

Over the Fence



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IN THIS ISSUE:

- Yesterday's railway?
- Tomorrow's railway
- Texts
- Trees of Hawke's Bay
- Well Said
- Last Word

Yesterday's railway?

"...a railway brought to this area [Gisborne] of extravagant and prodigal fertility would be working overtime at once, in getting the goods away. In the meantime there is glut and waste."

Quote from the New Zealand Railways Magazine, 1 April 1936 (in anticipation of the East Coast railway, then under construction).

It's an interesting historical fact that up to the middle of the last century New Zealand was doggedly building railways throughout the country under very challenging conditions, and thereafter we've been progressively closing them, or at least nearly all of the branch lines.



Every time a line closure is mooted hands are thrown up in despair, and in at least one case a group of women, lead by that old warhorse – or she was young then – Sonia Davies, sitting on a line between Nelson and Glenhope targeted to be closed in 1955. Sonia proudly wore this act of protest for the rest of her life. Never mind that no one thereafter said that it was wrong and the line should have remained. So it was win-win, with Sonia putting her name on the political map and Prime Minister Sid Holland garrotting a line that had no future.

There's been talk for quite some time that the Napier to Gisborne line faces closure. This would be a major step and therefore needs considerable debate and consideration.

Completed to Gisborne in 1942 this was one of the later lines constructed in New Zealand due to the huge challenge of the terrain and held up by the depression, earthquake and floods. While by the 1930s machinery was beginning to replace the back-breaking task of earthworks by hand it still was a huge physical effort. The section between Waikokopu and the Gisborne had 700 men working on it in the late 1930s, and involved two tunnels totalling 2.38 kilometres.) There are about 26 tunnels on the line and numerous bridges and viaducts, including the big one across the Mohaka. Many men lost their lives construction it, including 21 when a deluge hit the Kopuawharau camp at night – one of New Zealand's forgotten tragedies. The accomplishment of its construction and the human cost however is not an argument for its retention.

To make an informed judgement on the lines future one needs to know in reasonably precise terms what its state is. Obviously it is not in good shape. So how much will it cost to bring it up to standard, or can it be patched up more or less indefinitely? This applies to the state of the viaducts, especially the biggie. All it will take is for an engineer to decline to verify its safety and it's all over. So if and when is that likely to happen?

Quite apart from the physical state of the line the problem is that the bulk of the freight between Hawkes Bay and Gisborne doesn't lend itself to railing. This applies to logs, the main commodity transported, as it has to be trucked out of the forest, and if destined for Whirinaki mill then trucked again, a totally prohibitive cost. Other unsuited products are livestock, milk and other farm products,

farm requisites, and consumer goods destined for retail outlets. In any case, how do you make commercial operators use the line if it means a greater cost to their business, and indeed may jeopardise their very viability? Or do you make them use rail through regulation? We've been down that (rail)road before and arguably it hastened the decline of the railways.

In the meantime the road is being constantly improved and trucks ever becoming more efficient. And yes, they need copious quantities of diesel to run, but then how fuel efficient are the intermittent slow trains that use the line?

Notwithstanding the above, what will save the line? As I see it, it would need to be a major wood process industry in Gisborne and Wairoa with the output railed directly to the Port of Napier. Gisborne, however, might be expected to choose the throughput of its own port in preference to the railway. In any case, a coastal shipping service may accommodate this, which means that both ports would get the same throughput and without subsidising an uneconomic line.

Much has been said of the tourist potential of the line, and indeed it is a wonderful scenic trip. But I have my doubts as to whether this would have any critical impact on the lines retention. Comparisons with the South Island's Trans Alpine Express may have little relevance. Yes, it's a great success, but folk can do the return trip comfortably in a day, and the line justifies itself to cope with freight, especially the coal trains to Lyttleton - and a much easier line to maintain too. Still, scepticism prevailed when art deco was mooted as a potential tourist attraction, so who knows?

Upholding rail has much the same emotional effect as upholding motherhood. Tragically even mothers die. It's hard to escape the reality that the line to Gisborne is knackered.

Believe it or not, in 1897 railway leagues were formed in Gisborne, Wairoa and Napier to promote a rail way link through to Rotorua, and thus Auckland. This was the result of the advocacy of the Hon. (later Sir) James Carroll. The line from Gisborne was envisaged to head in a south westerly direction through the Ureweras to Muripara, and thence to Rotorua. In fact it was partially constructed (evidence can be seen if you know where to look, but it's long-since closed). However another line was completed in a nor-west direction as far as the remote settlement of Motu – the skeletal remains of a girder bridge can still be seen across the river – but was closed in 1959. The severe terrain beyond was too daunting, a compelling factor apparently not being considered when construction began.

Tomorrow's railway?

What will the Napier-Hastings urban area look like half a century from now? It's hard to imagine. Over the last half century the population has virtually doubled, though present prediction are that it wont be that great. But who knows. Certainly there will be very many more people than now. So will the normally one-person-per-vehicle be the normal way to commute? Well if so we are going to need a lot more road construction to cope and even then expect gridlock.

But what say scarcity makes petroleum products prohibitively expensive, and no practical substitute emerges? Many large urban areas have been caught out with this, having run down their public transport systems, particularly light rail, and they face a huge problem to sort it out. Auckland and Wellington are classic cases, while some overseas cities with populations bigger than our county's have developed efficient public transport systems based on rail. Well, where unlikely to ever have numbers like Auckland and Wellington, but we should see them as warnings. Too early to think about a light rail circuit around Napier, Taradale, Omahu road, through Hastings, Havelock North and back to Napier via Clive? No way is it too early to *think* about it! At least it could be prudent and foresightful to identify and over the years secure the way. Then you wont be faced with Auckland's problem of putting new railways through densely house suburbs

Texts

Aren't these texts in *Hawkes Bay Today* terrible? Apart from their corruption of the English language, they provide a great opportunity for an anonymous moan, often at the expense of some named person's motives and integrity. It would seem beneath dignity to rebut such attacks, but they potentially can do damage to individuals and institutions. With the local body election later in the year, and all the signs are that it will be dirty one locally, anonymous texting offers an opportunity for abuse as some one with a stake to directly or through a third party can denigrate an opponent without being identified.

It's now universally accepted by the media that all correspondence (with limited justifiable exceptions) in the 'letters to the editor' column be publicly signed and thus accountable. These texts are no different. Texters should identify themselves; simple as that!

TREES OF HAWKE'S BAY - Deciduous trees

Native trees are beautiful and have a character all their own. What is more they are unique to this country and part of our culture. But our lives have been immeasurably enriched both economically and commercially by introduced species, many of which have adapted very well to our environment.

If you want to see possibly the biggest collection of temperate exotic trees in the world visit **Eastwoodhill** in the Gisborne District, this year celebrating the century since its founder Douglas Cook drew his farm at Ngatapa. Although far from all the trees are deciduous this is the time when Eastwoodhill looks spectacular. A visit to this arboretum is a must for tree lovers, and for even those who'll settle for a bit of dendrological flirting.

What is the best coloured deciduous tree species?

Tough call! I'll pick Liquidamber, one of many spectacular trees of Nor-eastern North America. See photos to the right.

For a wider range of deciduous trees in autumn colour see my website under 'albums'.



Liquidambars come in a range of colours, demonstrated by these two examples. Often they have a range of colours



Street planting in Hastings. Liquidambars are not now favoured for street planting as they grow to a prodigious size.

WELL SAID —

"I always turn to the sports page first for it records people's triumphs. The first page records their failures".

Former U S Chief Justice Earl Warren

LAST WORD —

If you haven't already, don't forget to take a look at the new website: www.overthefence.org.nz
Cheers

Ewan Mac