very, very, very sorry for the late arrival of the train into Melbourne, sounding personally distraught, to the point of devastation.

She says over the loudspeaker: "I am a good listener and I will listen to you if you are angry or anxious about late departure. I will be coming through the carriage now to listen to you."

I wish I could "read" the carriage as to whether people are angry or anxious or want to talk – but we are all seated too far apart to tell.

All throughout the journey, the conductor keeps us updated about this lost time. We're hitting 120 km/h on the tracks, we're going to make up for lost time. Oh no, we have to stop outside Benalla to allow a V/Line train to pass – and we've lost 10 minutes. It's like Snakes and Ladders: just when we're ahead, we fall behind (ultimately, despite the delays, we arrive four minutes early into Sydney.)

Out the window, straight up the guts of Central Victoria, the countryside is green and lush. We gallop past townships that I have never heard of before – Wallan, Wandong – and some I have – Tallarook, Seymour, Benalla.

At 10:30am the fields are still shrouded in mist. More farms. Some dry stone walls. Green hills.

There's an announcement from the buffet cart. A hot lunch will be served.

The menu sounds sophisticated: roast chicken with vegetables, Thai green curry, vegetarian curry. A man comes along the carriage to take my order. This feels all very exciting and pre-Covid. It's like a restaurant!

Midday to 3pm

We cross the New South Wales border. A bit anticlimactic but still, on the train it is more of an occasion than a border crossing by plane - which is almost never acknowledged concurrently to the crossing and therefore has some subtle effect of nullifying even the existence of a border.

Lunch is ready. A highlight, surely. We socially distance as we line up to collect the meals from the buffet cart.

Back in my seat, the meal has been heated to volcanic temperatures. It is covered in layers of protective gear. Underneath the plastic and foil, the meal resembles aeroplane food – but I wonder if even the most sadistic airline caterer would be audacious enough to put chunks of pineapple on a Thai chicken curry. Eat the curry. Leave the pineapple. Err.....what??

Coffee time. The thermos lid is on too tight but no one on the train can get it off for me because of Covid.

Sleep for two hours. Wake up with sore neck.

The train creaks and rocks like it's speaking a secret language. Turning some corners seems harder than others, and when that happens you can almost hear the train complain. … *Arghhhh, eeak*. But it keeps going. In these groans, I get a sense of the miles done, and the age, and the service.

3pm to 6pm

Countryside is unchanging – just more and more and more brilliant green. Mostly it strikes me how empty Australia really is. We've boundless plains to share.

The winter sun is bright and remains so all day, giving all the green a bright, emerald sheen. The land around here has mostly been cleared. Some old

Underneath the plastic and foil, the meal resembles aeroplane food – but I wonder if even the most sadistic airline caterer would be audacious enough to put chunks of pineapple on a Thai chicken curry

gum trees have been spared. Every now and then there's a thicket of forest, a creek, a billabong – but not once on the journey do I see a person out there.

Hop on a plane between Melbourne and Sydney and what you miss seeing is really this absence – the fact that there's nothing to see, that this country is big, and mostly empty of people.

Closer to Melbourne, Meriton rules and the unikit homes march up the hills where the emerald grass has been churned into dirt. But out here –

Riverina country, I'm guessing – are remnants of old Australia: a large racetrack on the outskirts of town, lacework on the iron of the stations (and the station master's whistle and the lurching starts of the train – the eternals of rail travel), weatherboard houses along the tracks with rusted roofs.

After Harden, it appears: a big full moon low on the horizon, looking ridiculous, majestic and large above the golden sun-drenched fields.

A freight train passes beside us. Maybe time has warped for me now, but the train seems to never end, like some sort of mystical snake, as long as NSW itself.

The man ahead of me is drinking small bottles of red wine, eating a packet of Allen's lollies and listening to country music through his leaky headphones. Now and then he sings a few bars. He's getting drunk, I suppose, but in a soft, country music way.

6pm to 9pm

The dark outside is complete. I finish my snacks. My devices have run out of battery.

I get a thrill as we pass Campbelltown. We're almost here.

How can there be a city at the end of this emptiness and time and space?

But there is. "Hello Sydney."

- Brigid Delaney is a Guardian Australia columnist

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Editor's Comments

Among certain railfan circles, this article became the object of ridicule … a dopey woman journalist who couldn't find her way around Southern Cross station; didn't know how to read a timetable. The less-hot-headed among them pointed out that Brigid's experience was congruent with that of many who choose to use rail for the first time– they just can't believe how hopeless it all is.

A similar—and even more hilarious—article on the Brisbane-Sydney XPT was written by Hugh Lunn in 2017.

As it happened, Brigid's trip took place on a day when I was alerted by V/Line that its Up morning passenger service (8610) had been terminated early at Benalla, for a reason never completely clear. This meant that the West (northbound) line was blocked at Benalla and this forced Brigid's train to detour via the East line and use the disused #2 platform at Benalla. Luckily, this problem became apparent before the XPT had even left Melbourne, so there was plenty of time to do the switch to the East line.

I quickly logged on to Anytrip, which has an excellent GPS locator system and could follow what was happening. Indeed — the XPT **was** stopped at the #2 platform.
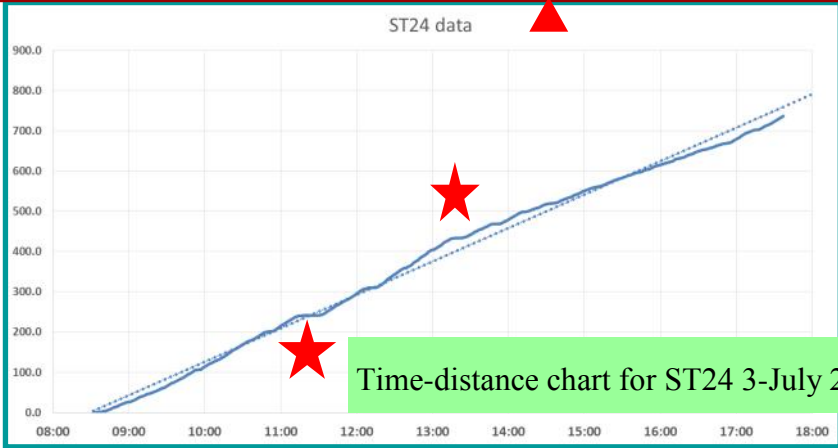
On that day, the XPT was not delayed for more than about the 10 minutes
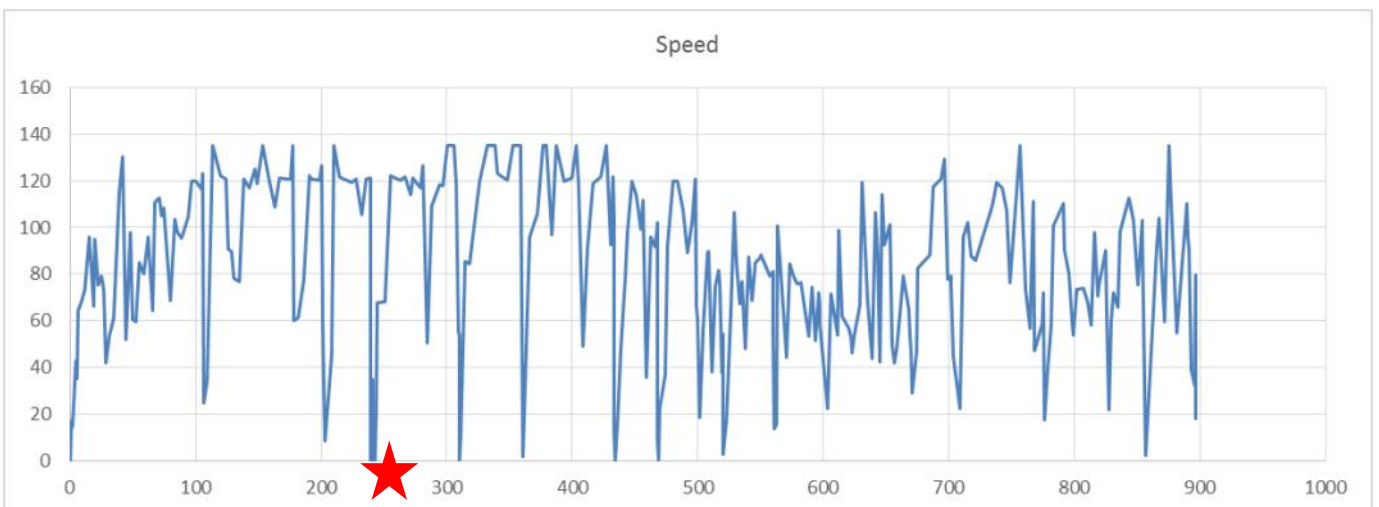
Speed chart for ST24 3-July 2020
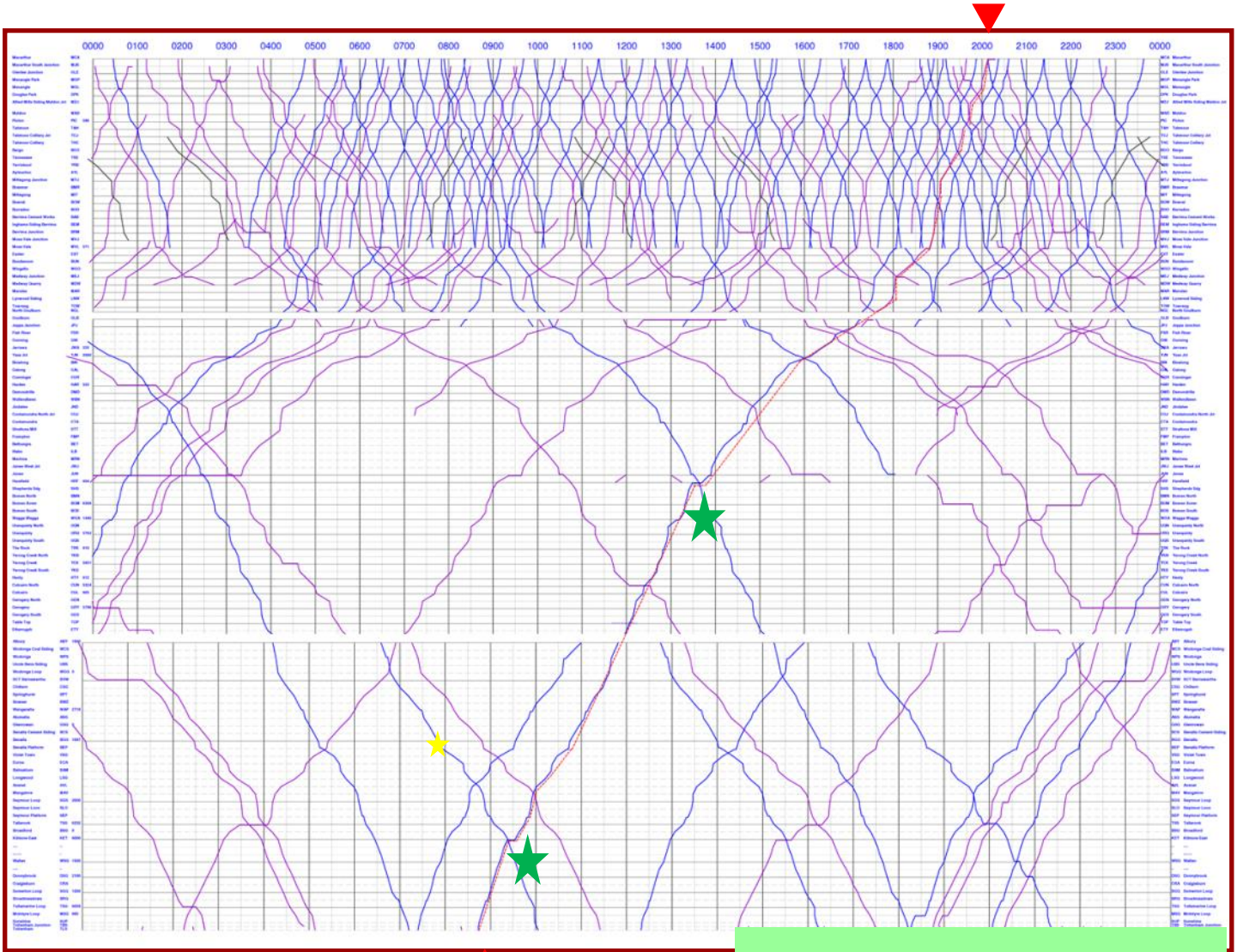
Wednesday ARTC Graphical timetable Tottenham to Macarthur ST24 (red dotted line) The vertical axis scale is not linear.

Time-distance chart for ST24 3-July 2020

Lateness chart for ST24 3-July 2020

V/LINE TRAVEL UPDATE

The 06.35 Albury - Southern Cross will terminate early at Benalla and no longer run to Southern Cross.

More information at vline.com.au

noted by Brigid and gradually seems to have picked up time, as Brigid also noted. It very probably used the East line only as far as Alumatta cross-over, at which point it would have returned to the West line. I lost track of it after that and paid more attention to 8610, which seems to have come back to life and run empty as far as Dynon, which was where it was meant to end up all along, anyway.

After Brigid's article appeared in *The Guardian*, I decided to track the train (ST24) all of the way from Melbourne to Sydney. I had the ARTC MTP for ST24 and, because Anytrip reports both position and lateness every two minutes or so (because—I believe—it has access to ARTC's 4-TEL tracking system, although only for NSW Trains such as the XPTs), I was able to make a graphical timetable of my own and calculate a lateness chart and a speed chart.

There is a kind of mantra that implies that something will always go wrong with the daytime XPT trains. In this respect, the experience of ST24 on 3rd of July shared several features with what happened to it a month earlier.

There were two places where the XPT came to an unexpected stand or travelled unexpectedly slowly. These put the XPT well behind time. These places are indicated by the red stars on the charts. They occur around Wallan and Springhurst. The Wallan delay may have been some kind of aftermath of the earlier XPT smash at this spot (See *The Times* of May 2020).

There were also two places where ST24 "dodged a bullet" by not having to pause to cross southbound trains — Kilmore East and Harefield. The latter, in particular, enabled ST24 to regain all of its lost time … and then some. Because the XPT is a booked service and possibly also because of COVID-related travel restrictions, ST24 did not need to pause at any of the subsequent stations to pick up passengers, so the train ran ahead of time from Harefield crossing loop, as far as Bargo. Something ahead of it on the double line near Bargo was slowing it here—possibly an Up Moss Vale service.

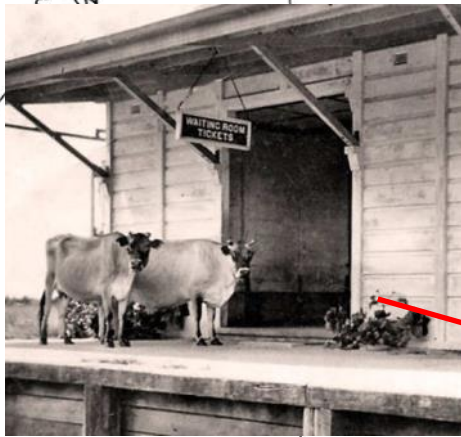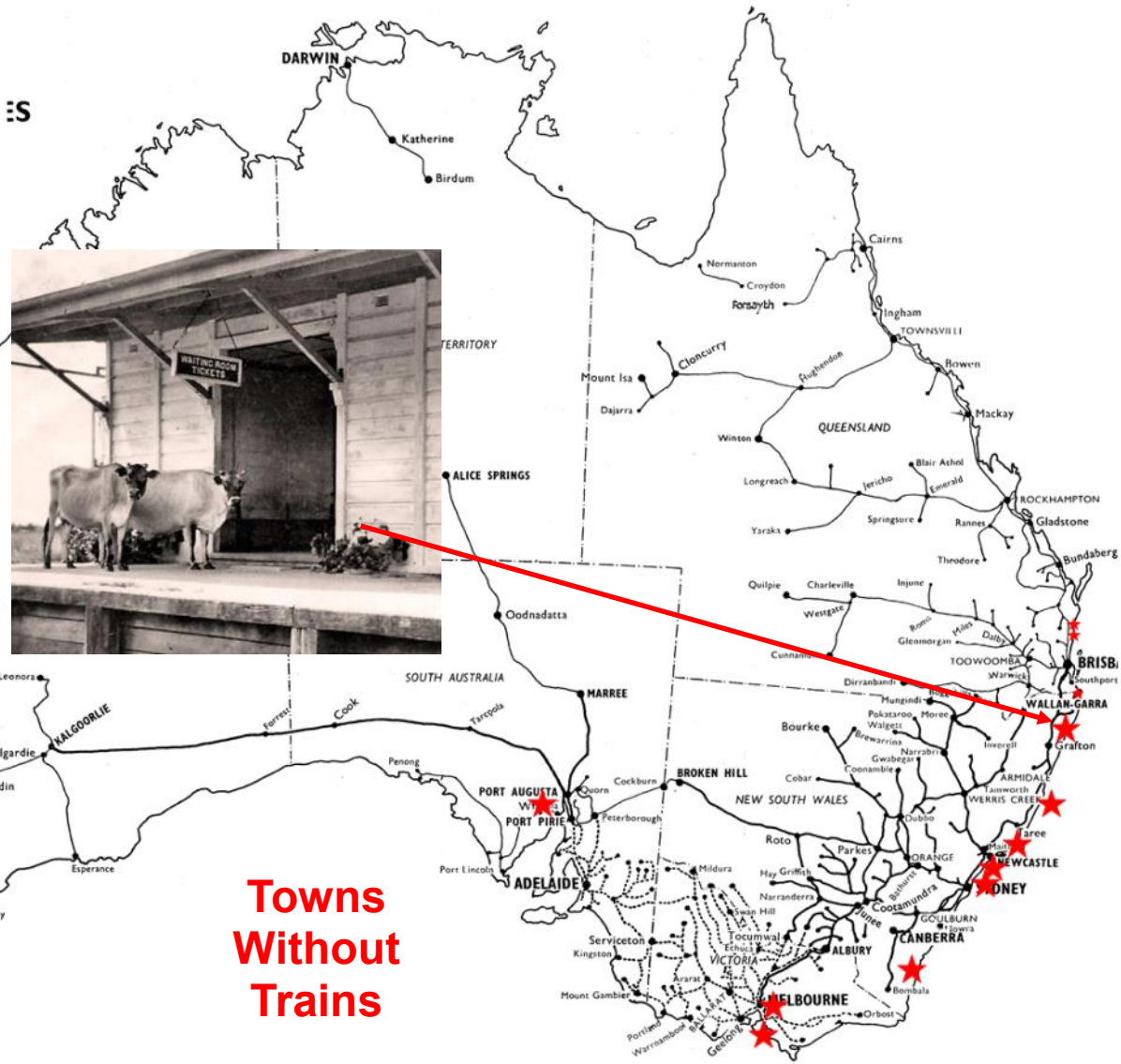The XPT was furthest behind time at Chiltern (25 min) and most ahead of time after Harefield (8 minutes).

The speed chart shows a very noticeable and trending decline in speed as the train climbed the ever-steepening grades as it mounted the Great Divide– then it picked up speed as it descended to Picton.

BTW—the only thing Brigid got wrong "timetable-wise" was the "full moon" - that came a few days later.

Comment on this article – Letter to the Editor, Facebook

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Towns Without Trains

MAP OF LONG ISLAND SHOWING THE Long Island Railroad.

The Route of the DASHING COMMUTER — THE LONG ISLAND RAIL ROAD

The Route of the DASHING COMMUTER

The Route of the DASHING COMMUTER — THE LONG ISLAND RAILROAD — Express Service to & from Manhattan!