

To Grandchester and beyond!

Text and images by Alan Shaw



Left: 1720 and 1743D lead 6725 through Oakey, past stored and rusting grains wagons while QR struggles to shift a sizeable grain harvest.

Below: An empty coal train rolls west through Gowrie.

I have a confession to make. When given the chance for rail photography, I'm just as likely to head west from Brisbane, as go north or south. Sure, the North Coast Line to Rockhampton and beyond has glamour and variety, while the *other* North Coast Line—the one heading south to Sydney—has faster, heavier, possibly even more important container trains. But really, the combination of proximity, ease of observation and steady procession of trains makes the Western Line hard to beat.

It must be said though, it is *not* glamorous. There are no prestige passenger trains, no high-priority freight trains, no flashy competition between big corporate players. And unlike QRNational's other coal and mineral lines, the Western Line cannot show the results of a huge infrastructure spend that still reverberates like an echo from the coal and mineral boom. No, the Western Line between Ipswich, Toowoomba and beyond is a no-nonsense, roll up your sleeves, dirt under your fingernails, make do with what you've got kind of operation.

And then, during what is almost universally referred to as the worst global financial downturn since the late 1920s, QRNational found itself grappling with the impact of a locomotive shortage. Whatever the reason behind the temporary shortage, fewer 2300 Class locomotives available for traffic raised the interesting possibility that 40-year old 1720s might be called upon to fill at least some of the gap.

With that in mind, a rare free day on Saturday 4 July promised some trackside variety, and this proved to be the case. Highlights of the day included:

- 1761D and 1769D coasting down the grade into Grandchester not long after dawn, in charge of 6825 container train, about to cross an empty coal train,
- 2481D leading the Brisbane-bound *Westlander* through Lockyer (between Gatton and Toowoomba) at 07.50, where it crossed the empty coal train seen earlier at Grandchester,
- 2490H and 2487H finishing loading a ballast train at Malu (near Jondaryan) in sight of the still-considerable amount of grain stored on the ground, as well as a reminder from the wickedly cold wind blowing from the south-west that Queensland really does get cold sometimes,

- A vision of years past across the black soil plains as 1720D and 1743D worked hard on a lengthy 6725 general freight, overtaking the ballast train at Malu,
- Satisfying my growing hunger at Spring Bluff (where else, might I ask?) where, over a chicken filo and coffee, I watched another empty coal train working slowly uphill,
- Opting for another coffee and then seeing the signals clear again for 6650 empty grain to work through, while listening to the sound of another loaded coal train roll into the next siding up the line at Rangeview, as I was leaving,





- Watching 2499D and 2480D on that empty grain train grind its way through Toowoomba in the now-late afternoon, before stabling in the yard ready to be taken out later that night to Thallon for loading,
- Figuring that even with the best part of a two hour head-start, I might still be able to drive to Helidon and catch up with the loaded coal train seen at Rangeview, and then see it arrive at Helidon two minutes after getting there,
- The last observation for the day at Grantham of another pair of 1720s powering up with empty 6H24 cotton train to Goondiwindi, making a fine sight against the clear cold light of dusk.

Not bad at all: of the 13 trains seen in 11 hours, three freights were hauled by pairs of 1720s, the ballast train and the empty grain train were hauled by pairs of 2470s, as well as seeing the *Westlander* and the usual mix of coal workings to and from the mines. On the drive home I concluded that: a) the line continues to be busy and interesting; b) the locomotive shortage is adding variety; c) 40-year-old 1720s are continuing to earn their keep and d) I have to do this again soon.

Above left: The Brisbane-bound *Westlander* powers out of Murphy's Creek for a cross with an empty coal train at Lockyer.

Above right: The ballast train 'hidden' in the grain silos at Malu.

Below: Another view of twin 1720 Class locomotives leading 6725 freight, here waiting at Gowrie to cross an empty coal train.

