

The Old Narrow Gauge Railway Line, Port Augusta to Alice Springs, and the Ghan

By Lloyd Butler VK5BR

Starting with the northern route to Darwin discovered by John McDougal Stewart, this was followed by a single telegraph wire to Darwin and later a train line to Alice Springs. Lloyd did a lot of travelling on that Ghan railway line in the 1940's and he recalls some of his experiences on the way.

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The article is about the development of the original Narrow Gauge Railway line to Alice Springs which commenced being built in 1878. This followed the surveyed access route from the south of Australia through the centre to the North by John McDougal Stewart in 1860/1862 and the later telegraph line built over this route, directed by Charles Todd, and finished in 1871.

They were not to know until the train line was built and tried, that there were a few places on the route which were subject to flooding and subject to train-line wash-aways. This led to a new Ghan route to Alice Springs which was completed after so many years later in 1980 and with a new standard gauge line compatible with other national lines. The new Ghan operated all the way between Adelaide and Alice Springs, via the India Pacific line between Adelaide and Tarcoola. It wasn't until 2004 that the line was extended and running the Ghan train all the way further to Darwin.

The first section of narrow gauge line from Port Augusta to Maree was completed and made operational in 1889, via Pichi Richi pass, to Maree. The Pichi Richi pass section had been opened previously in 1879.



Early train travelling through Pichi Richi Pass

The first sleeping car train was introduced at Terowie in 1923 and it ran via a newly built narrow gauge line from Terowie to Quorn and onwards north. From 1917 to 1926 all of the narrow gauge lines going north through Quorn from Port Augusta and Terowie were part of the South Australian Railways.

But between 1926 and 1975, Commonwealth Railways took over control of the narrow gauge system, except for the Terowie to Quorn section which was retained by the South Australian Railways. Changing trains at Quorn to get on the Ghan was then required. In the early 1940s, WW2 was still on and working in the Transmission section of the PMG, we (the technical workers) were required to go on projects north, initially via the early Ghan.

Through-out the article, as one of the workers, I will comment on my own experiences with the old train. For those early journeys, we changed trains at Quorn to board the Ghan and in at least one instance, I remember having a one night stay at the Quorn Hotel shown in the photo.

The first coal trains started in early 1940 from Leigh Creek on the narrow gauge railway passing through Quorn and the Pichi Richi Pass to Pt Augusta. This opened up part of the Ghan section considerably until 1956 when a new standard Gauge line was opened between Leigh Creek and Pt Augusta. However at this point there was apparently no function for the line section between Hawker and Maree and the section was closed and dismantled.

Since 1973, volunteers of the Pichi Richi Railway Preservation Society have restored historic steam or diesel locomotives, railcars and timber carriages, and run them on the Pichi Richi section of the narrow gauge railway. At least this section of the old railway to Alice Springs is still in use.

Between 1975 and 1981 the Commonwealth Railways became Australian National.

Many passengers going north had their first glimpse of the ghan train at Quorn and proceeded north from there, as I did myself. I will attempt to proceed with the discussion up the Ghan line in the same chronological order as passengers would see train sidings or train terminals.



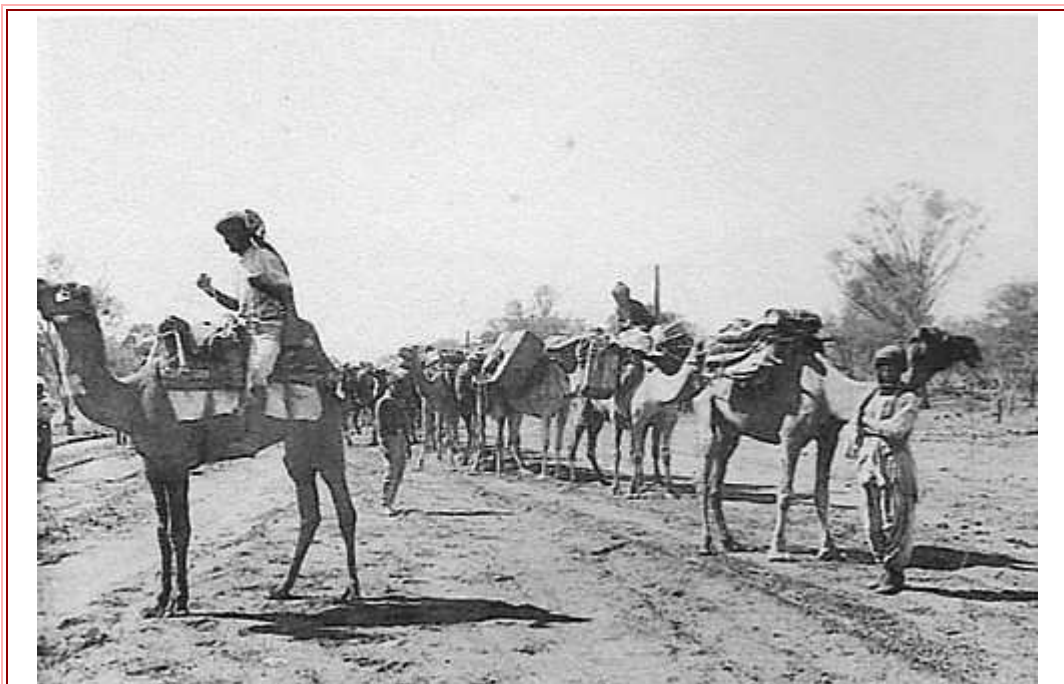
Quorn Hotel

This was the staging point, where in the 1940s, we changed trains between SA Railways from Terowie and Commonwealth Railways to Alice Springs. (Both were narrow gauge).

Photo - "When we rode the Rails" by Patsy Adam-Smith

After that first run with the sleeping car train from Terowie, it picked up its name after the Afghan cameleers, "ghan" short for "afghan". The Afghan migrants with their camels did much to open up Central Australia. For many years camel teams supplied the telegraph, railways and pastoral stations with supplies, no matter how isolated or far away they were. They were even involved in the establishment of artesian bores.

The precise detail of exactly how the Afghan name was adopted is a bit confusing. There seems to be two stories promulgated. One refers to an incident at the Quorn Hotel.



Early Camel Train

Afghan cameleers did so much to open up Central Australia, transporting between those hardy people of the outback. The train was named after the Afghan cameleers, "ghan" short for "afghan" . The train line commenced being built in 1878.

Photo - Flinders Ranges Research

The earlier Ghan trains were a mixture of sleeper cars and trucks with supplies. On the Ghan trains that I travelled in the 1940s, there was also a dining car. The sleeper cars had a walkway right through the centre of the car with bunks either side at two levels. Privacy was provided by a curtain in front of each pair of bunks. One had to dress or undress, sitting in the bunk. I had seen this type of sleeper car before in an American movie. (In the new Ghan , there are separate cabins of two or four bunks and the walkway along one side.)

Maree siding was the first terminal point for the train in 1889. There were many sidings along the Ghan track. If there was nothing else at the siding, there would be a Hotel. Some of them looked alike. The one in the photo of Maree Hotel looks the same as the one we used at Copley siding when working for the Department of Civil Aviation at Leigh Creek. Stopping at one of these sidings, there was always a stream of people heading for the hotel. Sometimes it was a long stop while the locomotive renewed coal and water. The whistle would blow when the train was about to depart. But no one took any notice. One had time to walk (and if necessary run) back to the train which very slowly gathered speed.



Maree Hotel

Maree was the first terminal point for the train in 1889

The second terminal point was Oodnadatta, opened in 1891. Below is the railway station in that era. I am not sure what the passengers are doing walking across the lines. It looks like the train came from south and is heading north. Perhaps the passengers are disembarking, but more likely heading for the hotel.



**The early Oodnadatta Railway Station
Oodnadatta was the second terminal point in 1891**

Photo - Flinders Ranges Research

In the wartime 1940's, the PMG Transmission Section sent two of us from their technical staff to install a Train Control Console for the Commonwealth Railways at Oodnadatta. Before the War, rail service to Alice Springs was about one train per week (essentially the old Ghan) on the old narrow gauge route. The system operated on train orders, but with the war extending to the east of the world, the line became important to the war effort. The number of trains increased to about seven per day carrying service personnel and equipment. There were problems handling the high level of train traffic and the PMG's Department was contracted to install a new train control system.

We booked into the old hotel at Oodnadatta .The multitude of cockroaches running around my bedroom floor was not my forte'. However I did enjoy showering under the steaming hot water which oozed out of an outlet pipe at a bore a little distance from the hotel. Next time I was in an installation team working at Oodnadatta, we found brand new, and empty, RAAF multi-bed cabins. And I didn't see any cockroaches. We had no idea what the Air Force was going to do with all the cabins.



**The early Oodnadatta Hotel
(Cockroaches running around the floor in our 1940's visit)**

Photo - Flinders Ranges Research

The final terminal point for the narrow gauge and the Ghan train was Stuart (renamed Alice Springs after the train first arrived). In 1980, it became the main terminal point on the way up to Darwin on the newer standard gauge line.



**Alice Springs Today
Terminal for both the old Ghan in 1929 and for the new Ghan in 1980**

Photo - Lloyd Butler VK5BR

In Alice Springs today, there is now a heritage museum ran by the Ghan Preservation Society and a 25 km section of narrow gauge line (the end of the Ghan line to Alice Springs) run by the Ghan Heritage Railway. The two photos following are sampled from the Patsy Adam-Smith excellent book concerning work on the railway lines by the fettlers (or gangers).



**Part of the old Ghan Narrow Gauge line
running 25 km south of Alice Springs.
Now probably on display
by the Ghan Preservation Society, or the
old Ghan Heritage Railway & Museum.**

**Photo - "When we rode the Rails"
by Patsy Adam-Smith**



**Rail Trike on the Ghan narrow gauge line.
Maintenance Gangers probably simulated
by visitors to the Ghan preservation societies.**

Photo - "When we rode the Rails" by Patsy Adam-Smith

Around 1878 when the narrow gauge line from Port Augusta to Alice Springs started its 50 year project, another narrow gauge line construction, the North Australia Railway, proceeded south in 1887 from Darwin. It made Adelaide River by June 1888, Pine Creek by October 1889, Katherine by May 1917, Mataranka by July 1928, and terminus Birdum by September 1929. After WW2, it was extended to Larrimah 5 miles to the north of Birdum. (Birdum is no longer recorded on modern maps). The line closed in February 1981. Whilst I had worked on a number of installations in that upper northern region, I never had reason to travel on that railway.

I travelled by train on the old narrow Gauge line to Alice Springs many times in the 1940's. Many stories can be told about what happened on the way. One day the steam locomotive blew a boiler tube. The driver and fireman jumped to get away from the steam and the train travelled on for miles and miles with no driver until the steam ran out. We were stuck in the middle of no-where with no locomotive and no driver and fireman.

On one Ghan trip, we were heading north, I think somewhere between Oodnadatta and Finke River, and our train-line ballast sunk into the mud. The ballast looked intact but the bottoms of the carriages scraped in the mud. I think the steel tracks were still fixed to the sleepers, but the whole track got out of alignment and two carriage couplings parted. It took some time for Commonwealth Railways to sorted that out. We were supposed to reach Alice Springs on a Saturday night. We finally arrived in Alice Springs on the following Monday morning.

The wash-away was typical of what happens in the route taken by the Ghan narrow gauge train. (See picture below.). Because of flooding, rail crews were continuously repairing or replacing parts

of the track and this caused periods when the train was out of service. The intermittent service finally led to the establishment of the new standard gauge route via Tarcoola, first to Alice Springs and later to Darwin.)



Early Ghan Steam Train moving through flooded rail track

On another occasion, we were returning from Alice Springs on a train with ordinary carriages, normally used to transport troops and working parties. I remember that this one had side seats along the length of the carriage. I think one gentleman must have had too much of the amber liquid. He climbed up between carriages and proceeded to run along them and jump from each one to the next one. (Just like they did in the Wild West movies.) The train was stopped and shunted back to the nearest siding where the gentleman was removed from the train and left at the somewhat deserted siding. (Of course this was the Wild North not the Wild West).

Everyone interested in engineering likes to see the locomotive pulling the train and I haven't been very successful in collecting photos of the early narrow gauge rolling stock. However the locomotives running in the days when I rode the rails in the 1940s, looked very much like the early Rx engines of the time, operated by South Australian Railways. These were built at Islington Workshops in Kilburn, a suburb of Adelaide. The large workshops, controlled by South Australian Railways, built numerous locomotives and other rolling stock for the State railways, The old Rx broad gauge engine in the photo is displayed at the Murray Bridge wharf, But there are also displays of the Rx engine at Kapunda, Loxton, Victor Harbor, Tailem bend & the Port Adelaide Railway Museum.



**Early Rx Steam Locomotive (broad gauge) displayed at the Murray Bridge Wharf and built by Islington Workshops in South Australia
Similar design to that used on the Narrow Gauge Ghan line in early days.**

Photo - Wongm's Rail Gallery - Murray Bridge, South Australia

To finish the article, I leave the reader with a photo of the new Ghan on its way to Darwin in 2005 whilst the train takes a break at the terminal in Alice Springs. Organised by my son, the particular Ghan had the Chairman's Carriage coupled in which two of our families hired for that particular Ghan run.



**The new Ghan at the terminal for trains right in Alice Springs.
The new standard Gauge line took over the train service
to Alice Springs when opened in October 1980.
The old Ghan line became redundant**

Photo - Lloyd Butler VK5BR

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