

A Tale of Two Signs

Right: An empty coal train works its way up the Toowoomba Range through Spring Bluff on Saturday 14 March. Visitors see the sign on the right setting out certain legal statements, before heading across the tracks to the café on the left.



Text and images
by Alan Shaw

They are now commonplace. Prominent signs with short terse messages to outsiders—stay away! They guard against public access to railway property from public land. They provide cautionary information to people who are authorised to travel beyond the boundary. A dual message from a corporation doing business in a world of increasing legal risk and workplace responsibility. They are signs for our times.

As if proving an exception to the rule, the picturesque station at Spring Bluff in south-east Queensland has a quite different collection of signs. Here are signs that, in their own guarded and cautious way, welcome visitors to the railway precinct, as well as invoking a sense of heritage, seek donations for the station's upkeep.

So what makes Spring Bluff, alone amongst similar crossing loops on QR's tortuous main line climb up the Great Dividing Range like Holmes and Rangeview, special enough, to warrant such attention? Well, it IS rather special. Nestled along the side of the range about 150 rail kilometres west of Brisbane, its 1 in 50 gradient poses a challenge to the drivers who take the procession of trains up and down the range.

From a visitor's point of view though, it offers more than just trains, since it is one of the two remaining garden railway stations left in Queensland. The gardens are well maintained and become a very popular destination during Toowoomba's annual *Carnival of Flowers*.

Train operations through Spring Bluff and its crossing loop have been controlled from Brisbane since 1992. With the station's operational closure, responsibility for the station gardens was moved to the Spring Bluff Railway Station Trust, now comprising the Toowoomba Regional Council and the Lockyer Regional Council, in 1995.

Visitors to Spring Bluff can enjoy the well-maintained gardens, a few railway-oriented displays including access to the de-commissioned signal frame, pleasant lawns and a café. It is one of the few places I know where you can observe trains while enjoying the tea or coffee of your choice, with visitors who won't make a second glance if you show a slightly heightened interest in a passing train.

And trains there are. When I first visited the station in the early 90s, the gardens were immaculate but the café had yet to open. More importantly the railway's importance was declining with Queensland

Rail withdrawing from its more traditional types of freight services.

If the year brought a quiet grain season you could wait a long time to see a train in daylight at Spring Bluff. Not now though. As in many places around the country, coal is the difference.

At first, coal traffic was a single daily train from the loader at Macalister to the power station at Swanbank between Ipswich and Brisbane. Now though, two mines generate enough traffic for an average of six to eight loaded trains a day that travel the line in addition to other freight and grain services. Some days will see significantly more. By Queensland standards these coal trains are very modest, limited by infrastructure designed for another era, and in the case of Brisbane's suburban network through which the trains must travel, an altogether different purpose. Even with those constraints output continues to grow, to the extent that if plans for new and expanded mines come to fruition the number of coal trains could go close to doubling in the not-too-distant future. The periods of peace and quiet that envelope Spring Bluff look set to become shorter and less frequent.

To make the most of the attractions of Spring Bluff, or to watch the parade of trains, most of the tens of thousands visitors each year will leave the car park, follow the well-marked path and walk across the mainline and the loop to the platform. On a busy day they might have to spend longer than they had anticipated: it is not uncommon for trains to cross at Spring Bluff so access to or from the café and its surrounds may be blocked as the first train to arrive waits for the second train to come through.

To reduce this possibility and make life both easier and safer for visitors, QR will change its operating practices at Spring Bluff. The first train to arrive will be held outside the loop until the second one arrives, and only then will proceed through, minimising the time a train might block pedestrian access. I've seen a similar practice at Murphy's Creek, except there it is to reduce the impact of trains blocking the level crossing that runs through the line and loop.

The visitors will also pass the welcome sign and its partner, the one that provides numerous warnings about the need to take care and other matters. If a train is imminent an alarm will sound and lights will flash. It must all work too, since there has never been an injury at Spring Bluff.



Left: As an empty grain train works its way slowly through Spring Bluff on Saturday 14 March, the author watches on, protected by a combination of signage, flashing lights, audible warning sounds and common-sense.

Below: A much more common sign and a clear statement to stay away. While these signs do their job, yet another empty coal train has just left Murphy's Creek on its way up the tortuous climb to the top of the range on Friday 27 October 2006.

Each time I visit, I can't escape the feeling that the implications of the visitor signs suggest a deep legal unease with the whole site.

This is not surprising: there is an inherent contrariness in inviting visitors to enjoy the surrounds of one busy crossing loop, but doing everything possible to prevent exactly that happening anywhere else. The risk assessors and lawyers at QR must have given a lot of thought to balancing the desire to keep the heritage of Spring Bluff alive and available for all to enjoy, with the 21st century need to minimise risks and possible legal exposure. No doubt the words on the signs were precisely chosen to convey a clear purpose.

On my last visit on a very pleasant March Saturday afternoon, I spoke to a young couple on a family outing from Brisbane. They knew the station was 'de-commissioned' but oddly assumed that the term applied to the railway as well. They were very surprised when I told them that the railway was still very much in use, and their young son looked especially pleased and excited when I went on to say a couple of trains should be through in the next half hour or so.

Drivers on the line are only too aware of the possible dangers here. While they might be able to make a brief and admiring glance towards the gardens as they travel through the station, their attention will be centred on ensuring nothing untoward happens. One driver I spoke to confesses to feeling tense as he takes a train through Spring Bluff, especially at busier times like weekends, although as he points out he feels equally tense at any station where the public might be present. He has good reason to as well, as he recounts examples of the public sauntering across the tracks even with a train loudly announcing its arrival, seemingly oblivious to the possible dangers, and despite the warning signs they walked right past.

"Safety is QR's top priority and we are implementing several safety measures at Spring Bluff," says a QR spokesperson. "The pedestrian crossing will be upgraded by the end of July with a concrete walkway, providing a safer footpath for people crossing the tracks." The spokesman went on to confirm what a driver had told me previously about reducing the time trains might block access to the station: "In recent months, rail operators have adopted new procedures to limit the amount of time that trains spend at the station during the day. In addition, during the Toowoomba Carnival of Flowers, QR provides extra staff at the station to ensure public safety at the crossing."

That's good news. So it's easy to imagine a future visit where over my next coffee at Spring Bluff, perhaps with our children enjoying a hot chocolate, I can enjoy watching trains hard at work and at the same time enjoy the unique environment. But between sips, I'm sure to wonder whether somewhere in Brisbane, a lawyer's pulse will briefly quicken on thinking about Spring Bluff.

