

# Stanthorpe to Wallangarra line closure

Darren Tulk

On 31 October and 1 November 2023, high temperatures and strong winds fanned fires across the Tenterfield Shire in the northern tablelands area of New South Wales. The fires spread northwards to threaten the border towns of Wallangarra/Jennings with four homes and 17 buildings subsequently reported as lost. The rail line and several bridges were also damaged by fire.

## History

Approved by the Queensland Parliament in 1884 and opened to Wallangarra in February 1887, the narrow gauge line from Stanthorpe was expected to be extended 20km south to Tenterfield where a break of gauge station had been proposed. But continued pressure from the Qld Government resulted in the standard gauge being extended north to the border, with Interstate services first beginning on 16 January 1888.

Wallan-Garra was the only interstate connection between NSW and Qld, until the standard gauge railway between Kyogle and South Brisbane opened in 1930. The new line had no break of gauge and soon took over much of the traffic formerly carried through Wallangarra.

The last Sydney Mail (26 Up) operated on 29 January 1972 and the Brisbane to Wallan-Garra service was withdrawn 1 February 1972. The Wallan-Garra Refreshment Rooms closed on 5 August 1973. Services from Tenterfield north to Wallangarra were suspended in 1989.

Apple traffic from The Summit (about 10km north of Stanthorpe) ceased in March 2007. The only remaining traffic on the line has been the Downs Explorer group (SDSR), based in Warwick and regularly operating day trips to Stanthorpe and Wallangarra.

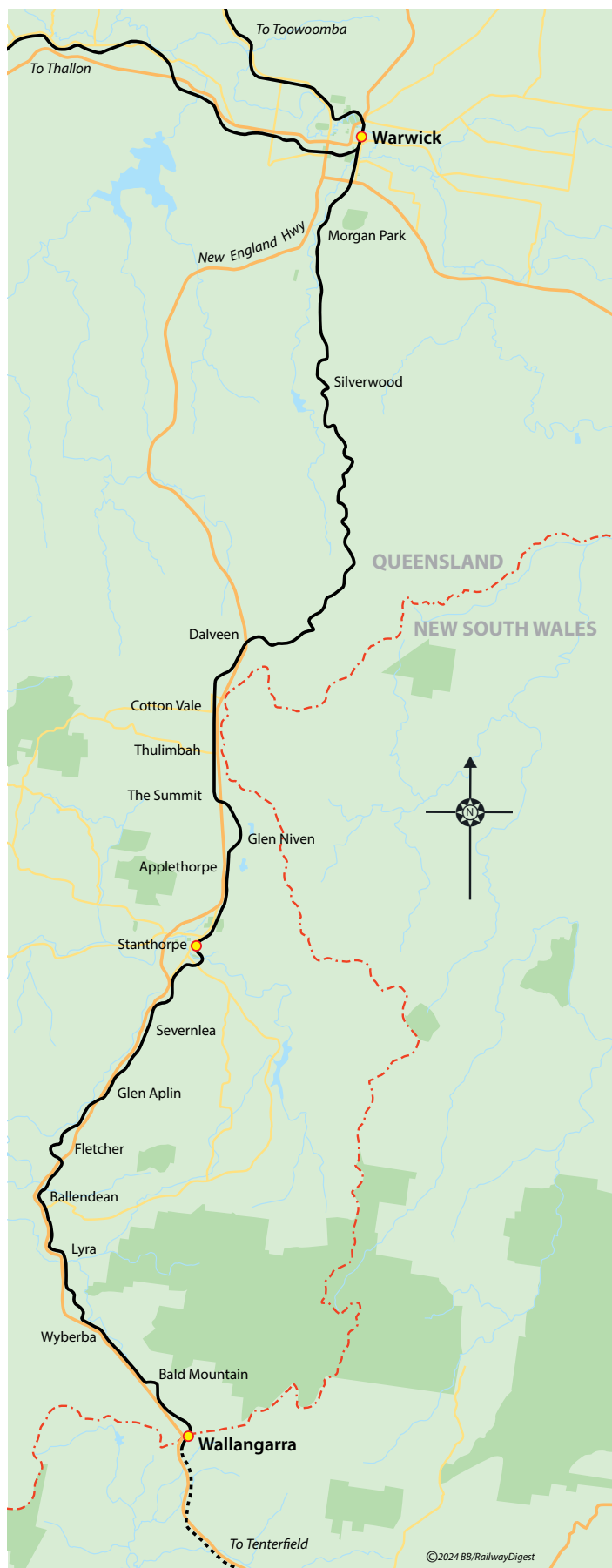
## Aftermath

A review of fire damage found five bridges and an unspecified length of track in need of repair, costed at \$20m. In early March 2024 the Queensland Government announced the permanent closure of the Stanthorpe to Wallangarra section of the southern line.

In a statement, Southern Downs Steam Railway chairman Kelvin Hutchinson said the closure was a tragic loss. "The Southern Downs Steam Railway has been a source of pride for our community, and its closure will have far-reaching implications for regional businesses and the local economy," he said.

Observers have noted all of the fire damage is confined to the section beyond Ballandean, about halfway between Stanthorpe and Wallangarra. One proposal to limit costs has been to construct a new terminus at the former Ballandean station site, where a siding remains in situ, only used by track machines in recent years. A turning fork or turntable installation has been proposed for a new terminus.

The last train to Wallangarra was a steam special operated by SDSR on 12 August 2023, hauled by C17 974. Local advocacy for repair of the line continues, with political lobbying and public awareness raising of the cultural, economic and historical significance of the line.



**Left:** The break-of-gauge yard at Wallangarra features a unique dual-gauge turning fork. On Saturday 12 August 2023, the crew of C17 974 takes the opportunity to blow down the boiler of 974 as it makes what would prove to be its last visit to the fork at Wallangarra. With the line now truncated to Stanthorpe (or perhaps Ballandean) the installation of a turning facility there will become a priority. Darren Tulk





**Above:** Rounding the curve near the former Bald Mountain station site, C17 974 approaches Wallangarra for what would come to be the last time, on Saturday 12 August 2023. Darren Tulk

**Below:** Typical of the damage inflicted by the fire is the condition of this bridge over Accommodation Creek, adjacent to the New England highway, between Bald Mountain and Wyberba, seen on Thursday 7 December 2023. John Hoyle

