

**A**lmost every railway-loving country in the world has witnessed a group of enthusiasts who have ganged together to preserve a steam railway – Australia is no different with a line affectionately known as ‘Puffing Billy’.

I don’t think this name does it justice. When we moved back to Melbourne and people learnt I was some sort of railway fanatic, they all said, “Oh you must go and see ‘Puffing Billy’...” I visualised a few hundred yards of track, a couple of

antiquated locos and coaches packed with happy children’s faces. In my mind it was NOT for real steam railway fans!

How wrong could I have been! Okay, it is narrow gauge and, yes, the coaches are open and mostly filled with mums and dads and kids in delight. But there is more to ‘Puffing Billy’ than that, a lot more. For a start, the lines stretch for nearly 20 miles through the Dandenong Ranges. These may not be full mountains but there are challenges, and the steam engines have to pound their way up

the gradients. This was a delight to the ears of yours truly, brought up on a diet of GWR Kings and Castles thundering through Pangbourne.

And on the way up – wow, the scenes are there to take your breath away. So the name ‘Puffing Billy’ is as adequate as saying a school-yard scrap is on a par with Muhammad Ali in the ring! Or comparing the village hop to a jam session with John, Paul, George and Ringo. A trip on ‘Puffing Billy’ really is a joy for railway fans. ➔

**MAIN PICTURE:**  
Prairie No 6A  
crosses the  
picturesque  
Monbulk Creek  
trestle bridge.  
(Kahla Webb)

# Steam Preservation Down Under

Our correspondent in Australia, **Richard Holdsworth**, pays a visit to Puffing Billy and finds out why it is the most popular steam tourist railway in the Southern Hemisphere.





**ABOVE:** Prairie No 12A stands ready for its next duties at Gembrook Station on the 'Puffing Billy' line. (Khala Webb)

**In the early days**

In Australia the line was prospering by the late 1880s when the demand for locally grown produce for a rapidly expanding population seemed to be never ending. Many immigrants from the UK and to a lesser degree mainland Europe, packed their bags, came to Australia and took up the challenge. The rolling plains that made up the majority of the State of Victoria were the first to be cultivated, but the more determined took up the challenge of farming on the slopes of the Dandenong Ranges. The slopes were one problem – then came the task of getting the produce to market. Horses and carts struggled on mountain roads and narrow tracks were often blocked by fallen trees or landslips.

Clearly, a more workable solution was needed and that could only be a railway. Talk is cheap but, eventually, the Government moved and construction of the Upper Ferntree Gully to Gembrook Railway in the Dandenong Ranges began in

1899. Standard gauge railways are relatively expensive to build and the depression of the time suggested narrow-gauge. There was another factor – the line of the railway would have to twist and turn through the Ranges and a narrow-gauge railway could handle the tight curves more readily, and there are plenty of those in the Dandenongs. Those in favour pointed to successful narrow-gauge railways in India, the United States and, of course, Wales.

The Colonial Parliament authorised the construction of the UFGTGR on August 15, 1898 with construction commencing a year later. The gauge was to be 2ft 6in and extend over 18 miles, and in places there was no alternative but to have a gradient as stiff as 1 in 30. Such was the enthusiasm of the locals, not only farmers wishing to get their produce to market but also ordinary hill folk wishing to see the outside world, that building progressed rapidly. Nearly 200 men bent their backs to the work, many locals wanting to see it completed



**RIGHT:** A trainee fireman waits his turn at the 'Puffing Billy' line, Melbourne, Australia. (Puffing Billy Railway)

**BELOW:** Map of the route.



as quickly as possible. Estimated cost was £53,000 but escalated (as these things do) to a hefty £74,000.

The first train steamed out of Upper Ferntree Gully station on December 18, 1900 and carried mail for hill dwellers and beer for the public houses. And carriages were packed to the brim with excited passengers. The return leg brought milk, potatoes, fruit and vegetables for the Melbourne market. First Class coaches had the convenience of toilets for the ladies and spittoons for the gentleman... this was the height of luxury for wealthy travellers but it was not quite the same for others who rode in coaches open to the elements. Yes, it does rain in Melbourne!

There were no complaints, though. This was a major step forwards and dramatically better than a horse and cart with some of the roads being nothing short of a quagmire in winter. And there were no complaints when



favourite passengers were offered space on the footplate during the cold winter weather.

Unfortunately, popularity of the line did not mean profitability. Roads started to be built into the Dandenong Ranges and motor transport reared its ugly head. Another challenge was the fact that all goods had to be transferred from the narrow-gauge wagons to the adjoining broader gauge line and thence to market in Melbourne. By the 1930s, the railway was losing money at an alarming rate and there was even a discussion about closing it altogether. By the end of World War Two there were just two or three trains a week hauled by grimy, unkempt locos on weed infested and neglected track. Landslips had always been a problem for a railway that was carved out of the steep mountainside, and August 1953 saw a major slip when the track was engulfed in soil and rocks. Even trees were brought down in the slip. It seemed the end of the once proud railway was a real possibility. ➔

**Locomotive fleet**

'Puffing Billy' uses with a relatively small fleet of locos. There are just five NA Class Prairie 2-6-2Ts and two Garrett locomotives of 2-6-0+0-6-2s. The NA Class was originally owned by the State Victoria Railway, with the two being built by Baldwin Locomotive Works at Eddystone, Pennsylvania. These are no longer active. The remainder (17 in total) were built at the Newport Works in Melbourne, of which 'Puffing Billy' uses locos 6, 7, 8, 12, and 14. They have been restored to closely represent the original specification.

The railway uses a Garrett locomotive built by Beyer Peacock in Manchester, UK, number G 42. Another – Garrett, number NG/G16 129, was imported from South Africa in 1996 and entered service in 2019. The NA Class locomotives are limited to hauling eight to ten carriages whereas the Garretts can handle up to 16. The railway also has a number of other smaller steam locos including a Peckett 0-4-0ST and Decauville 0-4-0T, formerly from the West Melbourne Gasworks, while a Climax-g geared loco was acquired from the Tyers Valley Tramway. There are also three small diesel locos used for shunting duties and handling passenger trains on days of a total fire ban – yes, this is Australia! There are 'Thomas the Tank' days and the railway also offers driver training courses.

the train made frequent unauthorised stops to pick up passengers – not necessarily at stations. The train often came to a halt to shunt extra goods wagons along the way as well. The railway soon became extremely popular and up to ten trains a day were run. It was the main reason that the Dandenong Ranges were being opened up to expanding farmland that was needed to feed the ever-increasing population of Melbourne. It also allowed logging on a commercial scale and special wagons were built where horses and carts could not cope.

Such was the success of the railway that people came from far and wide to travel on it and it can be said it spawned the tourist trade – more carriages were built and double-heading of the diminutive steam locos was adopted to handle the heavier trains. It is said that some young travellers rode on the roofs of the carriages when they could not find a seat inside. It was also reported that



**ABOVE:** Two 'Puffing Billy' Prairie locos and their crews wait their next turn of duty. (Dean Gifford)

**MIDDLE LEFT:** A heavily packed train needs double-headed locos as they work hard crossing the Monbulk Creek trestle bridge. (Puffing Billy Railway)

**LEFT:** Passing the scene of the 1953 major land-slip that interrupted services for more than a month, No 12A heads towards Gembrook Station on an outward service. (Dean Gifford)

**RIGHT:** Children enjoy the open coaches on the 'Puffing Billy' line, the most popular preserved stream railway in the Southern Hemisphere. (Puffing Billy Railway)

**BELOW RIGHT:** Double-headed with locos 12A and 8A passing through the heavily wooded Dandenong Ranges with a regular 'Puffing Billy' train. (Dean Clifford)

**BOTTOM LEFT:** Three generations enjoy the railway – albeit one of them, the author, is behind the camera! Lucy Holdsworth, daughter of the author, and granddaughter Josie during a fascinating day at the 'Puffing Billy' Railway. (Richard Holdsworth)

**Preservation beckons**

Fortunately, the people of Melbourne had a heart, and an outcry followed the announcement that the railway would close. A band of well-wishers capitalised on this sentiment and presented to State Parliament a petition of signatures on a scroll extending to no fewer than 586 feet (179m). Then the Melbourne newspaper, *The Sun*, organised a day of free travel for children to say farewell to their favourite railway, by then affectionately known as 'Puffing Billy', and this was so popular that the trains had to be repeated... and repeated...!

This triggered a groundswell of opinion that demanded 'Puffing Billy' should be saved and in early 1955 a meeting was held in the Independent Church Hall in Melbourne and the Puffing Billy Preservation Society (PBPS) was formed. To guide the plan, a committee of people from walks of life not necessarily railway related were appointed to a committee. Their first task was to persuade Victorian Railways, which had run 'Puffing Billy', that it should withdraw the plan to close the line. A truce was established and Victorian Railways agreed to run trains on weekends and public holidays as long as the PBPS would underwrite any losses the line might incur. This was something of a big ask as the railway had rarely chalked up a profit!

However, the PBPS committee set to work promoting their 'baby' and soon



**Specification: NA Class**

Boiler pressure 180lb/sq in	EVN 92 70 0043 484-9 (paintwork completed)
Boiler heating surface – 524sq ft	EVN 92 70 0043 480-7 (paintwork completed)
Tractive effort – 12,170lbs	EVN 92 70 0043 468-2
Driving wheel diameter – 36in	EVN 92 70 0043 467-4
Coal capacity – 30 cwt	EVN 92 70 0043 465-8
Cylinder diameter – 13in	EVN 92 70 0043 423-7
Cylinder stroke – 18in	EVN 92 70 0043 308-0 (Spare)
TOPS 43296	EVN 92 70 0043 296-7 (Spare)

**Specification: Garrett Class loco**

Boiler pressure – 180lb/sq in	EVN 92 70 0043 484-9 (paintwork completed)
Boiler heating surface – 1268sq ft	EVN 92 70 0043 480-7 (paintwork completed)
Tractive effort – 26,860lbs	EVN 92 70 0043 468-2
Driving wheel diameter – 36in	EVN 92 70 0043 467-4
Coal capacity – 70 cwt	EVN 92 70 0043 465-8
Cylinder diameter – 13in	EVN 92 70 0043 423-7
Cylinder stroke – 18in	EVN 92 70 0043 308-0 (Spare)
TOPS 43296	EVN 92 70 0043 296-7 (Spare)



found that the plight of the little railway had touched the heart of the people of Victoria and once the new timetable was published giving 'Puffing Billy' some sort of future, people flocked to Upper Ferntree Gully and packed the trains. Then another problem arose. Melbourne was expanding and houses were being built in the lower hills of the Dandenong Ranges and this created a demand for modern railway connections to the city. The Metro Service that runs throughout Melbourne and its outer suburbs (see *Railways Illustrated*, December 2019) is electrified, with 5ft 3in track known as Broad Gauge in Australia. The State Government approved the extension of it to Upper Ferntree Gully with a new, separate, station at Belgrave. This meant the narrow-gauge section of 'Puffing Billy' would have to be ripped up and so it was that the last train departed on Sunday, February 23, 1958.

The PBPS committee set to work once again. With the assistance of volunteers from Victorian Railways and the Citizens Military Forces, a new station and engine shed were built at Belgrave; and a new track laid that by-passed the land slip of 1953. The whole line was reassessed and re-laid as far as Menzies Creek. It was a huge undertaking for the volunteers but this was rewarded on July 28, 1962 when the first 'Puffing Billy' train of the re-invented railway steamed out of the new Belgrave Station to much acclaim and the sound of a brass band playing its heart out. It had taken four long years to get that far.

And it has not stopped there. Since 1962; the track as far as Emerald station has been repaired and re-laid (1965)

and on to the next station at Lakeside by 1975. The next step, possibly the most daunting of all, was extending the line once again to Gembrook, and this was achieved in October 1998. With the help of Army Reservists and financial support provided by the Andrews Foundation and the Victorian State Government, not only was the track re-laid but the four mighty wooden trestle bridges were re-built.

**After lockdown**

Most of 2020 saw COVID-19 and Australian Federal and State Governments introducing lockdown. 'Puffing Billy', like every other outdoor activity, suffered. But as I write this in April 2021 lockdown is being relaxed throughout most of Australia and 'Puffing Billy' is now resuming its normal, busy timetable. There seems every promise that the line will soon take up its former title as the most popular steam tourist railway in the Southern Hemisphere, with more than a quarter of a million passengers travelling each year. The railway is almost entirely self-reliant, with no subsidy from Government apart from occasional financial assistance for major projects.

As for recruiting staff, both on the payroll and as volunteers, I suspect 'Puffing Billy' would be the envy of many preserved railways in the world. The volunteer staff numbers 370 and full-time employees more than 100. Of these, 76 are qualified to work as guards or signalmen, 34 to be drivers, 31 to fire the engines and more than 30 to be responsible for restoration of the coaches and maintenance work.

Finally, as a rail enthusiast, I have to say that I enjoyed a great day out with family of three generations. And we will be back! **RI**

