



# Merredin - a wheatbelt rail centre

Phil Melling

## History

Merredin in the West Australian wheatbelt is located 250km east of Perth and 262 km by rail from Forrestfield Yard.

Merredin's rail history goes back to the construction of the 3ft 6in (1067mm) gauge Eastern Goldfields Railway, which reached Merredin from Perth in July 1894 (and through to Kalgoorlie by January 1897). Branches were constructed from Wyalkatchem to Merredin, completed in 1911, Narrogin via Yilliminning/ Corrigin, completed in 1914, and Narrogin via Yilliminning/Kondinin/Kulin, completed in 1925.

Merredin itself was a large rail centre with a marshalling yard, locomotive depot, wagon facilities and an administrative centre for this area of the wheatbelt.

The East-West standard gauge railway came through Merredin, and the single-track line (and crossing loops) was completed through to Kalgoorlie in May 1967. Along with the new standard gauge a new marshalling yard (for standard and narrow gauge) was constructed complete with a new loco depot, yard masters tower and a large goods shed.

Since 1967 the narrow-gauge branch lines fed into Merredin and grain was unloaded/ stored and transferred into standard gauge wagons for the journey to Kwinana Cooperative Bulk Handling (CBH).

Merredin unfortunately, is one of the regional centre's that has seen a large decline in its importance to the W.A. rail network. The decline has been gradual, starting with the narrow-gauge branch lines when general freight, fuel, etc. shifted to road, it saw trains reduced and general goods services that ran the length of the branches no longer running. Only fertilizer and grain were left and even those services were cut back and began to be only run as required during the later part of the 1980's.

With through services withdrawn, sections of the branch lines started to see long periods of disuse (mainly loco and wagon transfers, infrastructure and tour trains. The Merredin to Narrogin line via Kondinin/Kulin line saw the section closed between Kondinin and Kulin in 1978. Kulin was then worked from Narrogin/Avon Yard and Kondinin from Merredin.

The branch from Bruce Rock via Quairading to York was worked as far as Yoting from Avon Yard (the section Quairading to Yoting was later closed). Merredin served Shackleton and Yarding and the remaining sections operated until late 1997/early 1998. Wyalkatchem to Merredin was a different story with the line initially closed between Wyalkatchem and Nembudding then cut back to Trayning.

The branches worked in this form until the Tier Three railway line closures put an end to the Merredin branch lines 10 years ago. The Tier Three railway line closures effectively were undertaken in two stages with York to Quairading and Trayning to Merredin announced in October 2013 and the rest in June 2014. The Tier Three closures saw over 500 kilometres of railway lines closed and, despite a change of government in 2017, no reversal of the decision was made and later attempts to reopen parts of closed lines appear to have stalled.

The standard gauge yard in Merredin also went into decline and ceased operating, with no branch traffic to transship.. In more recent years the standard gauge tracks have continued to be used for long term wagon storage.

With all this reduction in activity the loco depot stands silent with no locomotives allocated here anymore. Rail has not totally deserted Merredin as there are still a small number of loco crews based at Merredin for the various standard gauge services that pass through the town and Arc Infrastructure also has an infrastructure depot for track and signal maintenance. It is not unusual for through trains to pause briefly in Merredin, either to cross trains or for a driver change.

Today standard gauge grain trains load at Merredin for transport to Kwinana CBH. Merredin is also used as a staging point for grain trains working further east as far as the CBH bin at Southern Cross.

With the closure of the branch lines the CBH Merredin facilities have been significantly expanded with over 20 open bulkheads constructed in addition to the original storage silos giving a total storage capacity of 860,000 tonnes.

**Left (page 48):** L255 is passing the former Merredin Railway Station (now a museum) with a loaded grain train to Kwinana on Monday 11 January 1993. Phil Melling

**Below:** AB1536 and brakevan are seen arriving at Kondinin passing stabled XA1405 and XA1415 whilst RCH wagons are being loaded on Monday 4 January 1982. Phil Melling



AA1515 is seen crossing a floodway two kilometres north of the former Belka siding on Monday 11 January 1993 with a loaded grain train from Ardath CBH to West Merredin. Phil Melling



For the rail enthusiast there are still photos to be had of the interstate/ intrastate freight and grain trains. The *Prospector* passenger services to Kalgoorlie also stop in Merredin along with the *Merredin Link* railcars which work from East Perth Terminal to Merredin three times a week. The *Indian Pacific* also travels through Merredin in both directions, so offers another photographic opportunity especially during summer.

The Interstate freights are operated by Aurizon, Pacific National and SCT but many run through at night unless late running has occurred. The intrastate freight services include those run by Aurizon and Watco, but again some run through at night. The closure of BHP's Nickel West operations were announced as this article was being drafted and the impacts of these closures on train services is still being worked through.

### The Present

A recent multi day visit to the Merredin area gave an opportunity to see just how much has changed on the Merredin rail scene, with visits to various locations on the closed narrow gauge lines. Unfortunately, it was noticeable that several of the smaller towns that were once sidings and/or had a CBH bin are also disappearing with some having only one or two homes or in some cases no homes left.

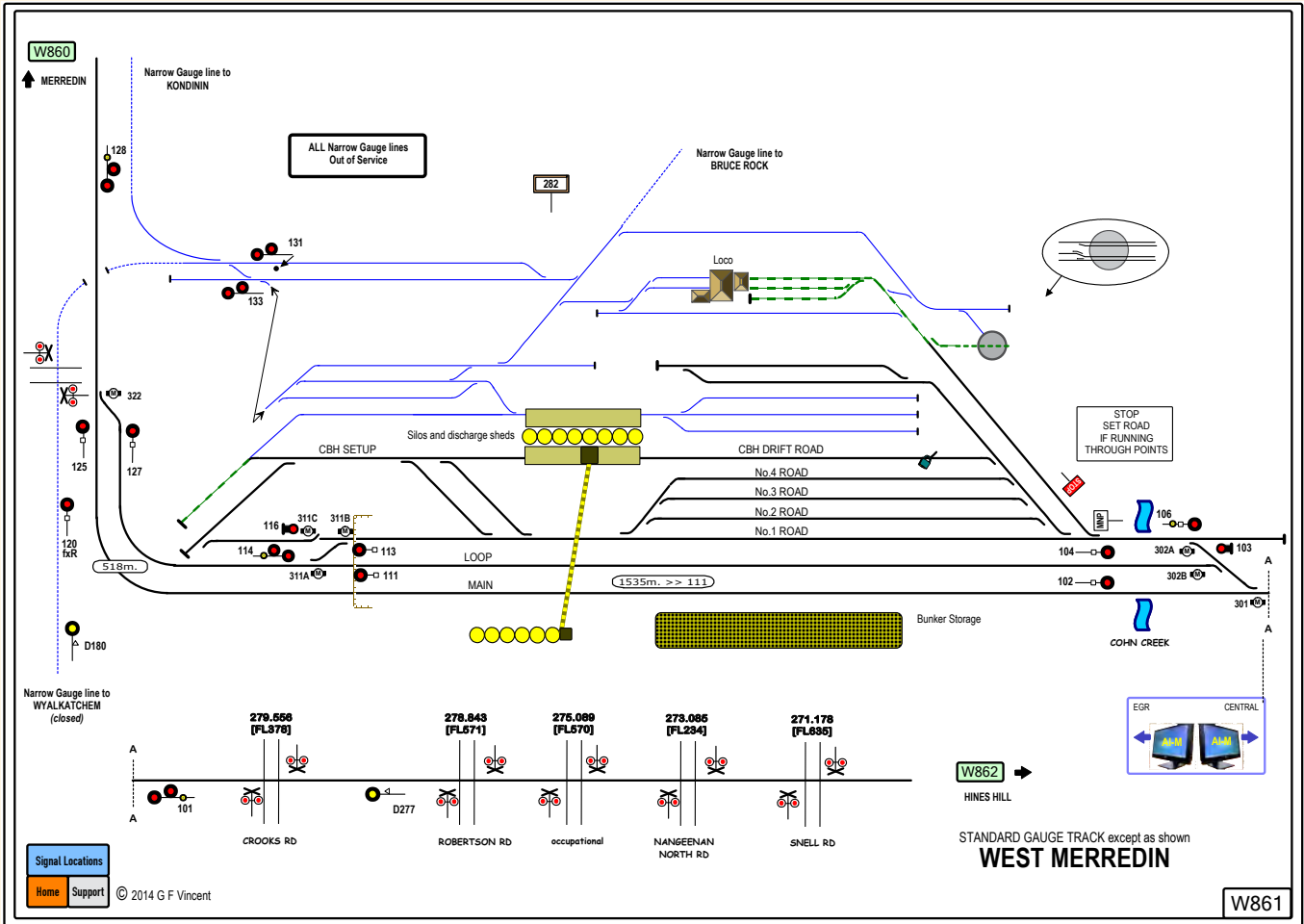
Cooperative Bulk Handling (CBH) are also rationalising their bin locations and a number have been offered out for lease or have closed. It was also noticeable that in some larger towns new grain storage areas have been constructed but away from the formerly rail served bins. With the increased grain storage capacity in Merredin, farmers also have access to larger truck combinations so can bypass the remaining local smaller bins. It is also noted that those bins often have limited grain variety storage segregations as an option and those grains varieties are also hauled direct to Merredin.

Having seen these changes, there appears to be little likelihood of any of the Tier Three lines around Merredin reopening. It is now 10 years since the lines were closed, then with CBH bin rationalisation and larger truck availability means grain delivery direct to Merredin is a realistic economic alternative. It is also noticeable that there has been no recent State Government comment on the reopening of any of the Tier Three grain lines.

Merredin is still a rail centre for standard gauge operations and worth a visit. In addition, the original Merredin Railway Station, signal box and steam locomotive water tank are part of a local museum. Narrow gauge TA class diesel 1808 (which was used in Merredin) and G class steam loco 117 are also preserved along with a selection of wagons and railway buildings from the now closed sidings.



XA1407 *Wirngir* is seen near the former Eujynyn siding hauling a loaded grain train from Yarding to Bruce Rock/West Merredin on Wednesday 30 June 1982. Phil Melling



**Above:** A diagram of the present-day track arrangement at West Merredin yard. Courtesy Graham Vincent sa-trackandsignal.net

**Below:** G523, G528 and G538 are seen on 5MP2 grain train loading at Merredin CBH on Sunday 22 July 2007. The locos will run round after loading and the grain will be taken interstate. Jim Bisdee





**Above:** AB1536 hauled a rake of former SA grain wagons from West Merredin to Avon Yard on Sunday 8 July 2007 and is seen passing Yealering CBH with the train. Jim Bisdee

**Below:** DAZ1905 and AB1501 are on 3452 empty grain train, passing Muntadgin heading to Narembeen CBH to load on Tuesday 11 January 2011. Phil Melling





**Above:** ACB4406, 6023 and 6025 are on 4UP1 loaded mineral sands train to Kwinana, about to pass Burracoppin CBH on Friday 24 May 2024. Phil Melling

**Below:** GWU015 and ACD6051 hauling 3MP1 Melbourne–Perth intermodal freight to Forrestfield are passing the Rabbit Proof Fence Road level crossing at Burracoppin on Thursday 23 May 2024. Phil Melling

