Ringing in the changes

Alan Shaw

You stand near the site of the now-closed and gutted Staff hut of the loop at Glenapp, just north of the New South Wales/Queensland border, with a gentle but unseasonably chill breeze in your face. The sun has set behind the hills but there is still a hint of autumn light. Following southeast Queensland's 'Summer of Endless Grey', the clear sky is a welcome sight, as are the distant thunderheads.

There! There—did you see that? The red light at the south end of the loop just cleared to green. Soon enough, the hum of a pair of NRs keeping Pacific National's BM4 in check can be heard approaching in the distance.

You have been waiting to see this for a long time. Not just the usual wait of trying to find the chance to escape work and family commitments for a few hours, but for years and years. This is the northern end of Australian Rail Track Corporation's (ARTC) North Coast Line North Coast Line, which until now has been caught in a time warp. At long last, what you are watching is the line going through its final transition to operating with a modern safeworking system.

Unhindered, BM4 roars past you, stirring up the air and your imagination, as it blasts its way towards the Border Spiral, Loadstone and points south. This is the first time you have seen such an event on this line, and it is a stark contrast to what you saw a six months earlier at the same location.

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Above: A loaded Staff machine in Glenapp Signal Box on Saturday 12 April. Alan Graham

Jump back six months. You'd travelled to Glenapp to watch a cross between a late-running BM7 service with a northbound WB3 steel train. According to your information, the northbound would be at Glenapp within an hour of BM7's arrival. Waiting at Glenapp's Staff hut, you could not see the south-bound train enter the loop from the north, but you've seen this before so you knew what it had to do to get out of the way. You could hear brace of CLP/Fs come to a stop as one of the drivers left the cab. You knew the driver had to unlock the small cabin at the end of the loop, insert his operator's key into the panel and press the 'cancel' button to clear the Home signal from red to yellow. Then he waited, as he would a few times this evening, for the timeout to complete that would finally allow him to press the 'loop' button to switch the point to the loop. After removing his key and locking the box, he would then have climbed back into the cab. The lusty chant of around 9000 EMD horses then powered up briefly as the train got moving again and ran slowly down the loop and into view around the low ridge.

Once again the train stopped as it passed the staff hut, allowing a driver to leave the leading cab and hit the ground, and then watch as his co-driver let the train roll down the hill to stop yet again at the southern end of the loop to await WB3. Back at the switch, the timing mechanism would set it back to the main line once the train had cleared the track circuit and the timer had run its course.

Meanwhile, the driver walked across to the Staff hut, unlocked it and went through the ritual of changing the Staff, signing the train register, and calling the ARTC controller at Broadmeadow with the time of arrival, and the Staff's number. He then hung up the phone and went through the same process with the QR South West Controller. His job, though, was not yet done as he waited at the hut to exchange the Staff for the northbound when it eventually showed, to at least save that train's crew the trouble of getting off their loco.

"It's just a courtesy thing", he said, "and they'd do the same for us."

Considering that there are five such loops between Acacia Ridge and the start of the Centralised Traffic Control (CTC) that reached Casino in 1983, it was no wonder ARTC has finally replaced the old safeworking system on these loops. The pity is that it has taken so long.

Did you mention old signalling system on those loops? The tragic thing is that the system being replaced actually is not much more than 10 years old. Until 1995, the line had no fewer than eight crossing loops between Acacia Ridge and Casino. They were signalled, short, and were usually staffed for at least two shifts a day. Just the thing to handle the short and relatively frequent trains running on the line.

National Rail Corporation was established in 1991 and, within its limited investment budget, set about trying to reshape the northern end of the NSW North Coast Line into something more suited to the late twentieth century (Train Orders were initially intended to replace the Electric Staff Working). By the time National Rail had finished the upgrade, only Greenbank remained more or less in its original condition and length (of just over 400 metres), while Glenapp was lengthened to 1535 metres. The loops at Kagaru, Tamrookum, Border Loop, The Risk, Kyogle and Fairy Hill were closed and eventually removed while new loops three to four times longer were constructed at Bromelton, Loadstone and Kyogle North. It was a strange sight at places like Kagaru and Tamrookum, seeing just the main line where once there was a loop, a short platform, signalling and the staff hut—not to mention someone in the hut who would willingly provide train information to wandering photographers! All these changes finally allowed National Rail to run its long-sought-after longer and fewer trains in its quest for operating efficiency.

Early expectations were that the safe working system might be the long-awaited extension of the CTC beyond Casino, or possibly a train order system, given that other states had been using such systems for many years. New South Wales, for example, had been trialling train order working for some time. As it happened, however, neither system was introduced. Instead, State Rail opted to use a variation of the existing miniature electric staff system, to allow train crews to work themselves through the loops without needing signallers, while providing some additional protection over the previous system.

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So the fine tradition of a nineteenth-century safeworking system was applied to infrastructure built for the twenty-first. The old system will not be missed by those who run the trains. Waiting for the northbound to cross BM7 at Glenapp, BM7's driver decided to stay at the hut rather than wait in the cab of his train. With long trains and his locos at the far end of the loop, by the time he'd got to them it would have been just about time to walk back.

As he said, "Glenapp's not a bad place to spend some time with yourself, but in winter it can get pretty cold. Still, at least this hut has a heater—you should be in the hut at Loadstone in mid-winter. That one's just an icebox."

Mind you, you can't help noticing how decrepit the hut now looks, and wonder whether it will collapse from termite damage before it is actually no longer needed. The holes in the wall would do little to keep the cold air out.

Eventually WB3 could be heard in the hills to the south and before long its driver called Glenapp: "WB3 on the way to Glenapp."

"BM7 in the hole. I'll hand up the staff for you," said BM7's driver.

"Thanks," came the reply.

As WB3 moved slowly up the grade in the dark, BM7's driver readied the staff and held it high. The driver of WB3 stopped his train briefly next to the cabin, dropped his staff on the ground where it landed with a dull, metallic thud and then took the new staff from the offered hand. With that, the trio of NRs opened up to get the big, heavy train moving again. You reflect that even this simple task has changed over the years, from the time when the staff could be changed by automatic staff exchanger at some loops (south of the border at least), or having the signaller exchange the staff on the fly, then more recently to train crews acting out the courtesy of exchanging a staff with a train in motion. Now, with new regulations, even that has changed, and trains are required to stop before a crew member is permitted to leave the cab.

Picking up the staff, the driver of BM7 returned to the staff hut, inserted the staff just dropped from the northbound into the machine and released a new staff for his train. He then signed the train register, walked over to the phone and made two calls to control. You know the two calls are just another manifestation of old state-based ownership, with Glenapp marking the boundary of Coast Control from Broadmeadow and QR's South West Control in Brisbane. With all the formalities out of the way, the driver locked the door of the hut, gave you a cheery goodnight, and disappeared into the darkness to walk down to the end of his train. Ten minutes later you heard the brakes release and saw the train slowly start to roll before gathering pace to attack the long climb up to the border.

Below: Captured during the last round of changes—the extension of Glenapp Loop—as a National Rail superfreighter led by 8237 rolls by during late 1995. As a matter of interest, the station building in the foreground (built to Queensland Railways design) was later demolished and all the action described in the article is centred on the Signal Box behind it. Alan Shaw

Top: A signaller waiting at Glenapp observes the approach of a Pacific National superfreighter on Saturday 12 April. This was during a period when Pilot Staff-Working was in effect, to govern the passage of freight trains and XPT services through Glenapp. Alan Graham

Above: Another signaller holds aloft the staff for the driver of an approaching freight during a night shift back in November 2007. Alan Shaw

You then pack up your gear and leave, and the hut returns to the solitude it has experienced for the previous 10 years.

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While the 'everything is old again' approach by National Rail hardly advanced things on the Far North Coast, National Rail is, of course, no longer with us, and the infrastructure is now leased by the NSW State Government to the Australian Rail Track Corporation, while QR continues to own the infrastructure north of the QLD border.

In June 2005 the Australian Rail Track Corporation announced its North–South Investment Strategy to increase capacity and reliability and reduce transit times for trains between Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. Under the plan, the existing loop at Greenbank is being extended, while new loops have been built at Namoona, just north of Casino, and Tamrookum on the site of the loop closed and removed just over 10 years ago. For observers though, the big change is finally replacing the miniature electric staff with a rail vehicle detection system (as centralised traffic control is now called), which will soon extend all the way to Brisbane.

According to the ARTC, these changes, combined with the changes being made elsewhere on the Brisbane–Sydney–Melbourne corridor, should allow transit times for Brisbane–Sydney trains to be reduced by almost four hours, and an impressive nine-and-a-half hours to be shaved off the transit times for trains between Brisbane and Melbourne.

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The changeover took place in the week starting 7 April and took about 10 days, with the contractors decommissioning the old system from Loadstone to Bromelton and firing up the new signalling system. The section from Bromelton to Greenbank is now the last stretch of track governed by the electric staff system, and it too will be replaced in the near future, removing miniature electric train staff working from the entire North Coast Line forever.

Not surprisingly, the changeover period brought lots of people down to the loops—to actually commission the new signalling and to work the trains through the loops once the old safeworking equipment had been removed—as well as fans wanting to document the changeover. So the staff huts, having had no regular human occupation for over a decade, briefly hosted men charged with the responsibility for keeping the trains safe. To help them while away the hours between trains, they were well-prepared with laptops and a healthy supply of DVDs, while the staffs they exchanged weren't the original miniature type. Oh No. These were big pilot staffs brought in especially for the job, which quite possibly could find additional uses for keeping the rats and brown snakes that populated the area at bay.

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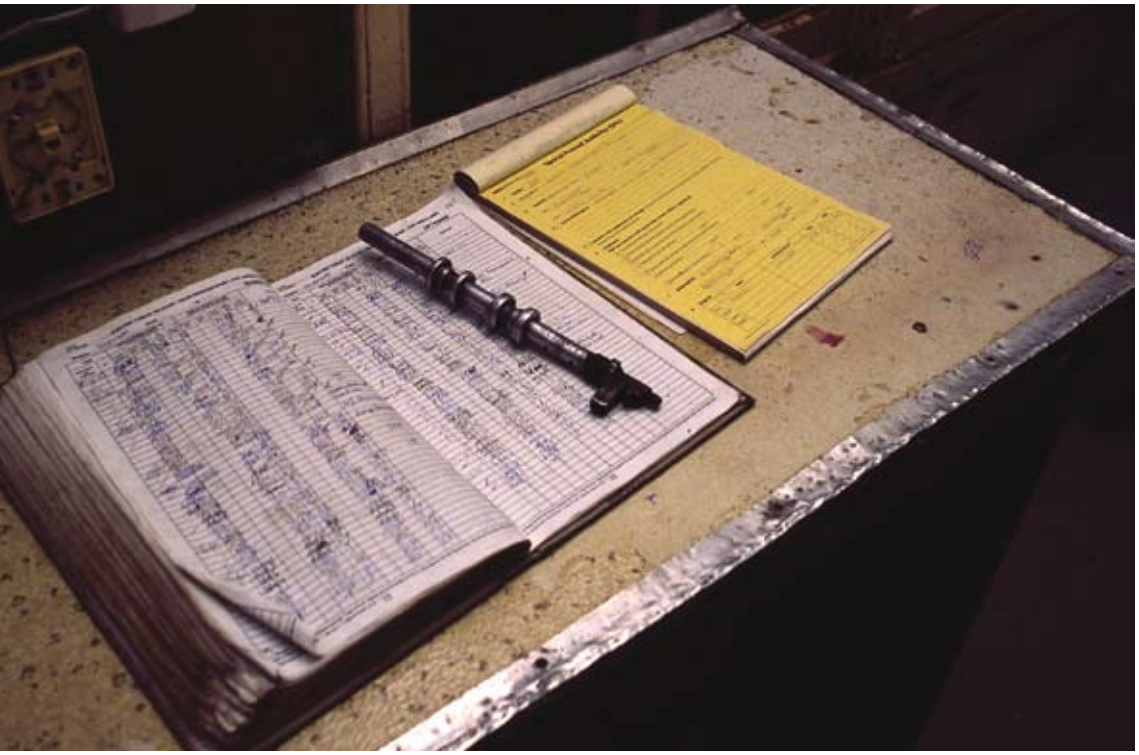
Back to the present, standing next to the staff hut at Glenapp, you watch with mixed emotions. You are glad that this long-overdue change has finally happened. After all, the relatively small investment will reduce transit times and increase overall flexibility and help the rail operators to be more competitive. You hope that sooner rather than later the line will host more trains carrying more freight than now. You like the look of the signals and their implications for the line staying a part of the national rail network.

You also know, though, that unless there is actually a cross at a loop, those same improved transit times that might eventually lead to more trains on the line will also, somewhat ironically, make your job as an observer harder. You know that little cameos of human interaction like you experienced six months before are now virtually a thing of the past. Archaic though they were, those staff changes and their enforced train stops sure made life easier when it came to chasing trains along the narrow Lion's Road. You wonder how you will adjust to the change. For now though, the signal at the southern end of the loop has again cleared to green, announcing the imminent arrival of BA6. You'd better get moving and set up for the photo.



Above: Left to their own devices—a staff rests on the open log book in Glenapp Signal Box during November 2007.

Left: Bypassed—CTC tells the story, although the 'front' light has been left on at the now closed Signal Box on Monday 14 April.
Both photos by Alan Shaw