

# *Running out of time under a big Queensland Sky*



*Text and images by Alan Shaw*

The afternoon sun by now had lost its scorching intensity. It was just plain hot, hot and still under a mid-summer sky. I was leaving Westgate, a junction in the far south-west of Queensland, although apart from the railway there is nothing to the place. I had just seen one freight slip by, and in normal circumstances half an hour later could have been waiting for another. This is no busy main line with unit trains hundreds of metres long. No, the scheduled pair of once-weekly trains typically hauled a mere half-dozen or so vans between them, each headed by a single 1720 Class Clyde/EMD diesel-electric.

While a national advertising campaign suggested we should 'Be part of Something Big', and buy shares in the float of the newly created QRNational, Westgate is in the middle of an altogether different Queensland rail environment. It is an area that is the last bastion of pioneer standard light rail: minimal earth works, short trains of general freight and rail workers who are happy to share their time. An area of all-too evident decline and neglect. Apart from the skies and the land itself, there is not much big to be part of here, for while this is the heart of that which I have come to call 'Quirky Rail', its pulse is slow and weak, and facing an end sooner rather than later.

For me though, 'Quirky Rail' is my kind of QR, having discovered its existence chasing the last of the apple trains from The Summit in 2007, and then the train to Dirranbandi (see *Railway Digest*, April 2009). Its attraction was what led me to make two trips during 2010 to first follow the train to Quilpie, and then six months later another trip to follow the Cunnamulla train.

I had originally hoped to see both trains in a single trip, as for many years there had been a twice-weekly freight train running west from Brisbane to arrive in Charleville on the Western Line in the early

**On 28 September 2010, one of the crew of the Tuesday afternoon train to Cunnamulla sets the road at the lonely junction of Westgate. Soon, locomotive 1724D will be rattling its way south over the light rails and ballast heading for a late evening arrival.**

afternoon on Tuesday and Thursday. After shunting, a train would then leave Charleville for Quilpie, followed shortly afterwards by a train to Cunnamulla. On Wednesdays and Fridays the opposite would take place with the respective trains leaving early from Cunnamulla and Quilpie and combining at Charleville for the return to Brisbane. The return train would work all the intermediate stations along the line, and by the time it reached the eastern Darling Downs, it could well be an over-length train running in between coal trains, headed by a couple of main line diesels and a small brace of 1720s as vehicles.

As an indication of the decline I was soon to encounter though, by the time I was ready to venture west the train had become a Tuesday-only service. On my first trip, I planned to see the Cunnamulla train, assuming that if the freight services to Quilpie and Cunnamulla were axed, cattle trains from Quilpie could justify a second trip to observe that line.

The Darling Downs was only just coming out of an especially long and brutal drought by January 2010. And as is often the way, the land emerged from drought by delivering a bumper crop of grain, the first good crop for many years. Driving west, it thus seemed odd to see two rakes of stored grain wagons at Oakey, while the adjacent highway was busy with trucks new and old carting what was once such a staple for QR. Indeed, in the occasional period of quiet, it was almost possible to hear the grain growing for what looked to be another good crop next season.





Left: On the way to Charleville, the train from Brisbane drops off wagons at Mitchell in one of the few signs of activity on the morning of Australia Day 2010. The platform in the middle distance is the remains of a shed destroyed in a storm the previous year. Below: One for Cunnamulla, one for Quilpie. At Charleville the two branch line trains should be about ready for their afternoon runs to their respective destinations. Such was not to be on this hot January day in 2010 though, as 1723D could not be refuelled and so the train was cancelled. The freight would be trucked to Cunnamulla the next day, in an ominous foreshadowing of the line's likely future. Right: It's just after 8 on the morning of 27 January 2010, and 1725D is about to leave Quilpie with its modest load of 4 wagons. The wagons on the left arrived from Charleville the night before, and by this time had been almost unloaded.





For a first time visitor, arriving in Charleville is misleading. The station is very easy to find, but the town itself lurks over a small ridge giving the impression of a once-large rail facility too big for the town it serves. Today of course, the railway precinct has all the hallmarks of neglect, with a trimmed down yard, almost no freight vehicles apart from cattle wagons that may one day be returned to service and, as I arrived before the train around lunch time, not a single locomotive either. The station building itself is a gracious structure, with a cool and airy central waiting room in a kind of art-deco style, echoing to the distant voices of the small army of workers scattered around the building.

With the arrival of 1723D and 1725D ahead of their little train, activity soon picked up. Shunting saw the two wagons for Charleville placed appropriately, with the four wagons for Quilpie behind 1725D and three for Cunnamulla behind 1723D representing the two trains to venture shortly into the heart of 'Quirky Rail' territory.

While observing the action, the Driver of the train to Cunnamulla was bemused to hear of my plan to follow his train, saying Cunnamulla was a very quiet place these days. With some of his colleagues, they were willing to reflect on the uncertainty of the railway's future this far beyond the safety of coal revenue in a soon-to-be-sold privatised railway. According to one, I was fortunate to find myself witnessing the second last service ever, while someone else ventured there'd be at least five more services, but whatever the number, it couldn't be too many more. Conversation soon turned to reminisces of better days, when there were 36 men in loco service compared to the current 11. Once upon a time, Charleville had a reputation for being a good money place that attracted people to the peace and quiet of far western Queensland.

Those days must have been some time ago though, as the Quilpie and Cunnamulla lines have both been on notice since at least 1993 when the Government of the day completed its Rail Taskforce Report on 29 Branch Lines. The Taskforce was a response to the Government's earlier decision to simply close those 29 lines. Whatever the politics of the day were however, both the Quilpie and Cunnamulla lines were spared closure,

with the proviso that cost recovery more than double from the 25% or so that existed at the time. Whether that target was ever reached I don't know, but even the most romantic rail-idealist would be hard pressed today to see how the revenue from a half a dozen or so wagons a week on both lines would come remotely close to that target.

Given the decline, I had to ask what jobs the 11 loco crew still did these days. One of the Drivers noted that his job that afternoon would be his first trip for a fortnight, but that his house and yard had never been tidier or in better shape. "So how do you handle that?" I asked. "Mate", came the forthright reply, "It's driving me crazy, but out here when you're too old to think about moving, what can you do? Not that it can last much longer." With those reflections in mind, I sauntered off to find a coffee to fill in the couple of hours before the trains left, and to reflect on what it must be like to work in an environment of such uncertainty and evident corporate indifference.

Back at the station to watch the first departure, the train to Quilpie, I was told good-humouredly that I'd better get in the car and follow that one, as the train to Cunnamulla would not be running. "Why, what's the problem?" "We can't get the mobile tanker pump to work so we can't refuel the loco." "So what's going to happen to the freight?" "Oh, we'll just send a truck down tomorrow." A bigger QRNsafu ! The Driver's disappointment at not being able to do some real work was palpable. "Jeez, what kind of outfit are we working for?"

So that was how I found myself at the junction in the scrub ambitiously called Westgate, before tackling the two-hour drive through the dusk to the neat and tidy opal-town of Quilpie. Arriving well after dark, I was very glad to get the key to my aging donga and close the door on the hot night and get some rest.

Emerging at six the following morning, I soon learned that the "cool" of a Quilpie night meant a minimum of 33 degrees. But they must breed them tough here, as the only air-conditioner running seemed to be mine. They are early risers too, with the QRNational crew already unloading the wagons that had arrived during the night, with fridges, pallets of groceries and beer neatly placed behind the yellow lines on the asphalt.



1725D had been turned on the triangle and promptly departed at 8am at the head of four vans forming the return eastbound train. The next five or so hours saw the train rock and roll its way eastward to Charleville on the light 21-kilogram jointed rails, with minimal ballast and the odd steel sleeper in amongst the silver grey weathered timber sleepers. The country here is very pleasing — rich red earth and gum trees. Mostly the line is close to the highway between Quilpie and Cooladdi but the topography is such that the odd meandering deviation takes place to keep the grades down. Between Cooladdi and Charleville though, it is very hard to see the line from the road. And don't be fooled by seeing Cooladdi and Cheepie on your road maps; neither boasts anything much at all. From a rail point of view both locations are interesting enough, with reminders of when cattle would have been important, as well as being the lifeblood for surrounding farms. Today in the increasing heat, I found it very easy to simply take in the scene of loops, light rail, token ballast, abandoned cattle loading facilities and water tanks that once served steam locomotives shimmering in the heat haze.

Since Cooladdi is about the last place to get a decent view of the east-bound train, after it left I went straight back to Charleville to find 1723D was in the dock, ominously quiet but presumably refuelled after its abortive attempt to get to Cunnamulla the previous day. Meanwhile, the Westlander from Brisbane had arrived, and by this time the carriages had been turned on the wye and were stowed and cleaned in the platform and stood in the 40-degree heat with the air-conditioning units running flat out and dumping an oppressive mix of heat and sound onto the covered platform, waiting for the train's departure at 6.15pm. Its locomotives, 2481D and 1743D, were half in and half out of the cramped Operational Support Depot — the first 90-tonner on the line for a couple of days.

Once the Quilpie train arrived, it was combined with the rest of the train already in Charleville and when it left at 5.30pm it virtually emptied the yard. The dozen wagons were another modest load and it would do little work on the way to Roma that evening, with its progress again hampered by heat restrictions. There would be no opportunity for the train to grow to the same length I'd previously seen just eighteen months before.

Eight months later I returned, unable to resist the lure of 'Quirky Rail's' charm, this time to Cunnamulla. Although both Quilpie and Cunnamulla are about the same distance from Charleville, where the railway arrived in 1888, the two lines are quite different in character. The geography of the Warrego is one of north-south ridges, almost like a low flat swell across the surface of the land.

**Above: Not long after leaving Quilpie the train runs over one of the small water courses along the line. In a few weeks, many of these crossings would be scoured ruthlessly by flood water, taking much of the line with it. Surprisingly though, given the tenuous nature of the railway's existence, the line was later returned to service.**

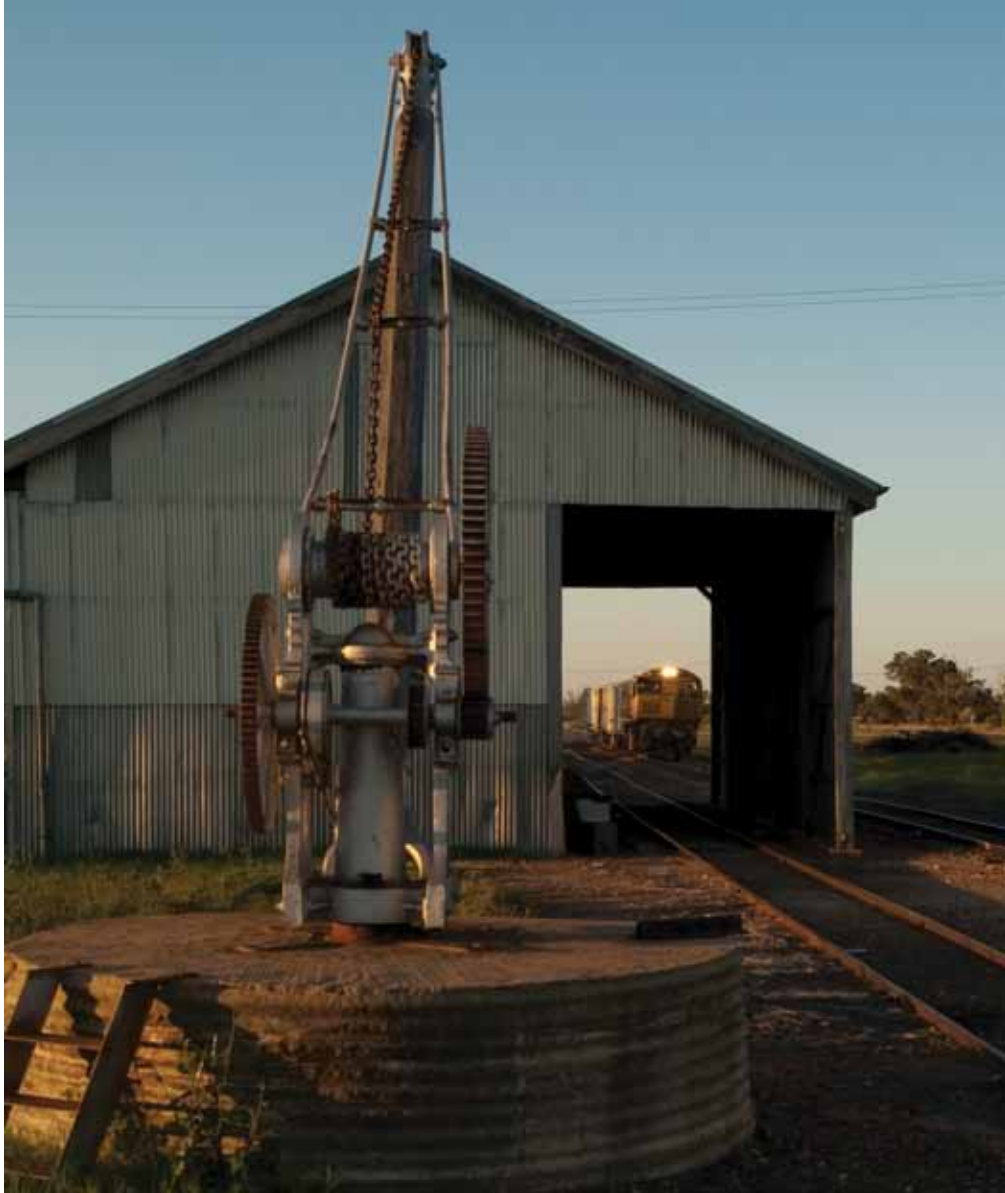
**Above right: About 50 minutes after the train left Cheepie, it emerges from the heat haze and runs through Cooladdi, the only other 'location' between Quilpie and Westgate. The neatly painted shed is one of the very few buildings in this small outpost, set amongst the scrub of south west Queensland.**

**Below right: Cheepie is one of those places where even what's left of the railway infrastructure is much more than is actually required. It's also one of those dots on a map which is little more than the railway. On 27 January 2010, the train from Quilpie traverses the light track out of the scrub and across the red soil on its way back to Charleville.**

The line to Cunnamulla, completed in 1898, is quite straight and has very few grades, and runs close to the highway for virtually the whole length through very open pastoral country. As with the Dirranbandi line further south, motivation for building the line was the prospect of traffic, especially wool, being transported through New South Wales. So ten years after the line reached Charleville and three years after approval had been given, a 195-kilometre extension was pushed through to Cunnamulla. By contrast, the line to Quilpie has to travel up and over these swell-like ridges and in places negotiates a more substantial deviation, as if buffeted by wind. The Quilpie line, finished in 1917, leaves the Cunnamulla line at Westgate, and heads westwards.

With its low speed, the Cunnamulla train is an easy proposition to chase and to have plenty of time to explore the occasional landmark that comes along: the long-since forgotten sheep and cattle races, the rough and ready sheds on the remains of platforms suggestive of stations, punctuated by the more substantial yard at Wyandra, where the odd van is still dropped off in the run-through shed to be loaded with greasy wool for later collection, and all tied together by the light track. Given the slow pace of progress, the time at any given spot allows thorough inspection of the permanent way, an odd collection of light rail, sleepers that look like they are held together by termite residue, rail anchors oddly prevalent, and even welded joints, with every now and then a group of new sleepers where the rail being tightly held down by Ajax screws. And all this for a mere dozen or so wagons a month.







**Above left: The shed at Wyandra frames the Cunnamulla train. Although the train rolled right through on this occasion, wool is still occasionally railed from here, necessitating shunting in the traditional style of more than 100 years.**

**Below left: The Cunnamulla-bound train runs through Yannah, a little under an hour after going through Westgate. Yannah is not much more than a trailing siding that ends in the impressive, and only, remnant of what was once a sheep race.**

**Above: While the run south to Cunnamulla the day before had been through a glorious early Spring day, the dawn for the train's return the following day was a return to the unseasonably damp conditions that had prevailed through much of 2010. This general scene shows the return train almost ready to depart, with the depot in the middle being the centre of QRN's remaining activity, much of it arriving or leaving by road. The station building on the left, with its grand arched roof, sees virtually no activity.**

Given the timetable, the train arrives in Cunnamulla well and truly after dark, so most inspections are best saved for the return working. Rather oddly, while the line is more or less on a north-south axis, at the last possible moment the line turns to head west, like a reflex action suggestive of the urge to continue the 19th century siren call of westward expansion.

With a departure the following day around 8am, an early breakfast at the only bakery in town then grants time to have a look around the yard. A quick inspections reveals it is typically under-utilised: the small QRNational depot that is the base for current operations, the closed-up station with its attractive but redundant arch roof, workers happy to share the time of day, and substantial cattle and sheep yards based around a wye that was used twice weekly for reversing the Westlander set before that service was truncated back to Charleville in 1994.

After a leisurely drive in an unseasonably cool and sometimes bleak morning following the train's return north from Cunnamulla, and back in Charleville around lunchtime, once again the train was combined with the train from Quilpie. It then had a few hours to wait before its scheduled departure east in the late afternoon. Compared to the comments from the workers on my previous trip, chatting to them while the shunting was going on suggested some of the uncertainty seemed to have disappeared — the workers knew their jobs were safe until the end of 2013, but after that the future was not good, for them or the entire line. And yet in amongst this fatalism was a common view that there was plenty of traffic that could go on the railway, "if only they would let us have a crack at it".

Such an opportunity is not likely to be forthcoming though in the brave new world of a privatised QRNational, even with the existing protection of the Regional Transport Service Contract with the Government. Indeed, the QRNational sale prospectus more or less said that about a third of the network could be rationalised to improve profitability so it is not hard to work out what is in store for these survivors of 'Quirky Rail'.

For all that though, there can still be surprises, and one such was in early 2010 when huge floods in March did enormous damage to the railway east of Charleville and the Quilpie line, just after my trip. While the lines were shut for repairs, there must have been a serious temptation at QR headquarters to thank such meteorological intervention and simply walk away. Such was not the case though, and the Quilpie line alone absorbed many thousands of hours of labour, many hundreds of tonnes of ballast and substantial cash to bring it back to service in July 2010.

So for now the trains that are the heart of what's left of 'Quirky Rail' continue to survive. My drive back to the 'urbanity' of Brisbane, traversing the profitable and expanding coal service was a good chance to ponder my recent experience. For now though, my return trip had more pressing matters ... how was I going to get ahead of that Kurtz Distribution Services truck that was lumbering its way down the highway in front of me?