



Baked Earth and Stainless Steel

Text and images by Chris Walters

At 12:44pm on Thursday 4 January, the *Great Southern* is threading a narrow corridor between the craggy escarpment, Bylong Valley Way and the Goulburn River, maybe a kilometre east of Kerrabee crossing loop on the Ulan line. There was nowhere here to safely pull the car off Bylong Valley Way, so the drone was launched from a handy driveway about a half a kilometre further north and sent back to capture the shot.



e/ – Three days in rural NSW

I do wonder, how imbedded within the Australian psyche has the *Great Southern* become...? Although I've no empirical evidence to back up my observations, I have noticed that the average Australian – in conversation – will demonstrate an awareness of some, if not all our 'household name' trains: the *Indian Pacific*, the *Ghan*, "the" 3801 or Puffing Billy. But the five-year old *Great Southern*, it seems, has a bit of work to do, to wedge itself into our collective imaginations. That said, it did turn more than a few heads during early January when, due to track work around Sydney, its normal Cootamundra-Sydney-Maitland route was denied it, and instead the luxury cruise train was diverted via NSW's interior, where it introduced itself to some more remote parts of the state in a manner that a TV advert might not have been able to manage.

For those who have come in late, the *Great Southern* kicked off in December 2019 as a new rail cruise journey from Adelaide to Brisbane and back again. Utilising carriages normally at the beckoning of the Adelaide-Darwin-Adelaide *Ghan* service, which goes into hiatus during the Northern Territory wet season, the *Great Southern* quickly became a feature of Journey Beyond Rail's summer program. Unfortunately, the train's early seasons were marred first by NSW's horrendous bush fire crisis, then by the ensuing weeks of flooding, and then finally the Covid-19 pandemic. And yet it managed to endure through the summers of 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23. By the time of its fifth season, the train had shrugged off the novelty value – except, for the occasional route diversion.

Following the diverted stainless-steel passenger express appealed to myself and close friend Trent Nicholson as a way to tour our state's back-blocks and drive a compelling arc from Cootamundra to the Hunter Valley. And so, we made plans to meet the train and follow it along parts of its journey.

The eastbound *Great Southern* set off from Adelaide's Parkland Terminal on the morning of Friday 4 January largely as it had each of the few preceding weeks of its Summer 2023/24 season – except for the fact that *Great Southern* liveried locomotives NR30 and NR31 had been reunited after several weeks apart due, reportedly, to issues with NR31. The express spent the remainder of that day rolling eastwards, pausing to deposit its passengers at Stawell for 'off train' experiences centred around Victoria's Grampian mountains and Fallen Giants Vineyard. Resuming its journey that evening, the train turned north at Melbourne's Tottenham Junction and headed for the NSW border.

By this time, Trent and I had escaped the humid sprawl of Sydney, pausing in the Southern Highlands to photograph local trains around Bargo and Yerrinbool. First up was a real oddity – Aurizon's Goninan/General Electric locomotive 3215 (originally narrow-gauge Queensland 2815) running north light engine on the return of a crew training run from Glenlee out to Parkes and back. Aurizon had used the normally

Newcastle-based locomotive for a few of these runs recently, and in fact another jaunt with 3215 set off from Glenlee a few days later on Monday 8 January. We eventually found ourselves in Moss Vale for lunch, where we awaited Pacific National southbound 6BM4 superfreighter which, with no passenger duties to occupy it at the time, boasted *Ghan*-liveried NR109 on the front. Working our way south 'via 6BM4' we found ourselves in Goulburn a while later where, just south of town, the fast-moving NR109 crossed Qube's northbound 6MW7 steel train bound for Port Kembla, with one of the operator's indigenous liveried locos, QL019, leading this second train. Three 'good uns' bagged.

During the day, we'd been made aware of southbound train 4349, a late running Southern Shorthaul Railroad empty grain train out of Carrington (Newcastle) and bound for Ardlethan, down near Temora. With triple RL Class on the front, the lead unit was the recently repainted RL304 – adorned with level crossing safety messaging. Since we were Cootamundra-bound anyway, we made this our 'taxi' and decided to follow it south. The thin cloud that had ceilinged the Southern Highlands most of the afternoon had broken up and dispersed by the time that RL304, RL307 and RL302 rolled into Goulburn, paused for a quick crew change, and then belted out of town. The presence of RL304 on the train, probably not harmed by the fantastic afternoon sunlight, had brought a few people out to chase 4349, and so a small convoy of cars set off in pursuit. We picked it up again just past the Cullerins, and then a third time at Gunning, before we let the train go and headed for Galong to try for a dusk rendezvous with another Southern Shorthaul train, this time SSR102 and SSR101 on 3140 'Westons' grain from Borellan to the Westons Milling plant at Enfield, in Sydney. We picked a road bridge just east of Galong for the shot, not realising the place was plagued with tiny beetles that, when SSR102's headlight blazed around the corner to light up the scene, made it appear as if the train was passing through a rainstorm. Seemingly a tiny variation on the Scarab or Christmas beetle, we were still picking the blighters out of our hair in the car 20 minutes after we got back on the road.

We missed a few other northbound trains on the way into Cootamundra but wanted to reach our accommodation in the Family Hotel before 'last drinks'. After checking in, we headed across to the south end of the yard to shoot the gaggle of Southern Shorthaul locomotives off 3242 grain from the Griffith area and bound for Allied Mills near Maldon, which had left their train to go and have their fuel topped up. The train had arrived with C505 leading 4908, GM27, GM22 and CLP9, and following a few snaps, we put the feet up on the balcony back at the Family Hotel with a beer and watched the seemingly endless SSR shunt across the road, before turning in. The Family is 'cheap and cheerful', but probably not a wise choice for anyone wanting a quiet snooze given its proximity to the Main South, but here lies its chief appeal to me personally. Dinner and a show, as it were.

First train of the trip was caught just south of Bargo at 1:05pm on Friday 5 January, and it was a real odd one: Aurizon's traditionally Newcastle-based 3215 on the return run of a crew-training light-engine movement out to Parkes, in Central Western NSW, from Glenlee, a former coal loading site just south of Campbelltown, which the operator uses for staging its Sydney intermodal operations.





Above: With indigenous liveried QL019 leading QL018 and QL009, Qube's 6MW7 empty steel train rolls through Goulburn at 4:34pm on its way from Dynon (Melbourne) to Port Kembla North Yard. In the background is the former Goulburn Railway Workshops, currently run by Rail First Asset Management (RFAM). Several RFAM locomotives and wagons can be seen scattered around the background, with stored units EL58 and EL52 closest to the camera. Just visible in the upper middle background are *The Picnic Train's* 4903 and 5917, stabled in Goulburn over the summer.



Left: Southern Shorthaul Railroad (SSR) empty grain train 4349 from Carrington (Newcastle) rolls south between Cullerin and Fish River at 7:27pm behind RL304 *Jamie Della - Survivor*, RL307 and RL302. RL304 carries level crossing safety messaging on its sides, featuring SSR driver Jamie Della and an aerial view of the aftermath of the Old Junee level crossing smash that he and his offsider managed to walk away from in March 2023.

Below: 12 minutes later, 4349 passes Gunning, heading into the setting sun. The first three of the train's 43 wagons would later be detached at Cootamundra for maintenance, before the train continued to Ardlethan out on the Temora line the next day.





With the plague of beetles visible in the train's headlight, SSR102 and SSR101 head east from Galong at 8:41pm with 3140 grain from Barellan, bound for Weston Milling in Enfield, Sydney. Two additional SSR Class locomotives, built by Progress Rail in the US, were due to arrive by ship later in January.

During the night, several trains rolled through, including both overnight XPTs between Sydney and Melbourne, a northbound 'priority' PN freight, Qube's regular Bomen-Cooks River train, and of course the eventual departure of 3242 bound for Maldon. Some I heard, some I slept through, but by the time I dragged myself out of bed just before 6:00am on Saturday 6 January, Coota yard was an ocean of calm with not a thing moving. While it is true that dinner options in towns like Cootamundra dry up very early of an evening – compared to the big smoke – it is just as true that good coffee

and pastries can be found before the sparrow yawn just as reliably. Suitably fuelled up, Trent and I headed out to the Dirnaseer Road overbridge just south of town, reasoning that it should offer a decent first shot of the *Great Southern*, while positioning us well for a quick (and safe!) scoot across to Stockinbingal for shot number two. The train was only about 15 minutes down on its 'table' by the time that it swanned into view from Frampton, by which time another half dozen or so photographers had joined us on the bridge. Within moments, we were back on the road, northbound on Suttons Lane.



Along with the other locomotives off northbound 3242 grain, CLP9 *Peter Wilks* and GM22 are getting a fuel top-up in SSR's Cootamundra compound at 9:50pm. Alongside is resident SSR shunter 48s34. The operator is currently changing its former Silvertown-owned locomotives back to their original road numbers, and so it is likely that 48s34 will be 4815 again sometime soon.

A close up of RL304's banner, taken during the shunt at Cootamundra. RL304's message has taken on even more poignancy following New Year Eve's tragic Bindarrah (South Australia) level crossing collision, which claimed the lives of two Pacific National locomotive crew. Adjacent is Pacific National (PN) unit 8240, only a few weeks following an overhaul and repaint at Progress Rail's Cardiff Workshop. Due to the imminent arrival during 2024 of the first of PN's new 94 Class 'GEVO' locomotives, it is likely that 8240 could be one of the last 82 Class locos to be so overhauled.



We hit Stockinbinal well ahead of the train and so I had more than enough time to plan out a shot of 113-year-old Commercial Hotel with the train rolling by in the background. I was keen to try and nail a more elaborate shot, for chasing on the Stockinbinal-Parkes 'goat track' is always a challenge, for no single road follows the line, and the condition of most of those roads that do broadly parallel the railway could uniformly be described as 'fair', at best. A new line from Illabo on the Main South is planned for construction through to Stockinbinal, thus allowing Melbourne-Brisbane trains to bypass Cootamundra, which will also remove the need for those trains to pass through Stockinbinal township as well. Chasing trains safely

along this line – which probably should not be nicknamed any longer the 'goat track' for all the Inland Railway upgrades that it is receiving – means few photographic opportunities. Thus, it you get a chance, nail it.

With all of this in mind, Trent and I set off for Quandialla as first stop, figuring it pointless to try and get the train south of there, since it could leverage a more direct route. As it happened, we were able to parallel the *Great Southern* out of 'Stock', which allowed me to shoot and video the train out the side of the car before it left us in its dust. About an hour later, we rolled into Quandialla to find the train slowing to a stop just south of the town (such as it is). The *Great Southern* was scheduled to pause here for five minutes



8:05am on Saturday 6 January finds the *Great Southern* rolling by the dormant, 1911-built Commercial Hotel in Stockinbinal. The new Inland Railway will, thanks to a new section of line built between Illabo (on the NSW Main South) and the junction at Stockinbinal, bypass the actual township to the west.



9:00am finds the *Great Southern* getting under way again from Quandialla following a five-minute safe working stop, the only pause the train would make between Cootamundra and Parkes. During mid-2023, Inland Rail announced that Martinus Rail had been contracted "to design and construct enhancement works on the Albury to Illabo and Stockinbingal to Parkes ...", stating that the "... enhancement and modification works are required to create height and width (horizontal and vertical) clearance to accommodate double-stacked freight trains."

for safe working purposes, but the cynic in me had assumed that would be unlikely. A lot of the locations along the line still possess historic infrastructure, and Quandialla is certainly no exception, so we were able to shoot the accelerating train passing an old goods crane and water tower before the chase resumed. Two more opportunities presented on the way to Forbes, as the train seemed to slow for (I assume) track speed cautions. Forbes was about shot number six for the morning, and here we let the train head on into Parkes while I threw the drone up to grab a shot of the Dorrigo Steam Railway and Museum's stranded Garratt locomotive, 6042, stuck in the middle of the former Lachlan Vintage Village site on the south-western side of town.

The *Great Southern* was still to pull into Parkes Station when we caught up to it, but we shunned the express at this stage for Southern Shorthaul's 4911 was approaching the town from the north and, apparently, due to stable here having overnight delivered some ballast hoppers to Talbragar, just north of Dubbo. At least that was the intel. Having shot a few photographs of the largely abandoned locomotive depot, which at least hosted some 48 and 81 Class locomotives, we set up for 4911's approach via the north leg of the triangle ... only to watch on with bemusement as it merrily sauntered off via the western leg of the triangle, I assume to return to Cootamundra.

10:11am - following the *Great Southern's* non-stop passage through Forbes a few minutes earlier, we paused briefly from the chase so I could take a quick drone shot of Garratt locomotive 6042, stored within the former Lachlan Vintage Village site until it can be reclaimed and relocated by current owners, the Dorrigo Steam Railway & Museum.



10:46am - Graincorp's 48208 (originally 48115) and Pacific National's 48123 are having a lazy weekend in the otherwise very quiet Parkes Loco at 10:46am, ahead of a run to out Tullamore on the Tottenham branch a few days later to load grain.



The 4911 non-event had at least saved us from a traffic nightmare in town, it transpired. Although a few metres off the Newell Highway level crossing, the train must still have been on the track circuit, for the crossing gates were still down and the lights still flashing – at least 20 minutes after it had rolled into the platform. We turned north along the Newell and were presented with the sight of traffic backed up all the way up to Mitchell Street – about a kilometre or so from the crossing. Northbound road traffic was, of course, all but non-existent – all trapped to the south. We paused briefly to check out steam engine 3075 “Spirit of Parkes” in Kelly Reserve, before continuing to the CSIRO observatory and radio telescope, also known as Murriyang, for an hour so respite from the growing heat.

Later that afternoon, we encountered a couple of Pacific National grain ‘feeder’ trains out at Trangie. One was loading on site, but departing as we arrived was train 8836 from Nyngan, bound for Manildra. Leading this was one of Pacific National’s increasingly rare 48 Class locomotives, an

amazingly weathered and tatty 48138, along with a rather faded mainline unit 8152. Along with a train of rather ancient grain hoppers under a very hot ‘white summer sun’ sky, this to me was the railway equivalent of ‘shabby chic’. Brilliant! So, we quickly u-turned and chased it back to Narromine, where the friendly crew spent around 45 minutes running the locomotives around the consist before continuing south via Peak Hill. We didn’t linger long enough to watch the actual departure, for we were keen to intercept another Pacific National ‘feeder’ train, this time from Gilgandra. To guarantee a shot, we dropped anchor beside the Newell Highway at Talbragar, where I briefly lost my glasses in the long grass, before shooting 8113 and 8156 passing with train 8836. Like the earlier train, this consist was also bound for Manildra, although we were a little surprised to see it take the ‘seeming’ long way around via Peak Hill, instead of heading south via Orange. We followed them into Dubbo for a second shot and then drove out to check on the Fletchers International Export train.



11:07am - having been a fixture within Kelly Reserve since August 1975, following its acquisition and restoration by the local Apex Club, locomotive 3075 still greets motorists on the Newell Highway as the ‘Spirit of Parkes’ almost fifty years after coming to call the town home. In the steam era, Parkes-based 30T locomotives were regular performers on mixed and stock trains to Forbes, Cootamundra, Condobolin, Narromine, Dubbo and Tottenham.



Having overtaken another Pacific National grain 'feeder' train loading at Trangie, it is 1:43pm at the locality of Mungeribar as 48162 and 8152 roll off the table-top like landscape west of Narromine with 8836 grain from Nyngan, bound for Manildra.

To be fair, locomotives FIE001, FIE002 and FIE003 did have that 'hungry' look of being ready to roll, but by now it was well after 4pm and with no guarantee that they would depart anytime soon, weighed against the allure of a pub dinner in Dunedoo, we pulled stumps and headed west via the Golden Highway.

While all of this was going on, back south, the *Great Southern* had spent a good part of the day tied up at the Parkes (grain) Sub-terminal, before heading east to Polona during the afternoon. There the locomotives ran around their 25-carriage train before the *Great Southern* returned west to Orange Station, where it picked up the passengers once again, this time after a day at Rowlee Wines. By the time we hit Dunedoo, the train was

northbound, heading for Dubbo where it would arrive well after 10pm that night. The idea was to let it catch up to us while we hit the pub and caught some kip.

The train's timetable from Orange to Gulgong was built with a lot of fat in it, with many stops in stations and loops along the way to keep the train from reaching Gulgong too early. Among those planned stops was one of around an hour or so at Dunedoo, from around 4am onwards. I wasn't entirely convinced that things would transpire that way, but since we were slumbering literally across the road from the station, I figured it worth setting a 4am alarm in case the opportunity did indeed arise to shoot the *Great Southern* in front of the town's gorgeously painted grain silos.

2:27pm in Narromine – 48138 has seen more revenue service than the average locomotive, and if steel, paint and rust could talk, doubtless it would have a lot to tell us about. One of only about eleven 48 Class still operated by Pacific National (PN) in 2024, 48138 turns 55 in August this year. Graincorp owns twenty 48 Class, although currently only four are in regular operation. This is not a reflection on grain yields as much as it is the shrinking number of lightly-laid branch lines which the smaller 48s must be retained for. Branch line track upgrades in recent years have seen the sphere of operation for 22-tonne axle-load locomotives, such as PN's 81 Class, grow significantly – thus intruding on previously 'branch line locomotive only' territories.





Above: Another Pacific National (PN) 'feeder' grain train, this time 8832 from Gilgandra, passes Talbragar, just north of Dubbo, at 3:42pm behind locomotives 8113 and 8156. Like the earlier movement, this train was also bound for the mill at Manildra, and headed west from Dubbo to run via Narromine, Peak Hill and Parkes to do so. Generally, two PN rakes like this are at work to feed the mill at Manildra, while other rakes are used to fill the sub-terminal near Parkes, from where larger export rakes are loaded to head east to the ports.

Right: 5:22pm – Graincorp's silo at Dunedoo was decorated by artists during July-September 2020, with all sides painted. The western-facing side was designed and painted by Daniel Krause (assisted by Jarad Danby) and depicts Daniel's son reading in a wheat field. For more information visit <https://www.australiansiloarttrail.com/dunedoo>

During the night, another close friend, Greg Wotton, had driven up from Gosford to join us in our 'GS chase', and at 4am on Sunday 7 January I found a message from him confirming that the train had indeed sailed through Dunedoo without so much as a backward glance. On the plus side, the skies were largely clear with only a few scattered clouds – so a decent sunrise was in the tea leaves. We arrived in Gulgong just before sunrise to find the train already in the platform. The sight somewhat incongruous given the tiny, humble nature of Gulgong's station.

Several road coaches were congregating ahead of fed and watered passengers groggily emerging for a tour of the township and yet another winery visit down in Mudjee – truly, is this express the *Great Pickled*?

Meanwhile, several locals were poking around for a sticky, the Gulgong grapevine having already spread word of their town's silver intruder. Heading off with an eye to take a look at the beautiful town of Gulgong before we moved on, I can also heartily recommend the early-opening Cobb's Bakery for coffee and pastry, a hospitality we greedily accepted before setting off for a couple of hours of coal train action out east of Ulan, ahead of the *Great Southern's* 9:20am departure.





Looking west at 7:28pm as the sun sets over Dunedoo Station. The line through here is used by Qube and Aurizon mineral concentrates trains travelling from Cobar to Newcastle via Ulan, as well as Central West NSW grain trains travelling via Ulan.

For those unfamiliar with the Ulan railway, it is several things rolled into one:

- a 1982-built branch from Sandy Hollow, off the pre-existing Merriwa branch, itself opened in 1917
- a railway built primarily to serve coal mining at Ulan, allowing tonnage to be railed east to Newcastle for export
- a long gestating cross-country link that was completed between Ulan and Gulgong (on the Gwabegar line) in 1985, providing an alternative and more direct link between Dubbo and Newcastle
- the original 19th Century survey had mapped out a path west from Gulgong to link with Maryvale (between Wellington and Dubbo), however that section was never completed.

During more recent years, additional coal loaders (each with a balloon

loop) have been established east of Ulan serving additional mines: Moolarben, Wilpinjong, Mangoola, Mount Pleasant and Bengalla. The former pair are just east of Ulan, while the latter trio are located between Muswellbrook and Denman at the eastern end of the line. As many as ten trains, operated by Pacific National, Aurizon and Magnetic Rail (formerly Aurizon, and before that One Rail Australia, Genesee & Wyoming Australia, Glencore, and Xstrata ... seriously) can be out on the branch at a time, particularly if trains associated with the movement of mineral concentrates out of the Cobar area are around. Qube and Aurizon currently operate concentrate trains between Cobar and Carrington in Newcastle. Grain trains from Central Western NSW can also use the line at times, but these may also use the more northerly route via Binnaway and Werris Creek (as one did, later that day).

It is 5:56am, just before sunrise on Sunday 7 January, and some early-rising locals have come down to Gulgong Station to gaze at the *Great Southern*, which arrived only a short time earlier from Dubbo. It would be fair to say that Gulgong is likely one of the more 'quaint' stations, along which the *Great Southern* has drawn up to during its five-year history.



Despite it being a Sunday, the Ulan line was humming with activity this morning. As we passed through heading east, a Magnetic Rail train was loading in Ulan, a Pacific National train was just pulling in to Moolarben, and an Aurizon train had just left Wilpinjong. Another empty Aurizon train was somewhere out in the valley heading towards us, so we found a nice spot just west of Wollar village to wait for it, before relocating further east to the Ringwood Road level crossing east of Coggan Creek for the *Great Southern* and anything else that felt like dancing. Unfortunately, during the couple of hours that we lingered – during which we saw four coal trains – not one car stopped completely for the level crossing. With the Bindarrah (near Cutana in South Australia) level crossing disaster still fresh in the mind, this was truly frustrating. As was the speeding antics of some cars on the road later in the day. The callous delusion of invincibility really has a lot to answer for.

Like the night before, the *Great Southern's* schedule between Gulgong and Muswellbrook was equipped with a lot of room for flexibility and interpretation, and while stops in most loops were planned, to keep the train from arriving too early in Muswellbrook, in actuality the train killed most of its free time at the Ulan end of the line. Undoubtedly this was related to the sheer number of trains coming and going from the three mines in the area. Unfortunately, the Australian Rail Track Corporation (ARTC) does not allow passenger-carrying trains on the line due to a series of tunnels – notably the 1,975-metre Bylong tunnel – which pose significant carbon monoxide hazards due to the build-up of locomotive diesel fumes within the tunnel confines. And so, it was that, as the *Great Southern* wandered through this amazingly beautiful line – for which photos don't really do justice – the only people aboard to enjoy it were the locomotive crew.





6:12am finds the rising sun starting to warm the Great Southern at Gulgong. Inside the train, groggy passengers are starting to rise for breakfast before transferring to coaches for a tour of Gulgong township followed by a winery lunch in nearby Mudgee.

Once free of the traffic jam of coal trains at the western end of the line, the express enjoyed a largely uninterrupted journey east along the Goulburn River to Sandy Hollow, where the train paused to allow Journey Beyond staff to climb back aboard after they had been road-coached over from Gulgong.

We let the train go once again in Denman to see if we could track down some lunch, on a day where it seemed most of the town was closed, and to let a Qube concentrates train from Cobar catch up to us. Greg set off for home at this stage, while Trent and I lingered for a few of the seemingly never-ending parade of coal trains. Eventually, and led by the photogenic trio of Qube locomotives 1102, RL310 and 1431, concentrates train 8468 rolled by us at Mangoola about two hours behind the *Great Southern*. We then agreed that a last trackside stint south of Singleton could be a fun way to round out the weekend, given that we should be able to catch the *Great Southern* easily, and hopefully see the concentrates train a second time. We ended up choosing the Hermitage Road overpass near Belford as the location, for if nothing else it allowed us a quick getaway home. We had hoped to bonus-prize some of the increasingly rare Pacific National 90 Class

into the deal, however while a couple of empty coal trains with 90s were about, they were rudely too quick and efficient in their comings and goings on this occasion, and so we missed them. However, while the *Great Southern* may have spent a lot of time shunting over from the Ulan branch to the mainline platform in Muswellbrook to pick up its passengers, the delay had allowed the concentrates train to close the distance to be only half an hour behind it at Belford. With the clatter of concentrate wagons fading at 5:45pm, we wearily piled back into the car and headed home.

I could count the number of main lines, cross-country lines, and branches that we 'collected' during the weekend, but I might leave it to you dear reader, to follow us on the map, back on page 43. If I was to leave you with one notion, though, don't forget to tour your own backyard – it can be amazing!

The author would like to offer sincere thanks to Trent Nicholson and Greg Wotton for their wonderful company and valuable assistance in preparing this article. The author would also like to extend a sincere thanks to John Hoyle for his valuable editorial assistance.

Our first stop out along the Ulan line was a spot just east of Wollar, where we waited for Aurizon's empty coal train WG121 bound for Wilpinjong. After about a half hour wait, the train passed us at 8:20am with locomotive 5028 leading and sister unit 5041 (out of sight) in distributed-power unit (DPU) mode, at the back of the consist. Aurizon commonly use this arrangement for its Ulan line trains, while Pacific National seems to prefer running their DPU about two-thirds back in the rake, rather than at the rear of the train. The rather dilapidated letter box in the foreground was actually broken when we arrived, so I reattached the door for the shot.





Above: The second location we tapped that morning was the Ringwood Road level crossing near Coggan Creek, where we shot three down empty trains and one loaded one. The second of the westbound trains passed us at 10:11am in the form of Magnetic Rail's Ulan-bound UL151, led by UGL/ General Electric locomotives XRN011, XRN017 and GWU011. Over on the far right is the 401-kilometre mark, measured from Sydney Central. Now what is interesting about this is that Gulgong, which is west of here and 460 kilometres from Sydney Central via Muswellbrook, is actually located near the 340-kilometre peg, measured via Lithgow and Mudgee. There are a few examples of this around NSW where multiple routes exist between certain junctions.

Below: It is 12:02pm and the *Great Southern* is back on the move. Unfortunately, given passenger carrying trains can't pass through the Ulan line's lengthy tunnels - particularly the 1,975-metre Bylong Tunnel, which is about five-kilometres further on from where we see the train here, alongside Wollar Road between Coggan Creek and Bylong - there are no passengers on-board to admire the stunning scenery along the line. Even the staff had to be bussed through from Gulgong, re-joining the train at Sandy Hollow.





Above: Having let the *Great Southern* go ahead to negotiate a complicated shunt in Muswellbrook and pick up its passengers from their lunch excursion near Mudgee, we lingered around Denman to catch a few more coal trains. Denman is currently home to a rake of stored, out-of-use passenger cars owned by *The Picnic Train* group, and so I took the opportunity to shoot a few trains passing the set for juxtaposition. At 2:54pm Pacific National's westbound empty coal train bound for Moolarben behind EMD locomotives TT123 and TT128, with GE unit 9309 located mid-train, working in distributed-power mode.

Below: We chose to round out the weekend by waiting near Mangoola for Qube's 8468 mineral concentrates train from Cobar, before moving over to Belford on the Main North to catch a second shot of it, and hopefully the *Great Southern* as well. Right on 4:00pm, the train rolls through the Mangoola Road level crossing, and out onto the plain at the north-east of Denman with locomotives 1102, RL310 and MZ unit 1431 hauling the lengthy rake. The train had departed Carrington empty on the previous Friday with RL310 leading, however the locomotive had issues later that day and was relocated as middle unit en route. This allowed the MZ to get a lead-unit run from the Ulan line through to Merrygoen, and then from Cobar to Merrygoen on the return trip. The ageing Danish MZs are fairly rare leading most Qube trains outside of the Sydney metropolitan area these days. Trains running between Dubbo and Newcastle via Gulgong and Muswellbrook are forced to run-around in Merrygoen given the junction was built to favour trains travelling along either the Gwabegar line, or between Dubbo and Binnaway, not trains between Dubbo and Gulgong (which of course is the most common usage of the junction these days).

