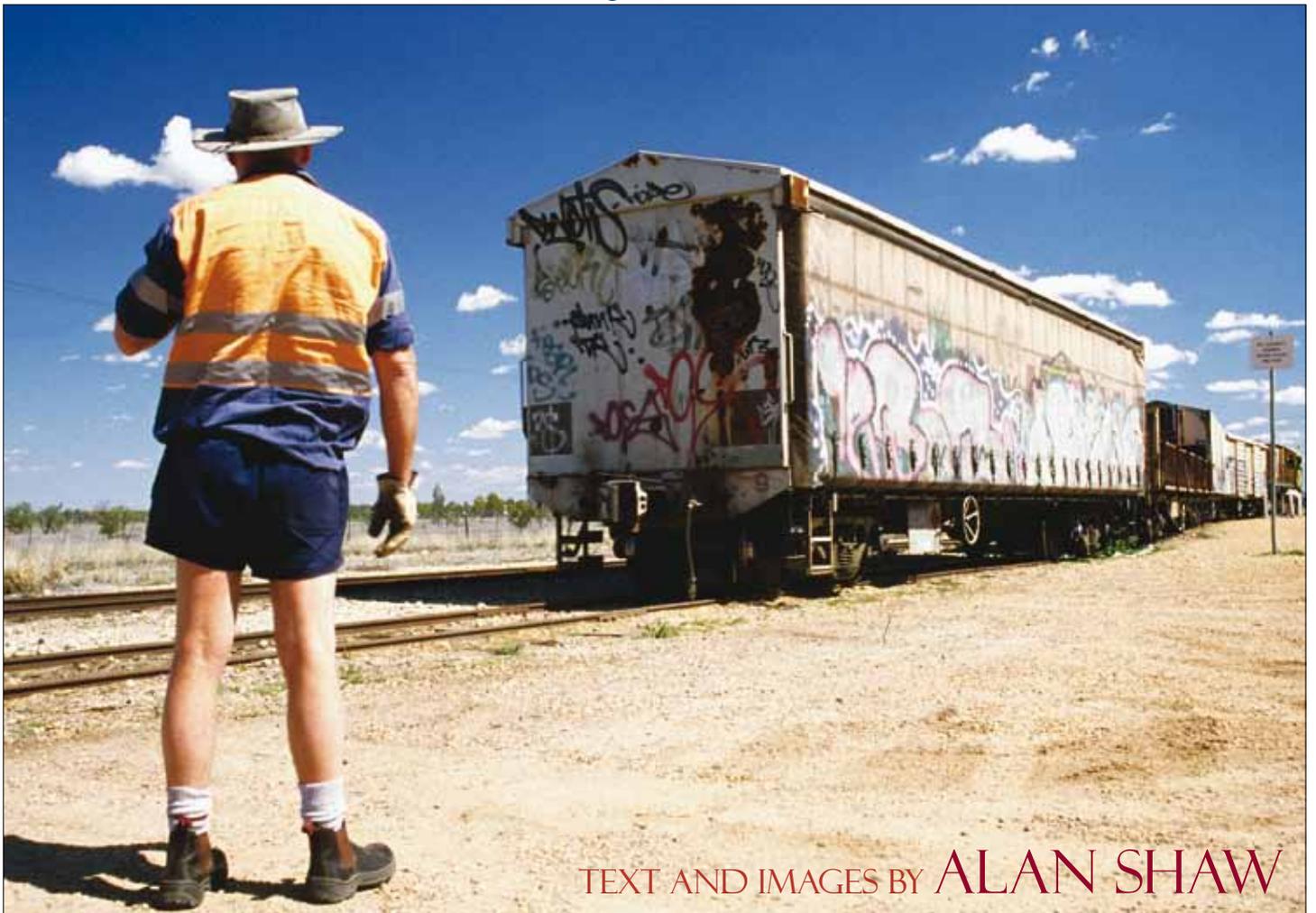




# DIRRANBANDI DREAMING

SEARCHING FOR ONE OF QUIRKY RAIL'S LAST DINOSAURS



TEXT AND IMAGES BY ALAN SHAW



**Page 23, top: A good grain season is in evidence at Noondoo on 6 November 2008. However, the grain will be moved solely by road as rail movement stopped in 2005. Meanwhile, a typically short 6H14 runs down the hill and on to its final destination at Dirranbandi.**

**Page 23, bottom: With Carl Williams in the cab of 1730, the train eases back into the QLink siding under the watchful direction of Kris Hopkins.**

**Above: On the same day, the train runs past the silo at Noondoo, which, in 2007 was not required for service. Having crested the grade, the train rumbles past the station building on its final approach to Dirranbandi.**

**A**s readers of *Railway Digest* will be aware, Australian railways seem to be entering a new golden era, with more activity than ever and ambitious plans for the future, some of which just might come to fruition. After decades of benign neglect from most State governments that operated trains, the new order sees an aggressive rail market making the most of what rail does best—point-to-point trains over reasonable distances.

While this is a wonderful position to be in, for an observer there is the somewhat paradoxical situation that the same forces that allow rail operators to view the future with some optimism have actually reduced the variety on the rails that is so much of the attraction of the railways. Plenty of trains are one thing, but when most rail traffic is either unit trains of bulk products or container trains racing through demolished stations—well, sometimes you can have too much of a good thing.

There is one state in Australia where some vestiges of an older order still survive—Queensland. While Queensland Rail (QR) is a thoroughly modern railway in most respects, it continues to operate services that are at odds with the trends obvious elsewhere. Thus QR, perhaps we can call its lesser operations ‘Quirky Rail’, started 2007 still operating apple trains, a heritage steam outfit and associated Workshops and a brace of little trains conveying small amounts of general freight to small locations at the end of long and spindly branch lines. In a system dominated by coal and other bulk commodities, Quirky Rail provides an added dimension to the personality of QR that would otherwise become as dull and dry as its dominant coal haulage.

Let’s not beat around the bush: QR would probably just as soon not run these trains if it had the choice. After all, in this day and age QR is in the business of making a return on its investment and a

few tonnes of freight here and there are not going to add black ink to the corporate bottom line.

How then do these trains continue to survive, seemingly defying all the laws of economic gravity? The answer lies with the Regional Transport Service Contract that exists between QR and the Queensland Government. In the dry language of the transport bureaucracy the contract “ensures the provision of scheduled general freight train services to western and rural centres of Queensland”. Worth around \$29 million in 2007–2008 the contract is the financial drip-feed that keeps the freight trains going west from Brisbane to Charleville, Cunnamulla and Quilpie, Toowoomba to Dirranbandi, and Rockhampton to Longreach and Winton.

Quirky Rail though may be on the way out, with the apple trains having finished for good in March 2007, and at least some of its other services looking less likely to survive for too much longer. While the contract provides life support for trains that would otherwise have long gone the way of such services in other States, it cannot perform miracles. Witness the demise of the train from Maryborough to Monto that disappeared from sight, seemingly unnoticed, early in 2008. The Monto train provides a grim peek into the future for these services. Rumours also suggest that the heritage operation is set for a major shake-up in the not-too-distant future.

With all that in mind, and over the years having let far too many other opportunities go unrecorded until it was too late, I resolved to try and put some effort into observing and recording what I could of Quirky Rail before it disappears.

And so it was that at the end of August 2007 I was loading my car with food and water, camera gear, maps, a borrowed scanner and a James Ellroy novel to keep me going through any quiet periods. My objective was to see and record westbound train

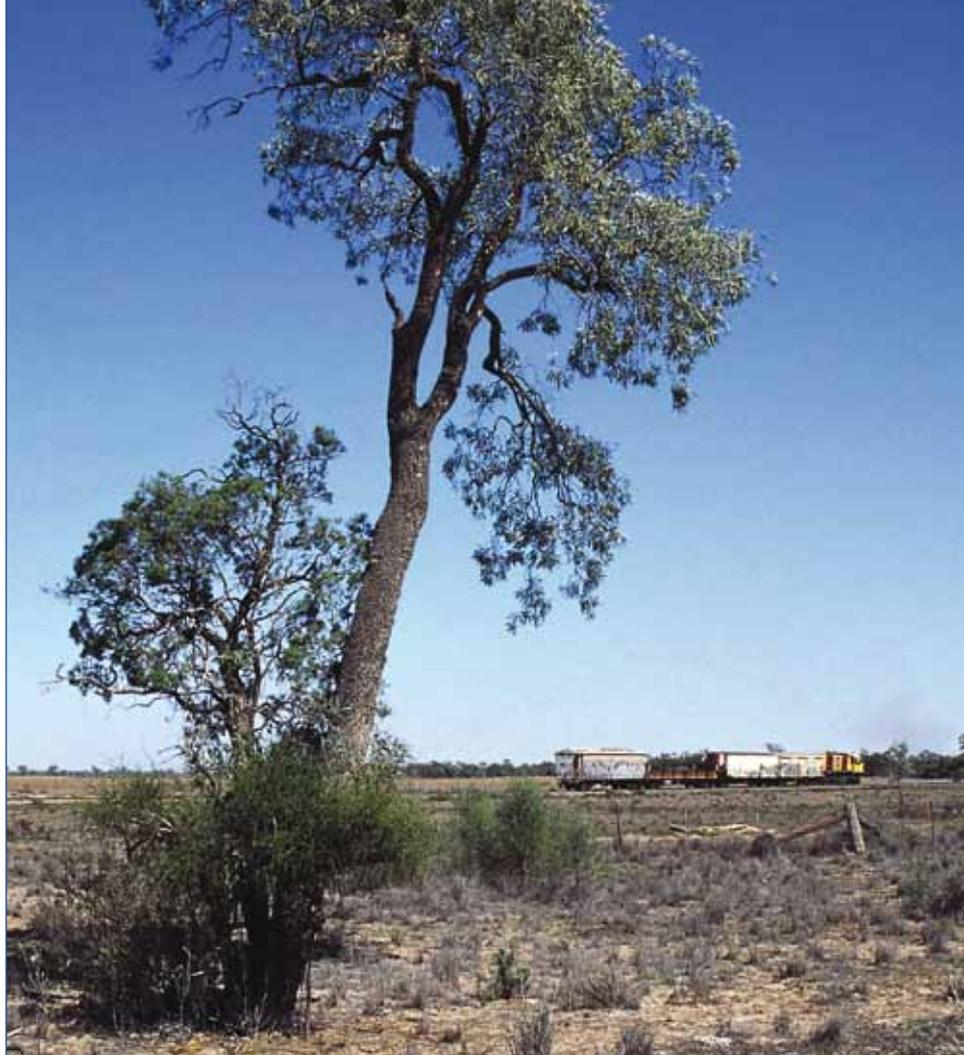
6H14 from Goondiwindi to Dirranbandi and the return working of 6657. This is an account of that trip, with some additional observations as a result of a more recent trip in October 2008.

### Running along the border

Calling a railway the Border Fence may seem odd from the vantage point of the 21st century, but the line to Dirranbandi was considered just that. It's an interesting insight into the nature of the rivalry between colonial governments, and how railway development was as much about politics as building a sensible network.

In December 1884 the Queensland parliament approved raising a loan of almost 10 million pounds to increase the size of its fledgling rail network, which included extension of the Western railway north west from Toowoomba. Among other things, this line was expected to retain Queensland traffic in Queensland, but those wily southerners in NSW had been encouraging growth of its own northern network. As a result, Queensland traffic was leaking across the border. In 1886 an attempt to get approval for a line to run west from Warwick and much closer to the border with NSW was defeated in Parliament. It was not considered a good route by some, and in any event the proposed line assumed a direct line between Ipswich and Warwick would be constructed, rather than relying on the roundabout route through Toowoomba.

With the line to Moree being completed in 1897, the NSW network had closed in to be less than 120 km from the border, and further expansions were being contemplated. The imminent threat to Queensland traffic from down south could no longer be ignored! Soon a line west of Warwick was approved and construction started in December 1901 with the first section to Thane being opened on 1 July 1904. Eighteen months later construction to reach points further west was underway with the line to Inglewood being opened on 8 July 1907 and Goondiwindi on 13 October 1908.



Even after the line was complete to Goondiwindi, the Border Fence was simply not long enough to prevent trade drifting across the border to New South Wales, so further extensions were authorised and subsequently constructed, with the eventual terminus of Dirranbandi being reached on 21 May 1913. Another westward extension, this one of 84 km, was approved soon after, but construction never started because of the outbreak of the First World War. Dirranbandi remained the western-most extent of the Border Fence, 413 kilometres west of Warwick.

Above: The year previous had been another very dry 12 months with no grain being moved from the district at all. The parched, lonely landscape witnesses the passing of a 6H14 service at Dunwinnie on Thursday 30 August 2007.



This map has been reproduced from that originally published on page 156 of ARHS Bulletin, July 1990 (Volume 41, No. 633)

## Chasing 6H14

For someone based in Brisbane like me, the train to Dirranbandi, 6H14, is a somewhat awkward beast to follow. Normally, the timetable has it arriving at Goondiwindi from Toowoomba around 6.30 am on Tuesdays and Thursdays, where it will change crews, do a little shunting and head on to Dirranbandi soon after. Arrival at line's end is usually after noon, depending on what work is needed on the way. After carrying out any shunting at Dirranbandi, turning the loco on the (fork) wye and getting the return train, now numbered 6657, ready for the next day, the crew then book off for rest.

They'll then be back on the job in the early hours of the following morning with the train leaving Dirranbandi around midnight and arriving back in Goondiwindi around 6 am. A new crew will take the train back to Toowoomba, leaving Goondiwindi around 11.30 and on some occasions not until the late afternoon.

That's the usual pattern anyway. By the end of 2008, and with some grain trains finally on the move, the timetable on some days was amended so it ran out and back again on the one day, with a return into Goondiwindi around 6 pm. It will then stow overnight and return to Toowoomba on the usual schedule the following day. There is no obvious pattern to this working and the best thing to do if you plan to visit is to ring the station at Goondiwindi.

To follow the train the choice then is either leave very early on Tuesday or Thursday and drive straight to Goondiwindi in an effort to catch the train there before following it to Dirranbandi, or take a more leisurely approach of leaving on Monday or Wednesday and staying overnight in Goondiwindi and wait for the train to arrive early the following morning. Whether you can photograph the return working on the same day, or need another night in Goondiwindi depends on what timetable is being used.

Taking the second option on a Wednesday also provides the opportunity for following the previous day's return eastbound train between Goondiwindi and, say, Warwick, then head back to Goondiwindi for the evening, and then chase the Thursday westbound.

## Go west

Now I have to admit it had been quite a while since I'd been west of Warwick chasing trains, in part because of little time for photography at all, in part because of choosing to go elsewhere to make use of the odd chance I did have, and more recently due to the drought slashing the grain crops and the trains that haul them.

So travelling west in August 2007 was something of a renewal for me, especially seeing once again the sinuous and hilly route between Thane and Omanama. The drive west was uneventful, although the number of the so-called grey nomads on the road out that way was striking. Also striking was the lengthy stretch of serious roadwork at Cobba da Mana, so serious that the local traffic authority deemed it prudent to run a pilot vehicle ahead of the waiting cars when enough had been rounded up to warrant switching traffic direction, like a cowboy with a small herd of well-behaved cattle—giddy up!

I waited at Yelarbon for eastbound 6H14 that showed up around noon with 1730 at the head of a short train of louvre and refrigerated vans, and then spent the next couple of hours following it back east the way I had come. By around Thane I had retraced my steps about as far as I thought I could and still get back to Goondiwindi at a reasonable hour for some exploration so I did a U-turn and headed back west.

In the last of the day's light I got to Goondiwindi and found my motel for the next few days. A quick cruise past the station showed it fenced from one end to the other, a couple of rakes of stored grain wagons and not much else and a locked gate to the station building car park. There was not much activity and no-one was going to be able to watch it easily either.

With that quick orientation out of the way it was off to dinner and Tracks restaurant across the road from the station beckoned as the obvious choice. Hunger tempered any brief disappointment that the tracks referred to were of the equine rather than steel variety.

The next morning was when the serious stuff would begin, and in territory I had never been to. On my first trip I was at the station around 6.30 am to watch the train, led by 1730, come in and do a small amount of shunting, an R Class refrigerated wagon was detached and seemingly unloaded in no time and the now shortened train was ready to depart west. I introduced myself to the new crew, Carl Williams and Kris Hopkins, who gave every impression of being a very experienced duo with the easy repartee to go with it. Carl suggested that I would be spending the morning chasing one of QR's last dinosaurs.



A little ahead of the train's expected departure at 7.25 am, I headed west to get on the main road, and then played an easy game of leapfrog as I stopped at various locations to get photos. The line was re-laid from Goondiwindi to Thallon with heavier rail in the early 1990s so the little train I was chasing had no trouble keeping a fair pace. Being on the road at that hour, I encountered a few kids by the road waiting for their school bus; the sight of the train running past them being less interesting than their dusty games. Dad though resolutely stayed in his ute reading the paper, the train's passing going completely unnoticed.

My more recent trip though was slightly slower, with the unexpected sight of the train performing 'roadside' at the little town of Toobeah. On that particular trip, driver Mick Ford noted with a big grin on his face that it had been years since anyone had done that.

Talwood, is a regular roadside stop though, with milk being delivered for the local store on Tuesdays. I was a little disappointed that, being there on a Thursday, I might miss the action, but again I was treated to the sight of a train stopping next to the little shed, the driver walking back to a van and then spending a few minutes transferring a few items of groceries from the van to the shed.

The shop keeper would be along later in the morning to collect it. Once a daily occurrence the length and breadth of Australia's rail network, Talwood must be one of the last places this ritual can still be regularly seen.

It's at Talwood the highway starts a dog leg to the north west while the railway takes the direct approach through the rolling country. This is no problem for train chasers though, as there is plenty of time to stay ahead of the train. By Thallon it's time to take the direct road to Dirranbandi and it's also where the railway becomes a remnant of early QR pioneer branch standards, with 20 kg rails laid on very light ballast. Such light rails mean this line is exclusively the domain of the ubiquitous 1720 Class whose tread is light enough for the track out this way.

Just to the west of the station at Thallon is the high bridge across the Moonie River, opened on 14 December 1960 to replace the original low-level bridge. The combination of the two bridges is one of the scenic highlights of the line. Keep in mind though that 'scenic highlight' is a very relative term here.



Thallon is also where the maximum speed from here to the end of the line will be no more than a sedate 40 kmh across the plains. It crossed my mind that this was a train you could probably chase by bike.

The road here is dirt for some of the distance, although in the dry conditions that posed no problems. In wet weather though things can be very different, and even today Dirranbandi is not blessed with a direct all-weather road from Goondiwindi. It is this fact that keeps the railway alive, as a form of wet weather protection for the town. However, the Balonne Shire Council has accepted an offer from the State Government to upgrade the road to Thallon to all-weather status and when that is done the railway will be closed. When this is likely to happen is not yet clear and when I re-visited Dirranbandi in November 2008 there was no sign of the substantial road works that are likely to be needed. There was however plenty of additional road traffic, with grain crops being harvested for the first time in many years and trucks constantly on the move from farm to every silo west of Goondiwindi. The impressive lines of trucks waiting to disgorge their grain, and the grain being stored on the ground were both harbingers of the grain trains that will soon be needed to get the grain to the port in Brisbane.

While train speeds are low, the line is an easy place to experience the railfan's dilemma of wondering whether 'this' would be a shot worth stopping for, or whether 'that' one that looks good on the map would be better. Inevitably some poor choices were made on my first trip, and there are a couple of spots where the road and the railway don't run that closely together so access is not always as easy as you might expect from a quick look at the map. And being generally low scrubby country there is very little chance of much other than across the paddock views of the train. I was grateful to have a second chance in November 2008 to fill in the gaps from my first trip.

Some excellent shots are possible at the bridge at Thallon, the woolshed at Noondale and the siding at Hawkston as well as the grain silo at Noondoo. Wool was once one of the mainstays of the line, and although some is still dispatched east from the QLink depot at Dirranbandi the faded and gnarled timber of Noondale's shed spoke of many years since it had been used. On my first trip I was surprised that the grain facilities at Noondoo seemed to be undergoing maintenance if not expansion, even though it was probably some while since it was



last used, and with the drought's grip seeming to tighten every month through 2007, the prospect for use in the near future seemed very low.

Sadly for the future of this line, even when grain did return after some decent rain in 2008 it did not benefit the railway, since the silo is no longer served by rail.

Why? Because Queensland Rail would no longer tolerate running partly loaded wagons on account of the light nature of the track and no-one wanted to fund the upgrade of the line beyond Thallon. With no agreement with the grain distributors on who would pay for the upgrade, QR withdrew service to the silo in 2005. With that decision, the future of the line beyond Thallon became more tenuous, and the sight of 1730 at the head of 5 lightly loaded wagons on its twice weekly trek passing over the ridge, past the silo and on to the descent into Dirranbandi about twenty kilometres further on did nothing to inspire confidence that even Quirky Rail could justify keeping this service going for much longer. And a little over a year later, a battered 1729D heading an even shorter train suggested further decline. It all depends on when the road is upgraded.

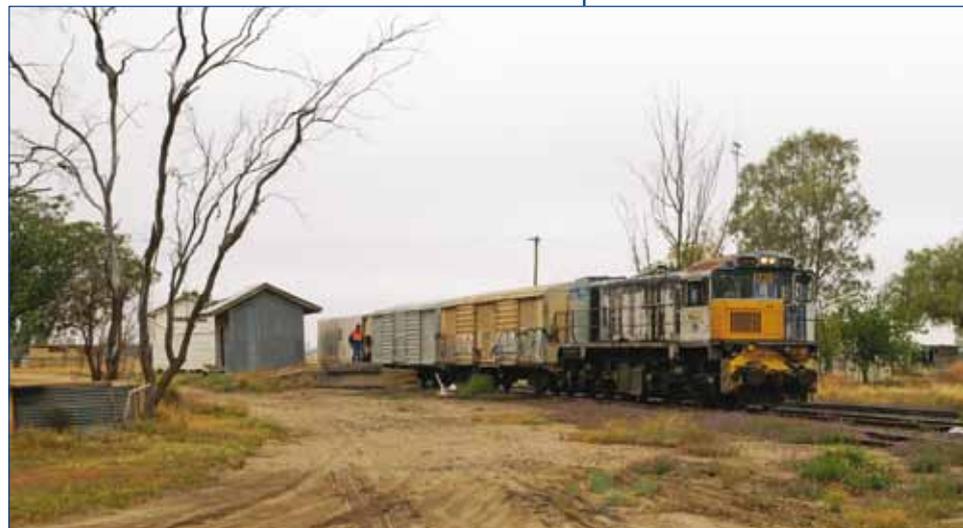
As 1730 rolled to a stop in Dirranbandi, Carl and Kris shunted the few wagons into the QLink road, and ran forward to let a couple of the locals who were waiting for the train unload their goods from the wagons directly into the back of their utes. Will they miss the train when it goes? "Not really, mate" says one of the locals. "Look, I like the service and it's been pretty reliable, but it hardly matters if it comes by train or truck. It won't be much of a big deal." The effect of the train's eventual demise might be met with a kind of stoic rural acceptance.

**Opposite page: The train stops at Talwood to undertake roadside duties on 30 August 2007. While the iron horse at the train's head idles, a couple of warm-blooded horses ham it up for the camera.**

**Above left: The same day at Dirranbandi, the rails bake and creak with expansion in the sun.**

**Above right: 1729D powers over the crest and past the loop at Hawkston on Thursday 6 November 2008. Newspapers for the local landowners used to be dropped off here until quite recently.**

**Below: While roadside working is a regular event at Talwood further along the line, it is very unusual to take place at Toobeah. Nevertheless, on 6 November 2008 driver Mick Ford is required to do just that in a light fog that will soon burn off in the late spring sunshine.**





**Above: On 6 November 2008, a slow moving 1729D grinds and squeals its way around the triangle to be turned prior to heading back to Toowoomba the following morning.**

**Right: In a scene that in essence has not changed for decades, on 6 November 2008 driver Mick Ford performs essential roadside duties at Talwood. Several boxes of various food products will be transferred to the shed, for later collection by the shopkeeper across the road. Talwood must be one of the last places in the developed world to regularly witness such a duty.**

**Opposite page: Having finished the small amount of shunting required at Dirranbandi on 6 November 2008, and with the train now stowed and ready for a departure very early the following morning, the crew head for the motel at the end of the tracks for some much needed rest.**

I couldn't help but feel though, that the residents will not really be losing a train, but a tangible psychological link to other communities.

With the inbound train sorted, 1730 then uncoupled and Kris and Carl turned it on the wye, rounded up the few wagons needed for tomorrow's train and then shut the loco down. With that brief flurry of activity out of the way, Kris said to Carl, "Well, mate, off to the chalet" and walked across the weeds to one of QR's dwellings for rest. They'd be back on the job very early the next morning to take the return east. A year later that had changed, with the dwelling no longer available and the crew resting at the motel near the station.

I occupied myself with a stroll around the rest of the station limits. The track plan of Dirranbandi suggested a quite extensive terminus had been in place, although by 2007 only three roads are actually needed to provide service for the small amount of traffic still on offer. The remainder is still in place but the sight of several disconnected tracks told its own story of traffic decline. Although looks may well be deceiving, Dirranbandi was one of those places that did not seem to generate much activity, and I could not help but wonder how the QLink staff kept themselves occupied in the spells between trains. I doubted Dirranbandi would do much to tempt a couple of seasoned drivers like Carl and Kris from the serious business of rest. Much the same might be said of the town itself, as it appeared that a brief cotton-based boom of a few years ago had dried up with the drought. Even after the floods upstream in early 2008, not much had changed on my second trip, although a couple of the shopkeepers were expressing some optimism that future cotton crops will bring back some sort of prosperity to the town.

I contented myself with a late lunch in the shade of some beautiful trees in the small park next to the station and reflected that Dirranbandi has almost always been served by a twice weekly train, plus the odd special train. You could almost say that 6H14/6657 were the spiritual descendents of the fabled Dirranbandi Mail, that by the time it stopped running in August 1994 had the distinction of being the last mail (overnight) train using timber-bodied cars in the country. Towards the end of its life, the Mail also had the curious timetable of starting in Brisbane, but only returning as far as Toowoomba.

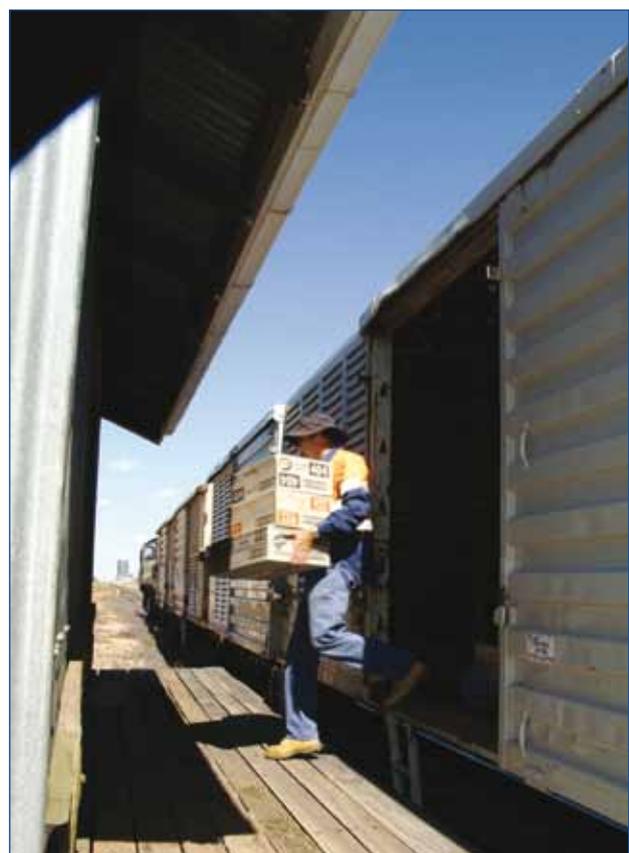
Perhaps recognising the allure of the Mail, and the line itself, there have been the odd special trains on the line in recent years.

October 2003 saw a six-day steam safari organised by the ARHS, while 2007 saw two trips: a June visit by members of the Australian Society of Section Car Operators (what a sight that must have been as the little yellow vehicles motored across the plains in line-astern formation!) and a visit by QR's unique railcar, 1901, during June 2007. Just recently, over the Australia Day weekend, the ARHS ran an air-conditioned train appropriately called the *Bandilander*, headed by newly restored 1620. There are many worse ways to spend an hour or so than thinking about such matters.

The following day was likely to be a long one, with a planned pre-dawn departure to try and get some dawn shots of the return train, and then follow it back as far east as its running would allow, before heading back to Brisbane. With that in mind I gladly had an early night in Goondiwindi.

On the road a little later than I'd wanted the following morning, I drove back west to meet the train in the pre-dawn darkness, with a near-full moon providing some guidance. I pulled into the station at Bungunya and set up the tripod and camera and waited. It wasn't long before the train's headlight appeared in the distance and I was glad I had not attempted to travel further west to intercept it.

With the shot out of the way, I then followed it back to Goondiwindi, where the train arrived at around 7.20 am. With the train in the station platform, Carl and Kris spent a few minutes on some housework, sweeping out the cab and restocking the fridge with bottled water. With those tasks out of the way, they spent about ten minutes shunting and collecting the wagons dropped off by the westbound train a couple of days before, and then closed down



the engine and booked off. The new crew would arrive at around 11 for an expected departure at 11.30. Carl told me that Goondiwindi was a great place to work, although with the drought that never seemed to end work was pretty quiet.

Fortunately 2008 did see some rain, and by the end of the year the odd grain train was on the line between Goondiwindi and Thallon.

Having already discovered two days previously that the line between Goondiwindi and the fly-speck of Kurumbul was not easy to follow, I opted to leave town early and head there to wait. The train should be along there about noon so I thought I'd just pull over, find a tree for some shade and let the train come to me, before following back to Warwick. It seemed like a good time to dig out my James Ellroy novel and settle in for a half hour or so.

Al reads; breathes fresh air through wound down windows. The scanner is quiet. No train headlight on the horizon. Call it: no train; time passes, Brisbane beckons. Plan decoheres. Trucks pass on the road. Al's car sways in the slipstream. Drivers wave cheery. Trucks dump their loads in the paddock. Graders level it. Dust clouds rise resultant. Al breathes dusty air. Al gets out of the car. No train sound over the wind and the grader. Al stretches his legs—get the blood PUMPING. Wait—the scanner bips! 6657 through Callington. Ten minutes away. Plans recohre. Al throws down the novel. Al knows it will take a lot longer to get Ellroy out of his head.

The next three hours or so were spent following the train east, and I took the opportunity to use some spots I noticed a couple of days earlier. This was classic chase strategy: think ahead of likely locations, and chase the train from one to the next. Hopefully enough time has been allowed to make sure none are missed, taking into account possible delays—like the extensive roadworks at Cobba da Mana. Fortunately my timing was spot on and I just made it to the end of the next piloted convoy at the tail of another herd of grey nomads. Giddy up. Back in the hilly country, some good views were found on some quiet roads just off the highway near Chain of Ponds. The trees were pretty thick, and while I could see some drives to houses, the vegetation meant I couldn't actually see them. It made me wonder how that Neighbourhood Watch sign was expected to mean anything if you can't see your neighbours.

Maybe they like to keep an eye on railfans.

It was on the last leg just before Thane that the flashing blue lights of the local highway cops caught my eye in the rear-view mirror. Struth! Maybe that neighbourhood watch sign really does work! But no, the car soon sped past me and off into the distance after some more important quarry. By the time I got to Warwick, around 4 pm I had spent the best part of three days chasing the same working, twice westbound and once eastbound, with only 1730 as the motive power. So although following 6657 northwards to Toowoomba until the light ran out was tempting, I had a dinner engagement in Brisbane to get to. Shots around Toowoomba would have to wait for another day, and it took well over a year before I could indulge in more shots west of Goondiwindi.

There is of course always some risk with leaving things until later, especially with a train that is on the endangered list, but circumstances sometimes leave no choice. Indeed, not long before Christmas 2007, I heard of a 6657 working that was trapped by washaways on the line around Noondoo, the result of decent storms west of Goondiwindi. Not surprisingly the road was also closed, although a QR truck was able to rescue the train crew.

It was some days before the train was retrieved and the line re-opened. No doubt some serious questions were asked in Brisbane about whether to open the line again at all, but it seems a commitment to the community holds enough weight to keep the line open until the road is capable of withstanding such rains in future. The irony of such a rain-induced closure would have been rich.

So the train continues to run, as an example of Quirky Rail. It may do so for some time yet, but one thing is for sure, it won't do so indefinitely. Nor will the other surviving little trains to Quilpie and Cunnamulla. Now, when can I find time to get out that way? It's a long way to travel, but such is the attraction of Quirky Rail that a visit sooner rather than later is now being planned.

## Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank the QR crew and station staff for being so willing to provide information and tolerate my presence, especially Carl Williams.

## Reference

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