

Teepookana and the Abt railway

The history of the Teepookana township and the railway line that once joined it to the outside world is tied to the mineral boom of the turn of the century. The discovery of rich deposits of copper at Mt Lyell led to the establishment of the Mt Lyell Mining Company in 1892. Yet transport of ore from the Mt Lyell mines posed a major problem. Between the mines and the nearest potential port lay an expanse of rugged and steep terrain cloaked in thick rainforest. In the minds of many, such terrain seemed impossible to traverse.

The Abt railway

The German-patented Abt railway system was selected as the best alternative to overcome the difficult terrain of the King River Valley. A central cog on the engine engaged the teeth of a third rail known as the 'rack' which was positioned midway between the two outside rails. This allowed locomotives to haul loads over sections two and a half times steeper than was possible for conventional lines.

In 1894, work commenced on the ambitious project. Four hundred men, many from

Victoria, laboured under the harsh conditions. Morale was often low among the workers. In the mid-winter of 1885 a stop-work meeting forced the contractors to offer reduced work hours and slightly improved wages (six shillings and sixpence for an eight hour day). The line was completed as far as Teepookana by 1896.

The Abt railway was hailed as one of the greatest engineering feats of its day. Many cuttings, up to 20 m deep, were laboriously hewn by pick and shovel. The line was 34 km long and had 48 wooden trestle bridges, the longest being the Quarter Mile Bridge. (Its remains can be seen one hours walk from Teepookana.) This bridge was nearly 250 m long and a steel girder soon replaced the original timber span. Trains crossed the bridge at a walking pace as any speed above this caused the bridge to sway dangerously.

Teepookana

From the time that work commenced on the track, until 1899 when the track was extended to Regatta Point, Teepookana was a hive of activity. During the last

years of the nineteenth century it was the fourth busiest port in Tasmania. At its peak, Teepookana was home to about 200 people. Most residents were railway workers.

Situated at the highest navigable point of the river, the township acted as a port facility for the Mt Lyell Mining and Railway Company. Two steamers, the *Pioneer* and *Eagle*, and over a dozen barges, or 'lighters', plied the King River, carrying coal, passengers, goods and mail for shipment by rail to the copper mines, and copper for shipment from the Strahan port facilities. Today, the ruins of two Huon pine lighters can be seen at the Fishermens Wharf.

Buildings comprised a two storey Royal Hotel, bakery, butcher, a police barracks, school, Mt Lyell workshops, stores and goods sheds. Today the remains of the once busy wharf can be seen along the bank below the Iron Bridge, while the six ton steam crane that once hauled copper onto barges now stands outside the Regatta Point Railway Station.

The end of an era

Although the rail system of the west coast was vital to the social and economic growth of the region as a whole, the fortunes of railway towns often waned. In 1899, the Abt railway was extended a further 11 kilometres to Regatta Point. The following year, the Tasmanian Government extended its railway the three kilometres around the bay from Strahan to Regatta Point. With Strahan acting as the port for the Mt Lyell Mining and Railway Company, facilities were translocated from Teepookana to Regatta Point. With the town's major function now rendered obsolete, the population of Teepookana rapidly declined.

Teepookana, however, did not die completely. The town struggled on until 1963, when the line was closed after 69 years of operation. Shortly after, much of the track was ripped up and sold. By 1972, the main span of the Quarter Mile Bridge had been washed away in floods. For Teepookana, and the townships of Dubbil Barril, Rinadeena and Lynchford along the line, the end of an era had come.

A new beginning

In the year 2000, the first stage of a new 35 kilometre railway connection between Queenstown and Strahan began operation. Although not a direct reconstruction of the historic Abt line, the



The Iron Bridge at Teepookana

finished project will essentially follow the original route. The journey gives visitors a unique opportunity to discover the region's history and stunning scenery.

Pining at Teepookana Plateau

Among the first to work the timber reserves of the King River were the Doherty brothers, who arrived around 1887. Some piners used draught horses to drag logs from the Teepookana Plateau to the King River. In 1911 Hartwell Conder established a seven kilometre long wooden tramway, complete with 29 bridges, to transport logs to the top of a near vertical chute upstream from Teepookana. The logs were rafted down the King River to be collected at its mouth for Conder's sawmill at Picaninny Point.

Huon pine continues to play a role in the economy today. The 20 000 hectare Teepookana State Forest is managed by Forestry Tasmania under a multiple use

system. Huon pine which has previously been cut or destroyed by fire is salvaged, providing a backup for other salvage operations from HEC impoundments. A rehabilitation program for those areas previously disturbed by logging is carried out — although the seedlings will take five centuries to mature!

Further reading

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