



*The Sydney Station Stories article series looks at active railway stations around the Sydney region – their history, placement, design, precincts and current services.*

I think there is an argument to be made that Cowan Station is the 'Pluto of the Sydney Trains' network. No, no, hear me out here. Just like what was 'once our ninth planet, but suffered a humiliating bookkeeping demotion in 2006', Cowan Station too was once of slightly grander status than it now enjoys. This is because Cowan Station was once upon a time, the northern terminus of suburban passenger services.

The Main North Line between Hornsby and Hawkesbury River (Brooklyn) opened on 7 April 1887, but Cowan itself was to come later. Cowan Creek, as it was originally called, was opened on 30 September 1889, but only as a crossing loop – the location didn't appear as a timetabled station stop until 12 October 1901, which is also when the name was simplified to 'Cowan' and a passenger platform was opened. During 1909, the line was duplicated and a second platform was built. From these humble beginnings emerged a station that was to always remain somewhat humble, at least in the public eye. For the station came to as much to support fishers accessing the 45-minute walk down to Jerusalem Bay, and bushwalkers taking on the Great North Walk, as much the tiny village (population 649 as of the 2016 census), all of which lies to the west and north of the station.

Sunday 16 November 1958 brought with it the commissioning of electrification (as part of wiring the tracks to Gosford) of the section from Hornsby, and shortly thereafter 'wide-bodied' suburban electric trains began to use Cowan as a terminus before returning to Hornsby. This continued for decades before an increasing number of trains began to use Berowra (the next station to the south) as a turn-back. With the introduction of the 10/11 January 1992 timetable, Cowan as suburban terminus was discontinued with all services turning back at Berowra from that date forward.

Following this Cowan Station was served only by all stations Berowra to Gosford intercity trains and this practice continues through to the present. During 1989/1990, the configuration of the quaint little buildings along the Down (northbound) platform was altered, which included the demolition of the former signal box at the southern end of the platform. Although seats, lighting and the gates/bells protecting the pedestrian level crossing have all been updated since then – in some cases more than once – the Cowan Station of 1992, when suburban services ceased calling, is more or less what we see today. What has changed significantly since 1992 are the types of trains you will see passing through. Although V Sets and XPTs continue to frequent (although the former can be seen nominally only on weekdays), the UGL-built OSCAR H Set trains, introduced during 2007, are today the train you will most likely take to reach Cowan. On the freight side of moving things, change has been rapid and sweeping. Where once was 46 and 86 Class electric locomotives, and before them obviously steam traction, today diesel-electric power is the most prevalent on the freight/commodity traffic seen passing through Cowan.

This is probably a good time to touch on the notion that, while Cowan is hardly a household name to the general populace, within the NSW railway industry, it is a name that carries a lot of weight and history. I'm sure many of you already know where I'm going with this, but for those who don't, the reason for this is quite simple: Cowan Station sits literally at the summit of one of the most notorious sections of steeply graded track anywhere in Australia. Commencing at Hawkesbury River Station and proceeding uphill for 8.6 kilometres, the gradient is a largely continuous and unrelieved 1 in 40. Not the steepest grade in the country by any means, but it is one of the longer, and more inaccessible to be found on an Australian mainline. For many years, this meant that dedicated steam (and later, electric) locomotives were allocated to bank (assist) trains up to Cowan, but since the 1980s this practice has largely been dispensed with. Except on ad-hoc occasions when locomotives are dispatched to rescue stalled freight trains as needed – and this happens more often than you might think.





**Left (page 40):** Eight-car set H14/H33 (led by motor car OD6930) eases out of the darkness on Run 206G from Sydney Central to Wyong. These trains are typically the most common on the all-stations services that call in at Cowan these days. In the next 12-18 months, these services are expected to be taken over by the much-delayed D Set *Mariyung* trains.

**Above:** Southern Shorthaul Railroad empty coal train AR01 from Carrington (Newcastle) to Airly Mine blazes through Platform 1 at Cowan behind CEY005, CEY007 and CEY004. In the foreground are numbers 1 (right) and 2 (left) per way sidings, across which is the pedestrian access to the nearby Great North Walk and the trail to Jerusalem Bay. Also out of sight on the left is the deep cutting through which the M1 Pacific Motorway runs.

**Below:** Having paused briefly for a crew-change, Pacific National's 7BS3 from Acacia Ridge (Brisbane) to Chullora, gets under way again with modern locomotives NR94, LDP008 and TT111 seemingly unconcerned about the steep grade that the back of their train is still sitting on. The wooden station building was once on the opposite, Down platform, and is believed to be original to the 1901 configuration of Cowan Station.





The climb has caused more than a few operational headaches for train controllers over the years (particularly when rain renders the rails somewhat slippery), and unfortunately this has sometimes led to significant accidents, such as the 6 May 1990 collision which saw a Sydney-bound V Set run into the rear of a heritage special being hauled by steam locomotive 3801. That resulted in seven fatalities.

Since that time, the line has been configured for bi-directional running, which has certainly improved things by allowing faster passenger trains to overtake slower freights on the grade and 'on the move', but the section is still troublesome. By way of example, at around lunch time on 1 February 2023, Crawford's container freight 4190 from the Newcastle suburb of Sandgate to Port Botany stalled at the foot of the grade at Hawkesbury River when lead locomotive VL359 failed. The other two units on the train, EL64 and PHC001, were unable to get the train going again in the conditions, and so veteran locomotives 42107 and 4836 were dispatched from Chullora to rescue the train later that afternoon.

Unfortunately, even with now four operating locomotives at the front of 4190, the train stalled again that night, not far out of Hawkesbury River. Luckily, Southern Shorthaul Railroad 'jumbos' 44206 and 44204 were closing up behind 4190, running light engine on their way to Port Kembla. The pair were soon drafted in to bank the stricken train from the rear and this third attempt to get 4190 up the grade finally succeeded – but not without a delay of close to 12 hours to 4190, for the train finally passed Cowan well after midnight.

As such, 'the Bank' has, over the years, also proven a very effective 'test track' for new trains, with most new (or at least, newly introduced) locomotives being subjected to load trials between Hawkesbury River and Cowan. In fact, today a new locomotive type is not accepted for service on the Sydney Trains Network if it has not passed a Cowan Bank load trial.

Although there has long been an Up refuge just south of Cowan Station, over the years it has been lengthened twice to now accommodate trains with a length of up to 1.5 kilometres. The climb up Cowan Bank usually slows Sydney-bound freight trains to the extent that they need to be 'put away' for a spell, particularly during the daytime when there is a roughly half-hour frequency of express and all stations NSW TrainLink services to thread between. During weekday peak periods, when passenger services north and south of Cowan are even more frequent, it is common to see a freight train waiting in the refuge for the "curfew" to pass before it is given the green signal.

What all of this means is that Cowan Station is a fascinating place to visit if you want to see some archaic station architecture and witness a challenging rail operation in action, but what if you have no interest in trains or railways? Well, to be honest, there's not much else for you to do and see. There is of course the earlier mentioned bushwalks to Jerusalem Bay and on to Brooklyn, via the Great North Walk – accessed by strolling across the two per way sidings, would you believe! – but aside from the lovely little café about 300 metres north along the old Pacific Highway, there is not much else to do in Cowan unless you live there. The famous Pie in the Sky shop at Cowan is in fact almost halfway down the hill towards Brooklyn, so unless you're willing to take on a 45-minute walk each way, the train won't get you there. The 592 Route bus will take you past it, but unfortunately it does not stop anywhere between Cowan and Mooney Mooney/Brooklyn, although it will allow you to glimpse the weekend warriors on their motorbikes who use the Old Pacific Highway in this area to try and show off to their friends. But, if you do want to be truly impressed, come to Cowan and wait for a slow-moving freight to blast upgrade into the little station. There are far worse ways to spend an afternoon.

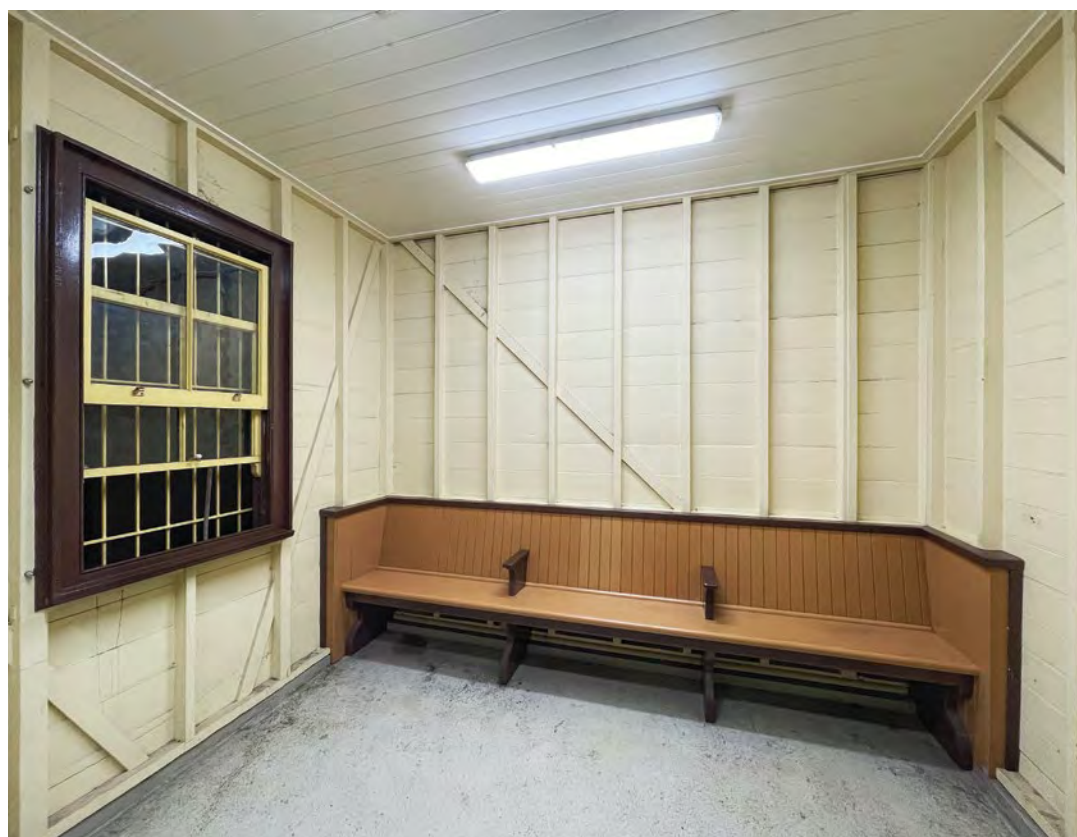
*Next: Fairfield*

### Quick facts

Distance from Sydney Central	48.81 kilometres
Elevation	191 metres above sea level
Opened	1901
Platform lengths	Two platforms alongside the double-track mainline. Platform 2 is slightly longer than platform 1
Departures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Up to Sydney: 253 (weekdays), 20 (weekends)</li> <li>• Down to Gosford: 27 (weekdays), 23 (weekends)</li> </ul>

With thanks to John Hoyle for his assistance in preparing this article.

Reference and further reading: <https://arhsnsw.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Cowan-railway-station.pdf> (accessed 11 May 2023)



**Cowan Station is unusual for a metropolitan station, in that it has wooden buildings on both platforms. The waiting room on Platform 1 is somewhat quaint compared to the facilities at other suburban stations.**