

Trans Australian Railway Stations

The peak of the collapsed northern monument at Ooldea



The base of the collapsed southern monument at Ooldea



There are many old and disused stations on the Trans Australian Railway. Most are named after past Australian Prime Ministers, Premiers, and Vice Regal personalities. There is also of course a maintenance track (road) that runs beside the (railway) track right across the Nullarbor. Travel on that maintenance track between the railway stations of Haig in WA and the point in SA where Googs Track exits is no longer allowed, and heavy penalties can be applied to transgressors. However there are vehicle tracks leading north from the Eyre Highway or the Old Eyre Highway (the original dirt road) that provide good access to most of those old stations and to others which are still in use. Most of those tracks are around 100 km in length.

Recently, due to some other plans being frustrated by rain, floods, and very wet weather, Fran and I took the opportunity to visit a few of the stations on the railway line, and were very surprised at some of the things we found.

The first station we visited was Ooldea in SA. Ooldea is famous for at least two reasons; one of those reasons will be the subject of another story in the future, but the other reason is that very close to Ooldea are two monuments commemorating a very important event in the history of the rail line. On October 17, 1917, construction crews building the rail line from both the east and from the west met at the exact point near Ooldea where the monuments are located, and joined the rail line. So from that date, a single, standard gauge rail line joined the continent from one side to the other.

The monuments, and there are two of them, one on each side of the rail line, were rather grandiose when first erected, particularly the northern one. These days, due to the ravages of weather and time, both monuments have completely collapsed. The northern monument at least, was intact in 1996.

When you look at the northern monument as originally erected, it appears that pieces of railway line are incorporated into its peak, but that is actually not the case. Whilst there is real rail line at the



How the Monument looked originally



Sign at Cook taken from the top of the northern monument

base of both monuments, what appears to be track at the peak of the northern one is actually replica rail line made of wood. A large sign stating "Linking of rail lines on 17th October, 1917" was also attached to the peak of the northern monument, but that sign is now located at Cook railway station, much further west.

The monument sites are easily accessible being just four kilometres west of the railway crossing at Ooldea via the maintenance track located on the southern side of the railway line. The northern side of the rail line is Maralinga Native Title Lands and a permit is therefore required to venture further north.

The track up to Ooldea leaves the bitumen Eyre Highway exactly 1.3 km west of the abandoned "Colona" homestead and is signposted as leading to Oak Valley, which is an aboriginal community about 164 kilometres north-west of the railway line. There is also a sign post to the "Jacinth-Ambrosia

Project" which is why the new road was built. (Be careful turning off the Eyre Highway as this is a brand new mining road and is not yet shown on maps – the original track shown on the maps as departing the Eyre Highway right at "Colona" is no longer accessible having been subsumed into the new road). The new road is beautifully built and well maintained. 78 kilometres up that road there is a sign-posted turn off to the left to Oak Valley which you need to take. From that point on, the track is simply a reasonable dirt one with a few stony and rocky sections, and at the time of our visit, a wet water crossing at Ifould Lake and some wet and muddy areas. Just keep following the track until you hit the rail line. At no time did we ever need to engage 4WD.

Regaining the Old Eyre Highway the next morning, we headed further west and then turned north at the intersection that led to Cook. Cook is one of those railway stations on the Trans Australia Railway which is actually still in use. It's a stop for the freight trains and the Indian Pacific. Train crews are changed over at Cook, and it

The wet crossing at Ifould Lake



Cook railway station



Rest stop halfway to Cook



Old gaol cells at Cook



is the only station on the Nullarbor itself where the Indian Pacific actually allows the passengers to alight and have a walk around for an hour. Because of this there is a small souvenir shop selling a wide range of souvenirs and some very interesting books.

Cook has quite a history. It was opened in 1917, and by 1937 had grown to be a small town of 300 people. It boasted a two storey school, a swimming pool, an airstrip, a post office, general store, locomotive workshop, water condensing plant, and a golf course. The two storey school building also provided an education for the children of the aboriginal community of Immarna which was nearby. The hospital was closed in 1998, despite the few locals still living in the area fighting to keep it open. At a couple of places on the way to Cook, and at Cook itself, you can see the slogan "If you're crook, come to Cook", which the locals used to encourage people to attend the hospital in a desperate, but futile endeavour to keep it open.

Whilst some of the old buildings are still standing, including the school, and some old gum trees and peppercorns from its glory days still provide cooling shade, a couple of other items of historical interest also remain. Two old gaol cells constructed of wood and iron are prominently displayed, and there is also the sign which says "Linking of rail lines on 17th October, 1917", which from our visit to Ooldea we knew does not really belong in Cook. But at least it is being preserved.

There are flush loos and showers at the railway station at Cook, and free bush camping nearby is allowed, if not encouraged.

The railway station at Cook, and the surrounding land, is privately owned. The owner is an American railway company by the name of Genesee and Wyoming. They have four employees based at Cook who provide a maintenance service for the buildings, and cleaning services to a large building used as a lay over by the train crews. They might also provide a refuelling service to trains as there are some very large above ground fuel installations. Genesee and Wyoming are also the operators of the Central Australian Rail Line from Tarkoola to Darwin. For those of you with an interest in BHP, it will be Genesee and Wyoming who will, in the not too distant future, be running one ore train every day from the BHP mine at Olympic Dam north up the Central Australian rail line to a new port facility being constructed at Darwin.

We also noticed that about 25 brand new demountable cabin sized buildings had recently been erected, but nobody could (or would) tell us just what purpose they would serve.

Due to the amount of use that Cook gets, the dirt road from the Old Eyre Highway to Cook was wide and in extremely good repair.

The next station we visited was Deakin. There is an obelisk at Deakin on the northern side of the railway track where in 1909 surveyors calculated was the border between South Australia and Western

Infrastructure at Cook



Welcome to WA sign at Deakin



The obelisk at Deakin



Australia. The border of WA and SA is supposed to lay on the 129th longitude. When we checked our GPS at the obelisk, it reckoned that the obelisk was at 129 00 07 or about 83 metres too far east. But I guess for 1909, using sextants, chains, and very early versions of what eventually became the theodolite, it wasn't too far out. Very large signs have been erected on both sides of the rail line welcoming rail travellers to Western Australia or South Australia depending on the direction of travel.

The track up to Deakin was a bit rougher and far less well defined than the track to Ooldea, but again, at no time did we ever need to engage 4WD.

To get to the obelisk itself, simply cross the rail line at the properly marked and constructed rail crossing at Deakin, then turn right and follow the faint but reasonably discernible wheel tracks in an east north easterly direction to the obelisk, which is 3.3 kilometres from the crossing.

The fourth and last station we visited was Forrest – and what an eye opener that turned out to be! One of our earlier maps had an entry that Forrest was “abandoned”, but that is certainly not the case. Forrest has been an operating airport since 1929 and continues to be to this day.

The airport at Forrest was constructed by Western Australian Airways in 1929 as a refuelling and overnight stop for their air services between Perth and Adelaide. There was a fully equipped workshop to effect any repairs needed on aircraft, and there was what was known as the “Hostel”. This was essentially a large and well-built hotel, where passengers and crew were accommodated overnight. Australian National Airways (ANA), which was the forerunner to Ansett Airways, took over the hangar and “hostel” when WA Airways went into liquidation in 1936. But once ANA

introduced the venerable and reliable DC3 aircraft (also known as the Dakota) a few years after WW2, they had no further use for the facilities at Forrest.

The “Hostel” was demolished some years ago, but the hangar and workshop (less a lot of its equipment) have survived to this day, and continues to be used.

There is a bitumen bidirectional runway at Forrest which is capable of landing and taking off aircraft of up to about Boeing 737 size. Forrest is in fact an emergency set down for Qantas, Jetstar, and Virgin for their internal flights from Adelaide to Perth.

And perhaps more importantly, Forrest is the only refuelling stop between Kalgoorlie and Ceduna for light aircraft flying across the Nullarbor. They also offer overnight accommodation (bring your own bedding).

Forrest Airport, which has its own “terminal” and “waiting room”, sells Avgas, Jet A1, ULP, Diesel, and a variety of oils for aircraft. The “terminal” is also a bit of a museum in its own right as it appears every visiting light aircraft has left a business card on the walls somewhere. The “terminal” also sells caps, beanies and scarves and a few other souvenirs. And for you aeronautical types, the toilets are marked “VH-GUY” and “VH-GAL”!

An abandoned meteorological office, which was shut down a few years ago, doubles as both a small museum and a place where visitors can “camp” indoors for about \$20 per night. Facilities include a fully equipped kitchen, hot showers, and a flush loo.

There are also some very well kept houses at Forrest. One accommodates the Manager and family, and has a most beautifully kept green lawn, whilst the others are apparently available as overnight accommodation. Some Government employees were using one of them after destroying one tyre and getting a flat in their

Back track to Forrest



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The Forrest museum and our accommodation



The Forrest air terminal



The hangar at Forrest viewed from where the hostel once stood



The office at Forrest

second spare, and not having any tyre repair equipment. And of all things, bitumen roads join the houses to the old meteorological office and to the hangar and terminal.

On the railway line, Forrest also boasts the last remaining small station shed of its type. The word "Forrest" is still very clearly visible on the shed.

What looks like an old aircraft control tower on the outskirts of Forrest is really quite an intriguing building. Due to the very clear atmosphere in that region, an English University has established one of six meteorite tracking stations it maintains worldwide. The station is operated remotely from the University.

There are two ways to get to Forrest from the Eyre Highway. The best way apparently is via the Mundrabilla/Forrest Road. The second and a sort of secondary, back access, starts at Eucla. Due to rain and floods, the Mundrabilla/Forrest Road was closed, so we took the back way. There was some concern on the part of a property owner we were talking to as to the state of that road due to the seriously heavy rain they had just experienced, but whilst it was a bit wet in parts, and we had to dodge around a large number of soccer ball sized rocks on the track, we didn't need 4WD at any time to actually traverse it. It was obviously a bit rougher than the other road, and became just two wheel tracks in many places, but overall it was quite OK.

All of the railway stations are approximately 100 kilometres north of the Eyre Highway. The trips up each of the tracks heading north are very, very flat indeed and a bit lonely. We only saw two other vehicles whilst travelling on the tracks in the week or so we spent in the area. Obviously there were other vehicles at Forrest and Cook and on the Eyre Highway when we were close. Best of all though, every time you got within about three kilometres or so of the rail line, bingo! mobile phone signal! Telstra maintain mobile towers with a very directional signal right along the railway, so that passengers on the Indian Pacific (and the railway staff) always have mobile coverage. There are towers at most of the old railway stations.

But whilst driving the tracks was a bit lonely, it was never dull. There are a number of rockholes, sinkholes, caves, abandoned sheds and tanks, trigs, and Bench Marks to be found and visited which just added to the enjoyment of travelling some of the flattest and usually the most arid parts of the country.

So next time you intend to drive the Eyre Highway, think seriously about making a few detours north and visit some of the very interesting and intriguing railway stations on the Trans Australian Railway.

John and Fran Greig

Standing at the end of one of Forrest's runways

