

The Ararat Story

When the railway reached Ballarat from Geelong the government looked for rail routes to the Western District. In 1869 a report to Parliament proposed four different routes which became known as the "Battle of the Coloured Lines". Ararat was in the chosen pink route and received the railway sooner than expected.

On Tuesday 6 April, 1875, Ararat had a holiday to celebrate the opening of the Railway from Melbourne. Two special trains from Melbourne brought the official guests and everyone enjoyed a picnic on the Recreation reserve. Two balls were held that evening.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Ararat had become a major junction with the opening of the line to Portland in 1877, the completion of the line to the South Australian border at Serviceton in 1887 and the opening of the rail connection through to Maryborough in 1890. Every train stopped to change crews or locomotives. Today standard gauge trains pass through at 80kph and trains only stop when required.

The railway line ran through the middle of Ararat. Families living on the north side of town had to cross the line to reach the shops and schools – all of which were on the south side. There were no bridges or subways. The death of twelve year old Blanche Millman in 1905, killed by a train when crossing the line returning to school after lunch, saw the first footbridge built in the area in August 1907. The Vincent Street bridge and Queen Street subway opened December 1915 and the Albert Street subway was built in 1928.

By September 1914 the traffic through Ararat Station had become so great that the Railway Commissioners announced major alterations to provide additional sidings.

A few years later Ararat was selected for development as a centre for the servicing of steam locomotives. The works included a new locomotive depot – the largest outside Melbourne- with ancillary workshops and an 85 foot turntable – the largest on the Victorian Railway system. The depot also incorporated a large concrete coal handling plant – the only example ever built in Victoria. The locomotive depot closed in 1989.

Three notable crashes have occurred at Ararat Locomotive Depot involving runaway pilot locomotives shunting at the 'up end' of Ararat yard. In the first (1949) and second (1966) runaways, the turntable was set to direct the runaway loco into stationary steam engines standing in the roundhouse. On impact, the stationary locos were pushed into nearby Alfred Street. In 1967 the turntable was not set and the T class locomotive and wagons piled up in the turntable pit.

On Friday 27 November 1998, a wheat train travelling approx 80kmp crashed into a stationary ballast train 'down end' of Ararat yard.

The Railways brought much employment to Ararat. The Victorian Railways Institute was built with clubrooms and dance halls, providing much of the social life and a place of learning for its members as well as other citizens.

Special trains were used for various occasions. In 1900 a free train took unemployed men to Willaura, on their way to the Mafeking Gold Rush. In 1934 school children travelled to Portland for the Centenary Celebrations marking the arrival of the Henty Brothers. Children from State School No.800 travelled in the 1975 Centenary train to Elmhurst. Sunday School picnics and school sports to Hamilton, races, football finals, and Agricultural Shows also used special trains.

Two signal boxes at Ararat opened in 1891. "B" box was closed and demolished in 1984. "A" box closed in 1996 and in 1998 was relocated to its present position and restored.

Train Control was in Ararat for 61 years until 1988, controlling trains between Ararat-Serviceton, Ararat-Portland, and all branch lines in these areas.

The introduction of diesel locomotives and the growing use of road transport reduced the local railways workforce. The broad gauge V/Line passenger train service from Melbourne via Ballarat was withdrawn in May 1994 and replaced by road coaches, whilst the Ararat-Ballarat line closed to all traffic in 1995 with the opening of the standard gauge route via Cressy. The Railway Station became the Information Centre and the Ararat RSL uses the Victorian Railways Institute building. The line from Ballarat was re-opened for broad gauge V/Line passenger trains in July 2004.