

Charleville, Quilpie and cattle



Text and images by Alan Shaw

Against the odds in 2011, cattle trains still run in Queensland, continuing to fulfil the rural promise the railways first suggested as they expanded through the State in the 19th century. Even more against the odds, the Quilpie line, extending its spindly reach with 220 km of track from Charleville on mostly 20kg rail, is kept open solely for a weekly seasonal cattle train. This combination, now unique in the world, is the sole surviving component of what I've previously referred to as Quirky Rail, with the little general freight trains that ran to both Cunnamulla and Quilpie both withdrawn after the disastrous flooding that afflicted much of Queensland in early 2011.

How long the line can survive on this meagre, if meaty, diet though is open to question and with this in mind I travelled to Charleville with Malcolm Jenkins and Darren Tulk, to watch the second last train for the 2011 season run to Quilpie, observe the loading, and then follow the loaded train back towards Brisbane the following day.

The empty train actually left Brisbane on the Sunday before, running all the way to Charleville where it would be stowed until the following Friday for its scheduled 1.30pm departure. Being too far away from home and leaving Charleville too early to consider a same-day drive the 800kms from Brisbane, we opted to stay overnight in Roma on Thursday, which would then allow us to follow the westbound *Westlander* from early Friday morning on its run to Charleville. All being well, this would give us a couple of hours in Charleville before changing our attention from passenger to cattle train. Knowing how little traffic uses the line now we were surprised to see 2472 shut-down in the yard at Roma.

As it happened, the week's *Westlanders* were cancelled so Queensland Rail could use the sets on the more populous coast to help alleviate the impacts of the Qantas lock-out. Friday morning thus became a locomotive-free drive scouting possible photo and video locations, including a loaded ballast train at Bongo, which explained seeing 2472 back in Roma.

At Charleville, locos 1730 and 1754 were in the yard, but there was no sign of the train. The station staff said the 30 empty KLEX wagons would be collected from the 'oil siding' across the main road and behind the hospital. As I've previously found, the staff were more than happy to chat

for a while. I suggested that things must be very quiet now, and while one agreed this week was, he said next week would be "really busy, with two *Westlanders*, the cattle train, and three ballast trains on the Quilpie line." Considering how busy Charleville really was when rail played an important part in local lives, the notion of busy has obviously been adapted to suit modern circumstances.

We told the staff we'd be following the train west, have dinner in Quilpie, watch them load for a while, then head back to Charleville later in the evening. "I hope you've got a good bull-bar mate, there's a LOT of 'roos on that road at night" was the advice I received. Thinking sheepishly of my car completely devoid of such protection, the best reply I could muster was "No, but I reckon we'll be right if we just drive back slowly". In time for the 1.30pm departure, the two locos trundled off to collect their train, and we set off soon after.

From Charleville, the first third of the line is well away from the Diamantina Development Road, with just a single crossing near the wonderfully named siding at Wanko. From Cooladdi west, the line and the road are very close together. With light rail and ballast in the pioneer branch tradition keeping train speeds low, plenty of time is available between locations.

Driving past the Fox Trap Hotel at Cooladdi and on to the siding of the same name, it's hard to believe it once served a small town of over 300 people. Now there is just a loop, a rectangular water tower, a small 'station building' (the original appears to have found its way behind the pub), a deteriorating wool loading platform, and a wye serving the long-abandoned sheep and cattle races. None of it looked like it had been used for many years, and all of it was set against the characteristic low scrub and red soil, surprisingly soft underfoot after such a wet year, in all directions.

Much the same can be said for Cheepie, although here the original station building with a weather-beaten sign is still present, along with a loop, a wye, a round water tower and another deteriorating loading bank. Cheepie also boasts a single residence that serves as the local post office among other things. It's hard to imagine it's a public service that gets much use these days.



Left: Led by locos 1730 and 1753, the empty cattle train heads west to Quilpie on 4 November 2011, passing through Cooladdi and its old water tower.

Above: At the balloon loop in Quilpie, 840 well-fed and watered animals are led onto the train in the early evening. Loading would take about three hours on this evening, a little less than usual on account of a shorter train.

Right: Having been fired up for the afternoon's work, the locos run through the station at Charleville, on the way to collect the cattle wagons, before heading off to Quilpie.

Below: Just after dawn the following day, the train waits for its 6.30am departure from Charleville. The time will be used to inspect both the train and the cattle.





By now the light was fading fast, so we took our last shots at Coolbinga, nothing more than a loop, a farm of the same name and a windmill situated in such a way that we described the setting as “iconic” and then drove to Quilpie for dinner, before getting shots of the loading operation in place.

Cattle loading takes place on the balloon loop immediately to the north of the small station at Quilpie, and was underway at the well-lit cattle race by the time we arrived after steaks at the local pub.

The 2011 season was a late starter even after the line became available for traffic after the flood damage on the Range near Toowoomba was repaired, since the unusually wet ground in the western Maranoa and channel country had made it difficult to get trucks into the properties. By the time we were there to see this penultimate train of the season, traffic was winding down for the year, and this train was well short of the 45 wagons often used.

We chatted to the drovers for a while after the loader, trim and thoroughly professional under her Akubra, gave the OK to take some photos, having observed that while they are happy for people to come and watch, photography is usually another matter given the sensitivity of live-cattle shipping. So were glad to be there, and to be able to record them loading some of the 840 or so cattle that would make up the shipment, gathered mostly from further west in the channel country, places like Boulia and Bedourie. With at least 24 hours in the yard before their train journey, the cattle would be well-fed and watered for the 1000km or so run to Dinmore, in Brisbane’s west. We left around 8pm and headed back to our pub in Charleville, and sure enough, ‘roos were in abundance by the side of the road, along with goats, pigs, cattle and the occasional cat. No wonder a bull-bar had been suggested.

We eventually slipped back into Charleville and down its broad darkened streets well after 11pm to our rooms in the living museum of the Hotel Coronas, the sort of two-storey pub seen on many street corners. Walking up the wide timber staircase and down the halls,

dimly lit as a concession to the hotel being fully occupied because of a cattle sale the next day, some guests choosing to sleep with hall and veranda doors wide open (feet out the doors, boots in the hall) was like another world, or at least another time. By the time I got to sleep, the train would have been loaded and heading back from Quilpie.

While the cowboys slept on, we left early Saturday morning as quietly as we arrived, after coming to terms with hot water flowing from the cold tap (direct from the Great Artesian Basin) and cooler water from the hot tap, all helpfully explained by a sign in the bathroom. The loaded train was already in the station, with an hour or so allowed for a check to be made of the cattle and the train before it left at 6.30am. From there, it was an uninterrupted run the 265km or so back to Roma, and we put to use the locations scouted the day before.

Roma came and went, with a crew change and swapping one of the 1720s for 2472 for the heavier grades to the east. With no other trains on the line until the first of the coalies might be met east of Miles, once again progress was steady and sedate. In a rail world dedicated to bland bulk haulage or lengthy container trains, there is something unmistakably, well, right about a cattle train in a rural landscape headed by a couple of locomotives that look at home doing what they were built to do. Knowing that such a sight is no longer possible anywhere else in the world, period, simply added to the appeal. Quirky Rail indeed. And east on the Darling Downs, formerly associated with agriculture and now hosting (whether it wants to or not) the emergence of a coal and gas industry, such a train would escape the wrath of those who choose to display their opposition to the new resource industries taking hold by an assortment of banners and signs alongside the Warrego Highway.

By the time Dalby was reached, darkness had fallen, and we called it a day on the cattle train. It would continue to travel through the night, arriving at Dinmore early the following morning. The final destination of the cattle, the butchers, supermarkets and dinner plates of Brisbane, would probably be in just a few days time.



Left: Constructed of timber and redundant 20kg rail, the cattle race at Mungallala frames the loaded train early on the morning of 5 November 2011. It's been a long time since cattle were loaded onto trains here. Right: Eye to eye contact while the train pauses at Roma for a crew change and swapping one of the locos for the grades further east. Below: Before the train reached Roma though, it passes through Muckadilla, past wheat silos that will increasingly become a landmark of the line as the train heads to Brisbane. Now the cattle season has finished for the year, locations like this will see no regular rail traffic other than the twice-weekly *Westlander*.







Has a permanent night also fallen on the train service itself? As with anything that's not coal or at least bulk freight, in the medium term almost certainly. But as with my previous trip to Charleville, it's not that the traffic isn't there, but more whether chasing it fits in with the modern QR business model. When asked about this, one local suggested that during the season, so many cattle come out of Queensland's west that a daily train could easily be run from Quilpie, although with a hard-edged realism noted also that "they make more money out of coal".

Still, having seen the number of road trains taking cattle east, that estimation is easy to believe. And anyone who's travelled out that way will know only too well how the roads are suffering as a result, not to mention the potential danger of mixing heavy road trains and cars. Cattle are also an unusual traffic in competitive terms, as many stock owners prefer the train to trucks: the more sedate pace is easier on the cattle and they experience less stress on the journey.

So how long cattle trains run to Quilpie is open to speculation, but those three ballast trains suggest at least someone thinks the line has a future. If news spreads next year of another cattle season in far south west Queensland being served by rail, it will be very hard to ignore the call and I expect to find myself heading west once again.

Left: By the time Macalister was reached towards last light of the day, the train is starting to mix it with the coal trains that are by far the dominant feature of the railway east of Miles. It's not without local opposition though, as evidenced by the protest sign.

Below left: At Drillham, the train crosses the waters of Drillham Creek held back by a small weir.

Below: On the drive west the day before, this ballast train being loaded at Bongo was the only rail activity noted between Roma and Charleville.

