

A visit to the Moura Line January 2023

Text and images by Steve Munro



I dare say most rail enthusiasts are aware of or may have visited and photographed the Moura Line in central Queensland. I have enjoyed photographing it on several occasions since as far back as 2000.

Utilising diesel power, the system doesn't have the intrusive infrastructure associated with electrified lines, making it very "photography friendly". Additionally, it has the benefit of running through some picturesque countryside to the west of the port town of Gladstone, including a range section between Mount Rainbow and Dumgree crossing loops.

The line occupies a special place in Queensland's railway history. Opened in 1968, it was the first "heavy haul" line in Queensland and was designated as an "S" (Special) class line by virtue of its track standards compared with the rest of the network. Its construction marked the watershed between the "old" QR where not many years before the maximum train load was 650 tonnes and a "new" era of trainloads measured in the thousands, not hundreds, of tonnes. It is now part of Aurizon Network's extensive Central Queensland coal system.

The Moura Line is a 1067mm (3 feet 6 inches) single track line connecting the Moura (Dawson) and Baralaba mines, approximately 189 km west of Gladstone to the R G Tanna terminal (and, until 2016, the Barney Point terminal) in Gladstone. Other mines at Boundary Hill and Callide feed into the main Moura Line and on the main line between Moura and Gladstone there are eight crossing loops. Stowe Loop, near Calliope is the first loop west of Gladstone and notable in that its tracks are on different levels. Balloon loops are located at the Boundary Hill, Callide Coalfields, Moura and Baralaba mines. The predominantly 60 kg/m rail on concrete sleepers supports an axle load rating of 26.5 tonnes at 80 km/h and sees trains of over 4,000 tonnes traversing the system, using 4100 and 4000 class motive power. In the 2021/22 financial year the Moura system moved 12.3 million tonnes of coal.

I have been photographing the Moura line periodically since my first visit there in around 2000, coinciding with the introduction of

the first of the then new EDI/EMD 4000 class locomotives. I had witnessed the construction of the locomotive cabs at Somerton, Victoria and knew that some of the locomotives were to begin their working lives on the Moura line so I decided to photograph their working in Queensland. Coincidentally, the very first photo I took of the new locomotives was of the class leader 4000 working an empty coal train over Deep Creek, west of Calliope.

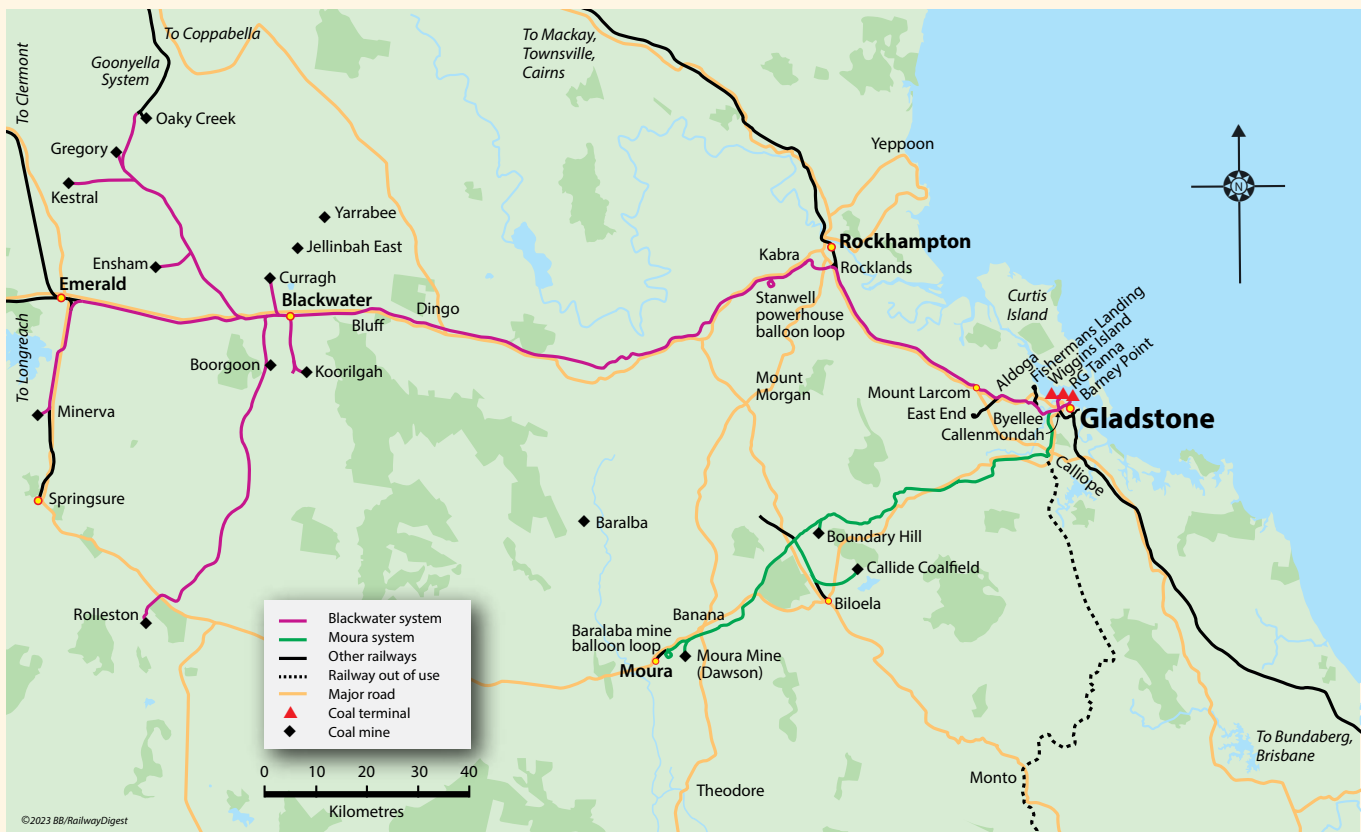
In those days most trains on the Moura system utilised interesting multiple locomotive lash ups of 2100 class, 2170 class, and 2400 class units, but it became apparent that the 4000 class locomotives would soon become the mainstay of motive power. There was also a Tuesday "Biloela Goods", but that's long gone and the southern end of the line into Biloela has been removed, with only the Callide mine section still being utilised. Callemondah depot at Gladstone quickly acquired a collection of 4000s so photographs of Moura coal trains hauled by modern looking units soon outnumbered the shots with the more interesting earlier locomotive combinations.

On my subsequent photographic trips to the Moura Line, I combined my photography with other events occurring in Qld in June. This year however, I had reason to be in Southern Qld in early January and decided I would shoot the line again while I was in the state. The higher summer temperatures and almost nonstop rain and biting insects made this trip a lot less pleasurable than those in the winter months. In fact, for the entire week there wasn't a rain-free day which made accessing known photo/camping spots not possible due to boggy road conditions. But as the line is visible from much of the Dawson Highway and road overbridges, pleasing shots can easily be obtained.

Even with the difficulties nature provided and the variety of motive power limited to 4000 and 4100 class locomotives, a good collection of shots was bagged over the week. It's certainly a lovely sight watching 4000 plus tonne coal trains, on the narrow gauge, working through some of Queensland's interesting landscapes. It's definitely worth the time and effort, but better done over the cooler winter months!

Left (page 38): On Saturday 14 January, Aurizon EDI/EMD locomotives 4027 and 4048, assisted mid-train by 4045 and 4003, work a lengthy loaded train eastward along the corridor that dissects the "Allawah Station" near Banana. Loaded trains make slow but steady progress through the undulating landscape, so it is easy to get ahead of trains for multiple shots.

Below: The Moura and Blackwater systems in central Queensland both converge on the Port of Gladstone.





Above: A combination of Aurizon and QR liveries is commonplace on the Moura System, as seen here on Sunday 15 January. With the aid of mid-train units 4165 and 4036, Aurizon loco 4167 and QR liveried 4007 ease their loaded train around the balloon loop at the Moura (Dawson) mine before departure for the Port Of Gladstone. Other balloon loops are utilised at Boundary Hill, Callide and Baralaba mines.

Below: A long lens such as the 300mm used here, can enhance a relatively boring background and emphasise the length of a long train through image "compression". A Moura-bound empty coal train, led by 4031 and 4025, (with 4033 and 4014 mid-train) skirts the town of Banana, as it heads toward the Leichhardt Highway road overbridge on Sunday 15 January.





Above: Unusually, when compared to previous visits, most of the system's crossing loops had empty trains stabled in them. An example of this is seen here on Monday 16 January where a "loaded" led by 4163 and 4018 approaches locomotive 4015 stabled in the adjacent loop line on an "empty". Half a train length away, mid-train units 4004 and 4048, will pass this spot sharing the load enroute to the Port of Gladstone.

Below: Persistent rain and overcast skies during January made photographing the Moura Line challenging. Normally blue skies were reduced to dull grey, but the flat lighting did make shooting in any direction possible. On Monday 16 January, in gloomy conditions, locomotives 4136 and 4018 (with 4004 and 4038 mid-train) ease an "empty" off the main line and onto the entry to the Moura Mine balloon loop. Once the loaded train departs, there will be ample opportunities to comfortably get ahead of it for photos along the system.





Above: Loaded trains on the Moura System travel at a speed that allows easily obtained multiple images. This loaded train, led by 4167 and 4007 (with mid-train assistance from 4165 and 4036) was earlier photographed departing the Moura Mine, then comfortably captured again passing under the Leichhardt Highway at Banana, Sunday 15 January.

Below: Mid-train helpers, as seen here with locos 4045 and 4003, are the norm on most Moura line trains. This image of a westbound empty train was captured from the road overbridge on the Leichhardt Highway at Banana. The road bridges on the Moura System provide easily accessed vantage points for photography.





Above: Of the crossing loops on the Moura Line, Stowe Loop is probably the most interesting, albeit difficult to access, other than near the western end at the Bruce Highway road bridge. With its “grade separation”, one leg of the loop separates from the other to take a “scenic route” through hilly bush country before realigning on the lower eastern end. Here, on Wednesday 18 January, locomotives 4167, and 4007, bring a loaded train into the western end of Stowe Loop, having passed under the Bruce Highway near Calliope.

Mid-train units 4165 and 4036 are still on the upgrade pull between Calliope and the Highway out of site in the rear. Once the entire train is past the crest at the Bruce Highway, it’s downhill to the Port of Gladstone.

Right: Making use of all the daylight hours is achievable by camping close to the action, although camping out is not everyone’s choice. My setup provides a lot of independence, with cooking facilities, and a comfortable bed, all set up, and packed up in very little time. The muddy ground evident in this scene west of Calliope, is indicative of January 2023’s wet conditions. Motel accommodation is available at Gladstone, Calliope, Biloela, Banana and Moura.

