Rare and Representative Aspects of Railway Heritage in the Australian Railway Monument

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Abstract

Werris Creek has assumed a prominent place in Australian railway folklore and practice. As the first railway town (i.e. the first place to exist in direct relationship with the nineteenth century railway) it was well known by all railway workers and travellers because of its functional importance to the North West sector. The infrastructure illustrates a nineteenth-century view of the importance of railways and it demonstrates the decline of this formerly supreme transport mode. The Australian Railway Monument — Werris Creek is a project which links the architectural and engineering antecedents of the NSW railways with the economic future of a town and district. The monument at Werris Creek poses many questions. This paper will focus on some of these big questions and provide a reasoned response. It may provide lessons for the conservation of other railway places and will address the following sub-themes: setting, focus, architecture, style, meaning and conservation.

Introduction

In contemporary discussions about heritage, transport and sustainable economic development, with the bulk of the New South Wales population concentrated in the Newcastle-Sydney-Wollongong coastal zone, it is easy to overlook the significance of inland railways on the State’s economic development and environment. However, the Great Railways that connected the NSW metropolitan areas with the remote northern, western and southern regions — where vast pastoral and mineral wealth was generated — provide many of the best illustrations of the pattern of economic development and decline in the bush. One place that illustrates this most eloquently is Werris Creek in the Liverpool Plains District; it is a place that is at once representative of NSW railways and rare.

The impact of the railway at Werris Creek was profound; it transformed a wholly undeveloped tract of pastoral land into a thriving railway centre in just a few decades at the end of the nineteenth century. Although it declined from the 1960s to become almost defunct in the 1990s, the railway has left a legacy of extensive infrastructure at Werris Creek including a coal mine, gas plant, power plant, three dams (one of which rivals Sydney Harbour in terms of its scale and beauty), a town, and a group of buildings that still dominate the surrounding landscape.

In October 2005, the Werris Creek railway story commenced a new chapter. In a tribute to all railway men and women who served and died on railways, the place became the Australian Railway Monument (ARM). As a place of commemoration, the outstanding railway heritage resources will be re-deployed in a local economic strategy that may save the dying town and preserve a railway location of unsurpassed heritage significance.

The most striking remaining evidence of the railway is to be found in the station which rises incongruously out of a denuded landscape on the edge of a pastoral basin, beside the sleepy town beyond the tracks. Its initial deceptive appearance is of an improbably grand classical pile, but this appearance belies a history of misjudged ambitions and muddled planning. What were the circumstances that gave rise to such an enigmatic place and what are its underlying meanings? Or, even more pertinently, what is its future? The answers, perhaps, will be found in the ARM.

View of Werris Creek Station, taken from the pedestrian footbridge to the north of the station. Source: Donald Ellsmore photo 2004.

Historical background

When the decision was made in the New South Wales Parliament on 26 April 1877 to build a branch railway line from Werris Creek to Gunnedah, sheep and cattle were presumably resting contentedly in paddocks on the site of the future railway and town, oblivious to the impact of the decision taken that evening (Sydney Morning Herald 1877: 3). Indeed, others were oblivious too — long standing policy was being overturned — for twenty years successive governments had held to the belief that there should be no branch lines built off the main long-distance trunk lines until the main lines were completed. However, the decision was taken on that night to build a branch line before the Great Northern Railway (GNR) had reached the Queensland border. It later transpired that Werris Creek would be the site of the first junction.

The lobbying that preceded this decision was led by Thomas Dangar, Member for Gwydir; embracing the towns of Narrabri, Wee Waa, Moree and Walgett, all of which would be served ultimately by the branch railway (Forsyth n.d. : 27, quoted in John Carr Architects & Ferry 1998: 4). That year, Dangar had been prevented by foul weather from reaching the parliament for the autumn session. His coach had become bogged in the black soil plains and he was unable to reach the rail head in time to make the connection. That experience emboldened him. It gave him the incentive and a powerful argument with which to
lobby for the railway to be pushed out into the immensely productive north-western plains region, in direct contravention of the long standing policy. He promoted the view that the new form of fast reliable transport would overcome the tyranny of distance and bring relief to the remote farmers burdened with uncertain conditions and high transport costs.

The change of policy instigated by Dangar’s outburst led to an explosion of branch lines. It followed a frustrating period of slow construction on the main trunk railways, in part due to the difficulties of crossing the Great Dividing Range, but also to political indecision. The Great Western Railway had stalled on the western side of the Blue Mountains and the Great Southern Railway had stalled at Goulburn. The Great Northern Railway, which originated at Newcastle had reached but not yet crossed the Liverpool Range, on the north western side of the Blue Mountains. In 1877 the Great Northern Railway finally conquered the Liverpool Range and was heading north through the tablelands at a good rate, although the construction was still a major undertaking. The impact of this construction on the natural environment was profound; it involved destruction on a massive scale.

The Great Northern Railway reached the Werris Creek district in the same year, when 500 navvies set up camp in the open ground a short distance south of the future town. The landscape in the vicinity had already been modified and denuded by forty years of pastoral activity. The place selected as the site of this first railway branch, which would also become the first railway town, lay between the established towns of Quirindi to the south and Tamworth to the north. (Strictly speaking, this was not the first branch but it was the first long distance branch line. Short branch lines had been built previously from Redfern to Darling Harbour in 1855 and from East Maitland to the Hunter River at Morpeth and from Blacktown to Richmond in 1864.) Neither of those places had pressed very strongly to become the railway junction so it was sited in splendid isolation in the middle of a bare paddock, owned as a free selection by pastoralist George Single (Plan of Portion of Land in the Parish of Grenfell County of Buckland, Land Titles Office of New South Wales, Small No B551-1788, quoted in John Carr Architects & Ferry, 1998: 5).

The first passenger station was a single storey structure constructed of cypress pine with an elevated timber platform, which was erected hastily on the main line south of the actual branch. In 1879, with the opening of the line to Gunnedah, and the splitting of the mail train from Newcastle at Werris Creek, a station platform was required at the branch point; this was completed in October of that year (Ware 1976: 33). On this new wedge-shaped platform an improbably large station complex would emerge to dominate the pastoral landscape.

Two separate contracts were let for the construction of the passenger station and the Railway Refreshment Rooms (RRR). The construction of the RRR proceeded ahead of the new passenger station. The building was completed, leased to a private operator and opened for business on 19 November 1884 (Tamworth Observer 1884: 2). For a short time afterwards trains were timetabled to stop at both the temporary passenger station and the new refreshment rooms on different platforms only a few hundred metres apart. Building on the new passenger station did not commence until after the RRR was completed and fully operating. It was completed at the very end of 1885 and only fully operational at the beginning of 1886. Together they formed a complex that was a monument to railway confidence, albeit misjudged, and to bureaucratic power.

The obvious error of judgment was immediately obvious to anyone who had studied the pattern of development and could thus predict the likely future of Werris Creek. One such local observer noted in 1886:

Our new station buildings ... are really a handsome and commodious structure; so much so that they call forth the admiration of the travelling public and necessarily compel it to enquire ‘why on earth did the government erect such costly buildings in this little hole?’ (Tamworth Observer 1886: 2)

It was to become a forlorn curiosity in a static landscape at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The incremental growth of the place, from its early beginnings of splendid isolation in a barren landscape, to a bustling railway centre for a short period during its heyday is captured in photographs of the time. These were taken mostly from the vantage point of the pedestrian footbridge on the northern side of the station. These views take in the broad sweep of the evocative landscape with the railway station as centre-piece. The pastoral basin is enclosed on the western side by a low range of picturesque hills through which the trains to the northern western district passed, via the Gap. On the higher eastern side the town and the main street, that was single in both name and function, frames the view.

As passenger and freight traffic at Werris Creek increased, the station and yard developed with new accommodation for

Mid 1880s view of construction of the Great Northern Railway near Bluff Rock illustrates the extent to which the construction impacted on the natural environment. Source: University of New England Archives, reference P11820.

railway staff and passengers, and new infrastructure was added to cope with these increases in traffic. The railway too was progressively modernised. For example, it opened with a gas production plant that was a fine example of steam-age technology but this was replaced by an oil-fuelled electricity generating plant in the early twentieth century. The oil-fuelled power plant survives intact as a rare example of that technology but sadly, the gas plant was stripped of its industrial equipment in one of the railway’s chaotic, periodic purges. Later, locomotive facilities that had been built initially at the station yard were relocated to a more strategic location further to the south of the passenger station. It was set up with a sector roundhouse and larger turntable in 1917.

The opening of the Binnaway line in 1923 made Werris Creek the junction of three lines, requiring new accommodation for the traffic superintendent and later, for train controllers. The single storey passenger building was made two storeys to provide accommodation for the additional staff, in two stages in 1923 and 1935. Prior to that, accommodation rooms for passengers and visitors were added to the existing refreshment rooms, also in two stages, thus the entire complex became double storeyed.

Railway workers at Werris Creek lived in the town — a one-industry place. From the very beginning, the destiny of the railway and the town were inextricably linked. The railway was not only the economic lifeblood of the town; it was its beating heart. Local folk who can recall earlier times in the town describe evening excursions across the tracks to the railway refreshment rooms to buy an ice cream — the railway was also a social centre. The Railway Institute, which was a vital institution for many rural railway families, was a venue for learning, recreation and social gatherings — not only for railway employees and their families, but also for the town.

However, at Werris Creek the Railway Institute illustrates a singularly depressing aspect of local heritage; a failure to honour commitment. The railway commissioners agreed in 1917 to take over the partially completed Mechanics Institute and to complete the construction for a Railway Institute. The prevailing fashion for Federation details such as red brick with rough cast plaster decorations is dominant in the unrealised design for the new front that would complete the building. However, the railway reneged on the deal, choosing instead to construct a large hall at the rear. The hall, in which an annual ‘railway ball’ was held, provided a useful new social centre in the town, while the Railway Institute still stands with its ‘temporary’ front, clad with asbestos cement sheeting, now doubly reviled.

Between the 1960s and the late 1990s the importance of Werris Creek as a railway place was, by a series of often small but certain measures, greatly diminished. Rail traffic dwindled, the refreshment rooms were closed, staff numbers evaporated and the town declined to become a place of diminishing numbers of railway retirees. But the valuable heritage remained; clearly, something needed to be done.

**Conservation strategy: stage 1 research and planning**

In 1997 the heritage unit of the State Rail Authority (SRA) initiated what at the time was an orthodox heritage conservation strategy guided by Burra Charter principles and state government policies. At the outset, there was no great show of optimism by the railway hierarchy, the town folk, or the heritage officers. It was more a case of needing to start somewhere, and of faith needing to be placed in the state heritage management system that had evolved since the introduction of the Heritage Act in 1977.

The strategy was laid out in 1998. It was a plan that was sensibly staged to cope with uncertainties regarding the level of political commitment. Stage 1 of the strategic plan, although not formally documented at the time, involved research and planning. It included the key challenges of:

- establishing heritage values;
- undertaking conservation planning;
- determining and considering options;
- engaging the community;
- developing strategies; and,
- identifying sources of funding.

An excellent conservation management plan (CMP) prepared under contract to the SRA heritage unit in 1998 established the cultural heritage values of the place (John Carr Architects and Ferry 1998: 4). It confirmed the Werris Creek station, railway refreshment rooms, gas plant, and electricity generator as being of national significance:

- as the defining focus of one of the first and one of the few railway towns in Australia;
- as a rare example of a major rural rail complex for traffic and mechanical operations located at a strategic railway junction;

_Design proposal for the new façade to the Railway Institute Building dated 25.11.1917. Source: RailCorp Plan Room._

_The Railway Institute Building today. Source: Donald Ellsmore photo 2005._
Conventional paint sampling techniques revealed the presence of the oak graining. However, the extent of the graining and when the vast output of the Railways Department is considered, the exact visual characteristics were not able to be confirmed until specifications in existence, which is all the more astounding.

An intact piece of original oak grained finish joinery timber, a roof batten, was discovered beneath the floor of a former the only complete set of nineteenth-century railway building (Commissioner of Railways 1885). As far as it is known, they are waiting room. It is assumed that it had lodged during demolition of a covered way during works to add a second storey to the formerly single storey passenger station building. This example was used to inform the selection of paint finishes that were later restored.

The physical investigations also established that the rooms of the RRR that were completed in 1884, and the passenger station building that was completed in 1885, were finished with tinted wall plasters. The tints in the rooms varied according to the room usage. Like other stations that were completed in the railway boom years at the end of the nineteenth century the Ladies’ Waiting Room was finished with a salmon coloured plaster and the General Waiting Room was finished in a French Grey colour. Cream and buff coloured plasters were found in the Refreshment Rooms and the accommodation areas.

Conservation strategy: stage 2 implementation of works

The second stage of the conservation strategy illustrates the usual pattern of conservation work to a significant place. Rarely does it happen that the nature and extent of works can be defined easily, or that work can proceed seamlessly. Rather, conservation work is more often an iterative process that proceeds in a manner and at a pace that is largely determined by the flow of funding or the exertion of external factors, often political factors. While priority was given to roof repairs, substantial funding and high priority was given also to the removal of asbestos wall and ceiling linings in areas that are unlikely to pose any risk in the foreseeable future. At the same time, work on the highly visible external area facing the town was elevated in priority when the Minister for Transport made a visit to the place. This visit by the minister in October 2003 caused scaffolding to be erected hastily to demonstrate the New South Wales Government’s commitment to the project, even though the commitment was not confirmed fully by the allocation of funding until much later.

The principal items of work in the second stage of the conservation strategy included works aimed at addressing roofing and stormwater drainage failures and reversing some of the intrusive earlier changes. These included:

- roof repairs and replacement of roof sheeting to the main structures;
- upgrading of fire protection services;
- stripping out disused office spaces;
- removal of asbestos cement lined partitions from former upstairs offices;
- repairs and painting of all external joinery and timber work;
- repairs to brickwork and tuck-pointing;
- painting and re-decoration of key interior spaces; and,
- repairs and painting of cottages and the former Railway Institute building.

Conservation strategy: stage 3 management

Although it was obvious to most observers that the future of Werris Creek, like its past, would be inevitably tied to the railway, it was clear also that the railway had a bleak future. The best that could be foreseen for the town was as a dormitory to the much larger regional centre of Tamworth fifty kilometres to the north. Yet every discussion of potential new railway business or any form of rural enterprise that might have occurred in the immediate vicinity of Werris Creek drew a response that it would be the saviour of the town. It was a clear expression of misplaced hope in external resources rather than building on internal, town-based resources.

It is worth noting that Werris Creek, like so many rural towns, had suffered many setbacks in the preceding decades as commercial activities dwindled and local services were withdrawn. All of the regional energy was moving to the larger regional centre of Tamworth and the smaller nearby town of Quirindi. Early attempts to generate new activities in Werris Creek were met with either unquestioning enthusiasm or skepticism. There was little objective analysis of the options at the outset.

A change in approach occurred in 2001 when Dr Stuart Sharp, State Rail’s heritage adviser, wrote an inspirational and
A compelling proposal to establish the ARM at Werris Creek. He argued that Werris Creek was not only the rightful, but also the only place for such a monument. To everyone’s delight and astonishment the idea received warm support from the Minister for Transport and the ARM moved from concept to reality with the help of a substantial commitment of state government funding.

The decision to create the ARM at Werris Creek was preceded by community consultation over several years. Although the idea of creating a museum was never fully supported or rejected and, despite the fact those discussions about the future of the existing small railway heritage centre and its collection were often acrimonious, it was a forgone conclusion that the collection would eventually be housed in the station complex. Nevertheless, it was well understood that the collection or a museum alone would not provide anything more than a temporary respite for the place. Something much bigger would need to be found or invented. Ideas ranging from establishing a business centre to heritage centre, or both, were floated, analysed, pursued, rejected or incorporated during a rolling program of planning sessions that saw local community stalwarts sitting down with curious or skeptical locals, itinerant outsiders and, importantly, a small but influential group of newcomers to the town to discuss options and strategies.

The collective energy was harnessed afresh and channelled eventually into the project to create the ARM at Werris Creek. The monument would be a tribute to the railway industry and its employees for their contribution to Australia’s development. It would include a contemplative sculpture garden commemorating all railway workers, to be funded by the New South Wales government and an exhibition in the former RRR covering six principal themes that would be funded by Liverpool Plains Shire Council. The monument was unveiled on 1 October 2005, 150 years after the first train steamed out of Sydney Yard.

The symbolism of the monument is concentrated on the railway axes of the three lines which created the need for a large railway centre and town at Werris Creek. The exhibition in the former RRR reflects professional input and the intense community effort by a substantial number of mostly-retired volunteers who were required to locate, catalogue, assemble and prepare the exhibits for display. The design and construction of the exhibition were undertaken by the Australian Museum in Sydney as a small contract funded from the same source.

The monument is now the masthead of the project to conserve the railway heritage and revitalise the town. It is also intended to be a catalyst for a new era of positive change. In 2002, in line with the minister’s commitment, formal planning for this change was undertaken by way of an SRA funded contract with MWA International for a range of economic, community and strategic planning services associated with the ARM Project. Bob McKillop (principal), Desmond Kennard and Kirsten McKillop worked closely with the community to develop the volunteer and professional human resources to manage the ARM. It involved business analyses, investigations, group planning sessions and focus groups coordinated under the contract.

It is as yet too early to gauge the success of the project, but it should be closely followed by everyone who has an interest in the future of single industry rural communities and rural heritage ventures in particular. Whatever the outcome, it would be fair to say that the project, which started so timidly, has been taken up boldly by a small but determined group. Everyone will acknowledge the tenacity and commitment and, if successful, will celebrate the success of the project.
Conclusion

One hundred and twenty years ago, for the first time, the sun set on the Werris Creek Railway Station standing in splendid isolation in the Australian bush; the sunsets at Werris Creek have a magical quality that is experienced in few other places. The setting sun casts a splendid golden light across the plains, the station and town almost every day of the year. Will this prove to be a metaphor for the place?

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