

Echuca Line Recent Works

David Campbell



I described around two years back the then current works along this corridor (see *Railway Digest*, February 2022, pages 41 – 45). Subsequent developments have seen much of what I wrote then become somewhat out of date, and the purpose of this piece is to describe recent works, recent train alterations and other matters which might interest readers.

The railway arrived at Echuca from Bendigo in 1864. The Victorian Railways line from Bendigo and Melbourne terminated at what promptly became a particularly busy river port, successfully tapping into the lucrative traffic carried in paddle steamers from southern New South Wales. Subsequently the Deniliquin and Moama Railway Company built their railway (complete with their own locomotives and rolling stock, although built to the VR gauge of 1600mm, and with rolling stock designed to readily interface with the VR) to connect with the VR at Echuca in 1876. This line was later transferred to the Victorian Railways in 1923.

The Seymour – Toolamba – Tatura railway was extended in 1887 to Echuca, making the town a railway junction, offering passengers a choice of route to Melbourne; goods charges (which at the time were based on distances covered, with all calculations made using the shortest possible route) then unfortunately had to be reduced, as the new railway offered a route around 17km shorter than the original Bendigo line, albeit at less operational convenience to the VR.

The VR opened a new railway via Moulamein to Balranald in 1926; this line commenced from the Echuca – Deniliquin line at Barnes, around

12km north of Echuca, and ran roughly parallel to the Murray River.

Even into the 1970's freight train services in this area were quite intense. Echuca generated substantial local traffic for the town area, while the lines to Toolamba, Deniliquin and Moulamein each saw several freight services weekly, in some cases daily.

Passenger traffic was quite busy, with trains departing from Echuca to Bendigo (10 return services weekly), Toolamba (2 return trains daily, Sunday excluded), Deniliquin (a daily return service, Monday – Saturday) and Moulamein or Balranald (twice weekly). During the 1970's, as it became clear that these passenger services would be replaced by buses, many enthusiasts made round trips to Echuca, travelling in one direction via Seymour and Toolamba, returning in the other direction via Bendigo or vice versa, with ample time available for lunch in one of the many pubs in Echuca. School trains (a Walker railcar hauling a few trailers) also ran between Kyabram and Echuca.

Passenger services were progressively wound back in this area during the late 1970's, along with so many other passenger services within the Bendigo District. Numerous services were once operated in this District, powered by the famous DERM's (Diesel-Electric Rail Motor, a rugged looking vehicle based on US design, using surplus suburban train bogies and ex World War 2 tank engines. These rail motors often hauled a bogie C van for what was then rather busy parcels traffic. "Road coaches" (yes, OK, buses) seemed in those days the desirable way to better serve the passengers, while parcels traffic soon disappeared completely.



Passenger trains resumed from 1996. The initial service comprised simply a Friday evening Down and Sunday afternoon Up train, allowing people from Melbourne to visit Echuca for the weekend. The service was paused between 2004 and 2006, but from 2007 had increased to a daily (7 days weekly) service each way, departing Echuca in the morning and returning that evening, while weekends saw an additional return trip from Melbourne through Bendigo to Echuca during the day, allowing passengers time to visit Echuca for a leisurely lunch or tour and return south that afternoon.

Freight traffic remained reasonably strong. The lines north of Echuca generated substantial bulk and containerised rice traffic as well as grains. Trains running north of Echuca were constrained by weight limitations on the Murray River bridge, a glorious structure used by both trains and road vehicles. For many years, the heaviest locos allowed north of Echuca were the little Y class diesel-electrics; although they only developed low

Above left (page 36): VLocity set VL35 is approaching the long closed site of Strathallan, running the 11:15 service from Echuca to Melbourne. The relatively flat countryside is typical of most of this line. David Campbell
Right: The usually goods-only line north of Echuca to Deniliquin has recently been partly re-sleepered. The new concrete sleepers, installed at approximately a 1:4 ratio with existing timber sleepers, are readily seen in this view on Wednesday 20 December 2023. The location is the site of Barnes, and the remains of the disused branch line leading to Balranald are visible to the left. David Campbell

power (600hp), the relatively flat terrain allowed them to haul reasonable tonnages. Even into the 1980's, these locos usually operated through to Bendigo, with larger locos taking over for the run south over steeper grades up the Great Dividing Range. The Toolamba line saw traffic to and from the local dairy factories (as with Rochester on the Bendigo line), typically milk products out and briquettes for the boilers inward.

By the 1980's it was clear that efficient rail operations could not practically be sustained across the Murray River bridge, and a new concrete bridge was provided in 1989 a little upstream of the original structure. The new bridge was designed to avoid visually intruding into the heritage river port precinct, and is almost invisible from that area. Road users probably welcomed trains disappearing from the old bridge, as it avoided closing the bridge to road traffic when rail moves were required. From this time, the little Y class locos disappeared, with the then new G class becoming regular visitors, hauling substantially heavier trains.

Drought conditions around the year 2000 and the reduction of irrigation onto farming land, once used extensively for rice growing, saw the line to Moulamein booked out of use from 2003 (the extension to Balranald having closed in 1986). The Moulamein line partly re-opened in 2004 for 4 weeks, and again re-opened in 2006 to Caldwell, but was finally booked out in 2008. The junction points at Barnes have subsequently been removed, the termites attacking the sleepers are now finding slim pickings, and this line seems unlikely to return to service.

The Toolamba line has fared little better. This line also closed in 2003, and re-opened in 2006. For some time the line was used by a daily container/rice train originating from Deniliquin, usually loaded in the Up direction only, but as rice production progressively declined the line was again booked out of use in early 2020, although the last few trains are thought to have operated in mid-2019. The rice mill at Deniliquin was sending containerised rice by train until 2019, when production was reduced due to climate conditions. Better weather recently has seen production grow, however the rice mill seems now to use road.

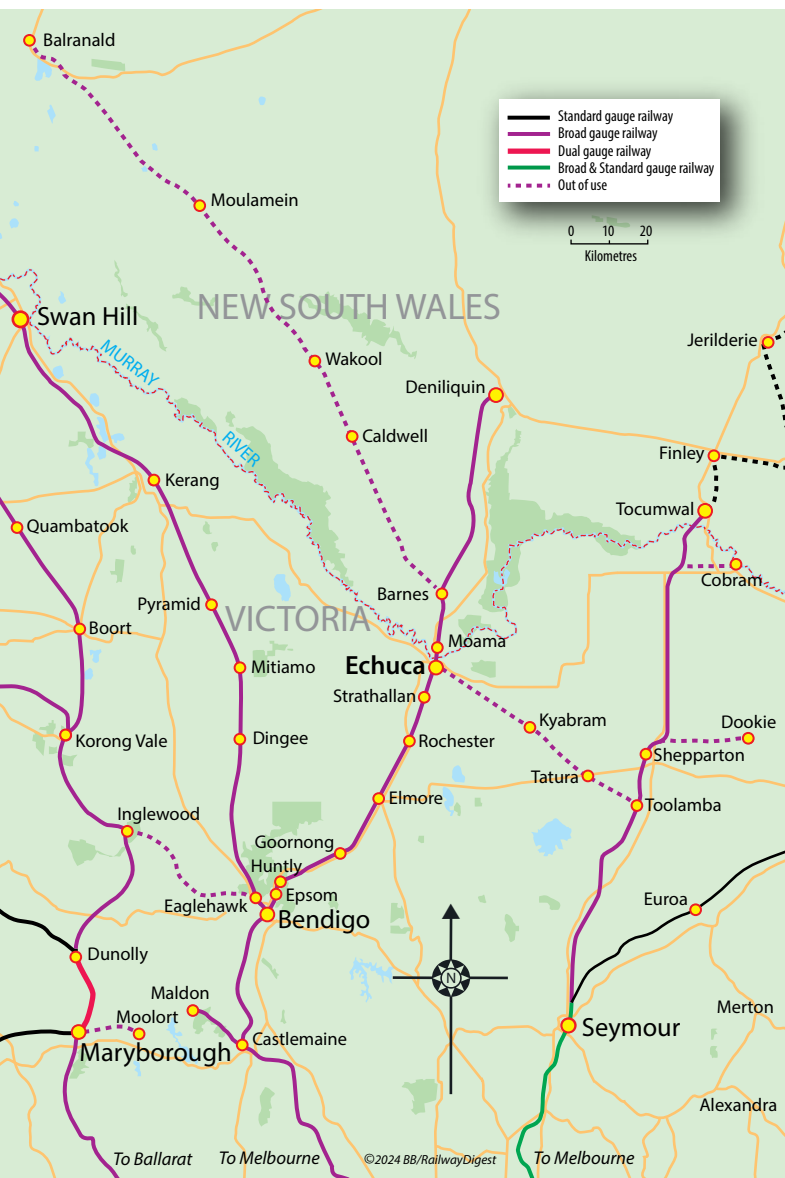




Above: Southern Shorthaul Railroad often manages to squeeze in an empty grain movement between Bendigo and Elmore in between passenger trains, as exemplified here with T363 and P14 passing through the site of the original Huntly station (just north of Epsom) in December 2021. The then recent track upgrades, allowing passenger train speeds to increase from 80km/h to 130km/h between Epsom and Goornong, are evident. Bill Arkell

Below: Echuca yard appears quite deceptively busy in this view on Wednesday 20 December 2023. VLocity 35 at the station will shortly form the 11:15 service back to Melbourne. The four sets of "H" type carriages, each of six vehicles, seen in various places around the extensive yard are all stored, pending presumed disposal. These carriages started life from 1956 as suburban electric "Harris" (blue) trains, being converted to loco-hauled types in the 1980s. David Campbell





Any proposal to re-open the Toolamba - Echuca line now would need to consider the abundance of passive protected (STOP or GIVE WAY signs) level crossings which typically cross the railway at a 45 degree angle, making viewing of approaching trains difficult for road users. The level crossing issue has long been a concern on this line, with numerous accidents over the years. The junction points at Toolamba have recently been renewed and a few hundred metres of the railway repaired in conjunction with Shepparton line upgrade works, however this appears to be for the convenience of track maintenance machinery. This line now seems likely to remain closed.

That realistically leaves rail traffic confined to just the main Bendigo - Echuca - Deniliquin line.

During 2023 the line between Goornong and Echuca benefitted from a heavy sleeper renewal and general maintenance programme, with the vast majority of sleepers now being the usual Victorian low-profile concrete type. Timber sleepers remain in several areas, interspersed among the concrete, however these are usually in near new condition, and are likely to remain serviceable in this dry climate for quite some time. Those remaining timber sleepers are usually confined to single sleepers, or occasionally two, interspersed between groups of concrete sleepers.

Many bridges and culverts have also recently been strengthened, with works planned on several more. The structures yet to be upgraded tend to be closer to stations, so while speed restrictions have been applied (three at 80km/h, one at 60km/h), these do not impact train running greatly. Most of these speed restrictions are expected to be removed by March 2024.

Ballast and drainage has not been neglected, and these vital parts of a railway are in good condition, ensuring the line remains in sound condition with minimal maintenance expenditure necessary for years to come.

The gated and passive protected level crossing at Holmes Road (195km) was closed after an empty truck attempted to pass in front of a train, reminding everyone of the crash worthiness of (particularly earlier series) *VLocity* trains. Three passive protected Occupation Crossings remain protected only by locked gates and STOP signs, however these lead into farm paddocks and seem to have a low likelihood of seeing an accident, and at this stage will remain. All other level crossings between Bendigo and Echuca are protected by flashing lights, bells and boom barriers.

Various alterations to level crossing interfaces with sidings have been made over the past year, reducing the complexity previously applying at Elmore and Rochester. The previous arrangements led to issues with the operation of the level crossings at Rochester and at the Down end of Elmore, necessitating signal technicians to attend shunting trains to allow the crossings to operate and then reset them after the sidings had been used. The changes allow train crews to manage the crossings locally during shunting manoeuvres. The siding at Elmore is used occasionally to load grain trains, while the siding at Goornong is available for maintenance purposes (track machines, etc) only. The Rochester siding is currently also only available for maintenance purposes; ballast trains for Metro Trains Melbourne had been loading there until around a few years back, it is unknown whether they or any other traffic will resume in future.

Overall track speed between Epsom and Echuca has been increased from 80km/h to 130km/h (to Goornong), thence 100 km/h to Echuca, with some restrictions around Goornong, Elmore and Rochester pending bridge upgrades and curve adjustments as mentioned earlier. The section between Bendigo and Epsom is generally limited to 80km/h, although much of that section is restricted to just 50km/h due to track condition.

The infrastructure improvements have led to a worthwhile reduction in running times. The overall Bendigo - Echuca allowance of 81 minutes (in 2022) has dropped to around 68 - 70 minutes, even with the additional stops at the new Huntly and re-opened Epsom and Goornong stations. In contrast, the pre-1978 timetable showed that trains would take up to 90 minutes for this trip. That 70 minutes running time compares very favourably to that achievable by car along the adjacent highway.

The safeworking system remains as Train Orders. Dealing with paper based Orders requires careful communications between drivers and Train Controllers, however the local crews and Train Controllers seem to have things down to a fine art, and generally delays to trains are minimised while safety is uncompromised. An earlier proposal to introduce Electronic Train Orders (as mentioned in 2022) appears to have been abandoned, possibly due to the complexity of the moves required, particularly with the shorter return trips from Bendigo out to Epsom and Eaglehawk; close to a dozen of those trips occur daily. The proposal had been expected to use the train radio technology to provide some form of electronic Authority for the section, however it does not seem possible to then transfer the electronic Authority to another inactive cab in a different Diesel multi-unit vehicle, as is required when the train reaches its destination and returns to Bendigo, and the Project has been paused.

Grain trains run to Deniliquin "as required", with both Pacific National (normally with trains of 40 wagons) and Southern Shorthaul Railroad (usually around 20 wagons) operating services. Trains seem to run at least weekly, and that can increase to several trains weekly or even daily depending on shipping requirements. Deniliquin trains usually depart Echuca before 7:00am, taking around 2 hours for the 70km track. Up services are scheduled to wait outside Echuca for passenger services to clear towards Bendigo until around 8:00pm, then continue south, so there are minimal opportunities for photos south of Echuca by daylight. Around 50 freight trains ran out to Deniliquin on each of the last two years; some months saw up to 11 trains, while other months saw none, and on a few occasions two trains ran each way daily, so it is hard to predict just when they will run. Any daytime opportunities for photos are unusual.

There has been speculation about trains resuming to service the Deniliquin rice mill. This plant had supported a daily train for several years until drought conditions caused production to fall and the mill to temporarily close a few years back. Production has increased over the past year, with freight transported in containers to port, using B-double trucks and "road trains", however overall production is lower than in past years. It currently appears that the volume of contestable traffic is insufficient for a rail operator to bid for.

Grain trains also occasionally run to Elmore; these usually seem to fit in between regular passenger services, often offering daylight photo opportunities along this scenic stretch of track. Southern Shorthaul Railroad operate these shorter trains.

The line north of Echuca to Deniliquin is currently being re-sleepered, with concrete/timber sleepers being inserted at roughly a 1:4 ratio, as well as culvert upgrades. This work will provide long-term strengthening of the railway, assuring that trains can continue to Deniliquin well into the future.

Freight trains planning to operate along the line between Bendigo and Echuca are somewhat restricted due to the recent additional passenger services to Echuca. Paths are available before 7:00 am and after 8:00 pm, with some other restrictions due to the operation of local trains between Bendigo and Epsom during the morning and evening peaks. Despite those constraints, it is actually possible to slot in grain trains to/from Elmore during the day, an opportunity that SSR can often take advantage of, the trains following a Down Echuca passenger service and shunting off the main line before the corresponding Up service departs Echuca. Paths for goods services are generally available through to Melbourne during the night, while trains often stage at Bendigo during the day (or even for several days), using the several sidings remaining for freight trains located on the Down side of the main line.

The extensive sidings at Echuca were re-laid with steel sleepers (rather unusually for Victoria) over 25 years back. Local traffic no longer originates at Echuca (the last substantial local freight traffic serving the Sunrice mill ceased with the closure of the Echuca facility in 2003), and the sidings for many years have seen little use, however they have recently found an unexpected use for storing of surplus "H" type passenger train sets. Four of these sets, each of six carriages, were placed at Echuca by Christmas 2023 pending what is assumed to be their ultimate disposal.

These trains have been replaced by the introduction of more *VLocity* railcar sets. The "H" sets were originally built as suburban electric "Harris" carriages from 1956 and re-built into their current form in the 1980's (with a design service life of 10-15 years), these carriages have certainly survived longer than anyone expected.

There are reports that an established freight forwarder is planning to develop a facility north of Echuca on the Deniliquin line. Early indications suggest that the traffic will be contestable for rail, and with reasonable train path options currently available via Bendigo there seems no need to consider re-opening of the Toolamba line to service whatever new traffic rail can gain. Much of this potential freight task reflects changing farming practises, in particular the on-farm changes to sustainable and

less water-intensive cropping rather than other products which require abundant irrigation for growth (such as rice and cotton). *Railway Digest* will watch this potential development with interest.

All passenger services running to/from Echuca are scheduled to operate using 3-car *VLocity* trains, with some trips attaching/detaching to another three cars at Bendigo. Two years back only one train operated on weekdays; as foreshadowed in 2022 this has now increased to three trains each way. Up trains depart Echuca at 07:23, 11:15 and 15:15, and take around 70 minutes to Bendigo and another two hours to Melbourne, arriving at 10:44, 14:25 and 18:32 respectively. Down trains depart Southern Cross at 07:02, 11:06 (change at Bendigo) and 15:05, arriving into Echuca at 10:12, 14:20 and 18:11 respectively.

Weekends see a different timetable. Down trains depart Southern Cross at 09:06 and 18:06, arriving at Echuca at 12:15 and 21:12 respectively. The morning Up trains runs a minute later on Saturday, while on Sunday we can enjoy a nice sleep-in, the train leaving Echuca at 09:05, arriving into Melbourne at 12:24. The afternoon train on both Saturday and Sunday departs Echuca at 16:05, arriving into Melbourne at 19:24.

Trains stop at Bendigo (162km from Melbourne), pass North Bendigo (164km, being the junction for the Swan Hill line), then stop at Epsom (169.6km), Huntly (176.5km), Goornong (190km), Elmore (206.7km), Rochester (223.5km), and Echuca (250km).

The Echuca station precinct includes a working 70ft turntable, still used by visiting steam trains, and buildings dating back to the line's original opening in 1864, including the main station building, the goods shed, and the sadly disused loco shed.

The timetable provides useful travel options for passengers, and this has been reflected with strong growth in patronage, notably including local traffic between stations north of Bendigo rather than just trips to/from Melbourne. Trains often carry tourists enjoying a trip to the Murray River places of interest at Echuca, and since the introduction of cheap fares last year (with daily fares capped at \$10, although weekday fares have recently increased to \$10:60 return), it is not uncommon to find people travelling to Echuca to enjoy lunch at one of the many pubs and restaurants in the town before catching a train home that afternoon. That growth in demand for rail services reflects the growing population of the Echuca/Moama area (currently over 22,000 immediate residents, and almost as many in the nearby surrounding areas) and the likely continuing growth of that population. The area is desirable for retirees, with a relatively flat terrain, a wide range of shops and services, and proximity to any number of outdoor activities. Several Vline bus services connect with trains at Echuca and Rochester.

The disused silos opposite the station at Rochester have been painted, featuring various fauna from the area. The stunning main silos are readily seen from the adjacent highway as well as by train passengers, and show a Squirrel Glider and an Azure Kingfisher. Between the silos can be seen an elevated work platform, used by the artist on 30 November 2021 as he worked to depict another local animal, being the Platypus, although unfortunately most of that is invisible from the train. David Campbell

