

SKETCH OF LAYOUT

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AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

RESEARCH PROJECT

"RICHMOND VALE RAILWAY"

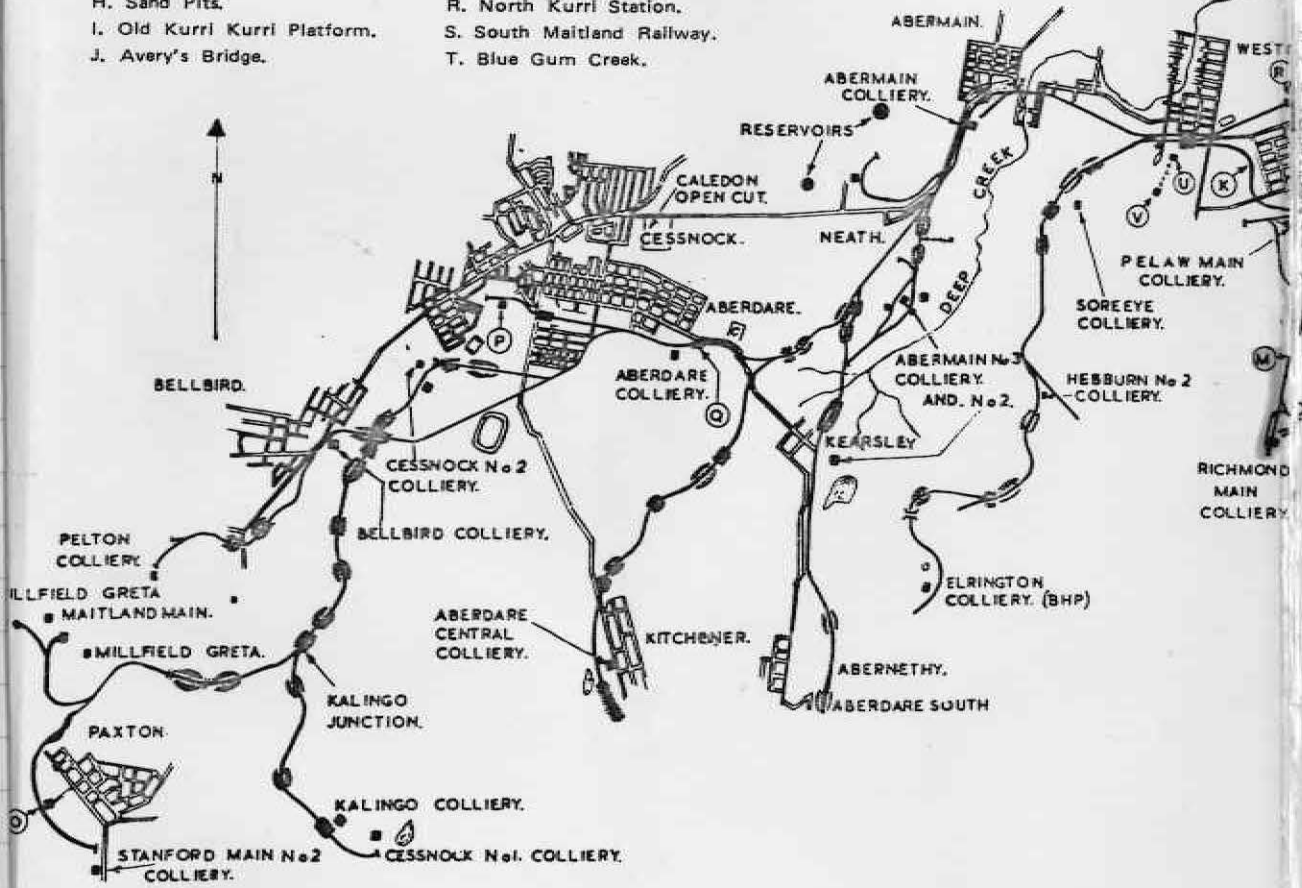
The End of an Era -

Last Working Industrial Steam
Engines in Australia.

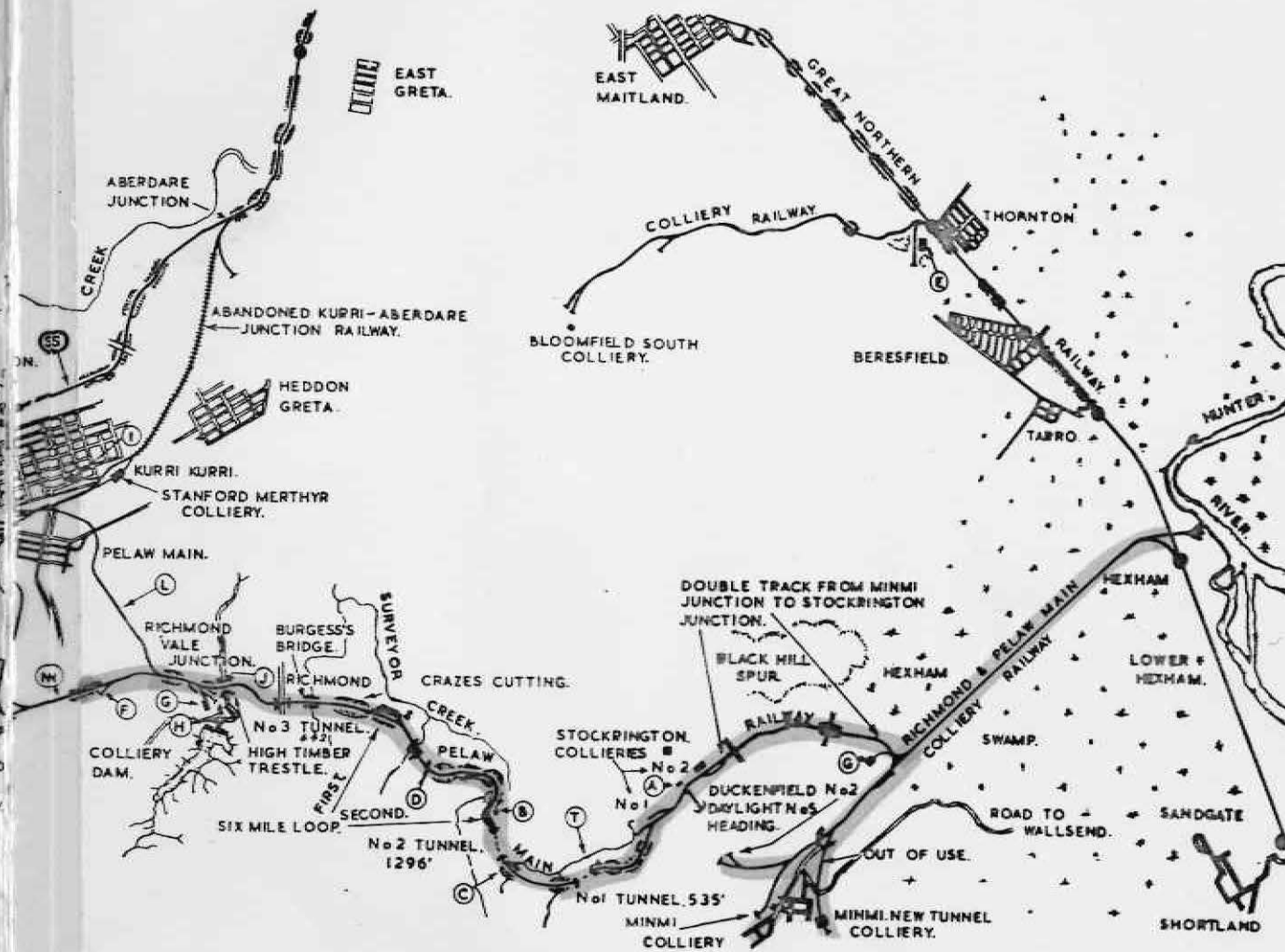
SKETCH OF LAYOUT

LEGEND

- | | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| A. Doghole Old Staff Cabin. | K. Owned by South Maitland Railway. | U. Hebburn No. 1 Colliery. |
| B. Staff Box. | L. Pelaw Main Branch. | V. Hebburn Tunnel. |
| C. Summit. | M. Passenger Branch. | |
| D. Buttal Bridge. | N. Richmond Main Branch. | |
| E. Waterloo Brichworks. | O. Paxton Colliery. | |
| F. Brick Siding. | P. Aberdare Extended. | |
| G. Fodder Shed. | Q. Caledonia Station. | |
| H. Sand Pits. | R. North Kurri Station. | |
| I. Old Kurri Kurri Platform. | S. South Maitland Railway. | |
| J. Avery's Bridge. | T. Blue Gum Creek. | |



J & A BROWN'S RAILWAY SYSTEM.



NOTE STAFF CABIN REMOVED FROM MINMI JUNCTION TO DOGHOLE (A) AFTER DUPLICATION.

B. J. GUTHRIE.
18 1 72

Richmond Vale Railway, the last working industrial steamengines in Australia, ceased operations and hauled its last coal on Tuesday, 22nd September, 1987, marking the end of its 133 year history. Coal and Allied limited, the railways owners, have chosen this course of action as part of their rationalisation programme due to an economic downturn in the coal market. Many interested groups, such as the N.S.W. Heritage Council and steam engine buffs, feel that the line should be preserved as a working museum that could be a unique tourist attraction.

Coal and Allied have offered to donate the engines and equipment for tourism but could not afford to sustain the costs of an antique railway to haul reduced tonnages of coal from Stockrington. The company has arranged for the locomotives of the Richmond Vale Railway to be cared for by experts from the Richmond Vale Preservation Society and has offered to support the establishment of a trust to operate the line as a tourist attraction!

The origins of Richmond Vale Railway, which were part of J. & A. Brown's extensive private railway system, began in 1850 when John Eales the owner of a coalmine at Minmi sought permission from adjoining landowners to construct a tramway between his mine at Minmi and Hexham to overcome uneconomical transport costs. Originally this tramway

1. Newcastle Morning Herald, 6.10.'87

was laid with wooden rails and the hoppers carrying Minmi coal were pulled by horses walking between the rails.²

These tramways, which later become steam railways in 1856, transformed the scope of the coalmining industry.³ Previously, collieries were sited close to water transport or relied upon horse or oxen drawn wagons, as in the Minmi area. This method of transportation of coal had many disadvantages. Wet weather caused delays and disruptions to shipping connections and wagon teams were very costly.

In 1854 a bill was passed in Parliament ratifying the construction of the railway between Minmi and the shipping wharves at Hexham. The cost of relaying the track with iron rails as well as the provision of two small locomotives amounted to £75,000.⁴

The mine owned by Eales proved to be uneconomical and was sold to James and Alexander Brown, rival coal producers, who owned an adjacent mine. Notice of the sale was made in the Northern Times dated 13th March, 1859 which stated that "the Minmi mine was sold to Messrs. J. & A. Brown for the sum of £60,000. This amount covered the purchase of the whole of Mr. Eales interests at

2. Australian Geographic No. 7, July-September 1987, p. 81
3. John Turner, Coalmining in Newcastle 1801-1900, Newcastle History Monograph No. 9, 1982, p. 65
4. Gifford H. Eardley, The Railways of J. & A. Brown, Australian Railway Historical Society, 1972, p. 15

Minni, including the Hexham-Minni Railway and its rolling stock, etc." 5

Improvements to the mine lifted its output to 110,000 tons in two years.⁶ Two locomotives hauled between 30 to 40 wagons to Hexham where the Browns had erected a modern steam crane and coal shoots with a capacity of 200 tons a day.⁷ Here the coal was reloaded into small ships, called "60 milers" because of the 60 nautical mile voyage to Sydney, and onto the punts used to serve the larger vessels in Newcastle Harbour. In 1861 the colliery railway was linked to the Great Northern Railway which made coal haulage between Minni and Newcastle possible without reloading.⁸ "It was an era when coal was king and the Hunter boomed."⁹

In 1891 James Brown's son, John, entered the family business.¹⁰ He was widely known in his lifetime as "The Baron." In 1896 the Richmond Vale Estate was purchased by the J. & A. Brown mining company from the Melbourne and Newcastle Minni Coal Mining Co., who in 1888 had sunk a shaft to the newly discovered Greta Coal Seam. Their enterprise failed due

5. Eardley, Railways of J. & A. Brown, p. 26
6. Turner, Coalmining in Newcastle, p. 65
7. John Turner, James & Alexander Brown 1843-1877, Newcastle History Monograph No. 4, 1968, p 18
8. Ibid. p 19
9. Australian Geographic, p 81
10. Ibid.
11. Newcastle Morning Herald, 9.7.'67

N.M.M. 13/6/1902.
RICHMOND VALE.

This estate, which is owned by Messrs. J. and A. Brown, comprises 4875 acres of freehold land. It was this estate which formed the subject of a lengthy equity suit in Melbourne. The coal was proved first of all in a bore in the northern boundary, and later on by a shaft 12ft in diameter. The upper seam was struck at a depth of 700ft, and the second seam at a depth of 800ft. This second seam is the one now being worked from the tunnels at Pelaw-Main, the dip from there being about 3in to the yard—a very favourable dip for working. It is intended to call for tenders for the railway, which will be about 11¼ miles in length. About a mile of this distance has already been made, and now serves as a siding on to which to shunt the Duckenfield coal from the Minmi to Hexham railway, which is joined at a point about two miles on the Hexham side of Minmi. The country has been cleared practically for the whole of the route. The railway strikes off the Minmi line in a westerly direction, passing through the Wentworth swamp. It then goes along Blue Gum Creek and the valley almost skirting this creek to a point near Thorn's selection, where the Seaham Colliery Company is sinking a shaft to the coal seam. From this point the railway will pass through what is known as Oakey Ridge by a tunnel about 20 chains in length. On the west side of the ridge the line will skirt Surveyor's Creek and cross the Government flat (Palmer's land). Thence it will go direct to the Richmond Vale Estate. After passing through the tunnel the route of railway will present very few engineering difficulties, and the grades are so arranged that an ordinary engine will take a train of 400 tons of coal to the Minmi junction, from where a train of 800 tons can easily be hauled. The Enabling Act, which was passed on the 21st October,

1900, allows five years in which to complete the line. It is expected that the line will be out of the contractor's hands within two years from now. The cost is estimated to be between £60,000 and £70,000. The railway will serve to bring these fields in closer touch with the Newcastle district, for it is possible that passenger trains will be run daily to and from Hexham. There is a provision in the Act that the Commissioners can enforce the running of passenger trains at all reasonable times. Arrangements are in hand for the building of a brick house on the Richmond Vale Estate as a residence for the manager.

to the lack of a railway to serve the mine and insufficient capital. The enterprise was re-named Richmond Main Estate by John Brown and sinking of a second shaft was commenced as well as a private power station and a private brickworks.¹²

Although the development of the mine was important to John Brown, he was much more interested in the construction of a private railway.¹³ His proposal was for a single line commencing near Minmie and linking in with the Richmond Main Estate. After much discussion in parliament in regard to who should build the line, the Richmond Vale Railway Act was passed in John Brown's favour with the proviso that the line had to be completed in five years and much to John Brown's annoyance that "the line was to be open to all who cared to use it for the conveyance of coal and goods upon payment of transport charges and due notice be given."¹⁴

John Brown eventually spent £100,000 on construction of the line.¹⁵ The route of the railway passed through rugged country in the foothills of the Mount Sugarloaf range, which is divided by Oakley Ridge which lies to the north of the twin peaks of this range. "To the lover of the Australian bushland the scenery along the route was delightful

12. Leaflet from Richmond Vale Railway Museum.

13. Eardley, Railways of J. & A. Brown, p. 59

14. Ibid.

15. Australian Geographic, p 81

and in complete contrast to the flat expanse of the neighbouring Hexham swamp which borders the base of the northern foothills." ¹⁶

The railway construction required the construction of three tunnels, purportedly by Russian labourers, and two substantial timber trestle bridges. Numerous cuttings were blasted through solid rock, embankments formed with spail and brick lined culverts used at their base to carry hillside run-off water. No. 1 Tunnel has a length of 535 feet ¹⁷ and No. 2 Tunnel a length of 1,296 feet. ¹⁸ The track gradient in some parts is 1 in 60 and it follows Blue Gum Creek, a fern covered gulch overshadowed by thick scrub.

The Richmond Vale Railway was opened on 26th June, 1905 ¹⁹ and gave direct access to the river port of Hexham and export markets. The Richmond Main Colliery came into production in 1913. The first coal in commercial quantities was railed to Hexham in 1914 and by 1928 coal production had reached 507,000 tons per annum. ²⁰ In 1926 a world record was set when 3,400 tons of coal was lifted up a vertical shaft in a single 8 hour shift. ²¹

Richmond Main colliery was recognised as the most modern in the southern hemisphere.

16. Eardley, Railways of J. & A. Brown, p 61

17. Ibid. p. 63

18. Ibid. p. 72

19. Ibid.

20. Leaflet from Richmond Vale Railway Museum

21. Ibid.

"(H) was always kept in the forefront of modern coalmining methods by John Brown, equipment being continually upgraded in line with the latest developments and Richmond Main became the showpiece of J. & A. Brown empire and indeed the South Maitland coalfields, then the richest in Australia." ²²

During 1900 to 1920 eleven locomotives worked the Richmond Vale Railway servicing two mines at Minmi, one at Richmond Main and one at Pelaw Main ²³ as well as coal hoppers, they hauled freight and passengers. A passenger service for miners operated between Minmi and Stockington from 1921 but was subsequently withdrawn with the introduction of a privately owned motor bus. ²⁴

The Minmi pit, however, closed in 1923 due to flooding and uneconomical workings and a new mine was opened at Stockington. But it too was closed due to an industrial dispute which lasted eleven years. In 1924 Back Creek Colliery, adjacent to Minmi also closed. The original track to Minmi became useless and was pulled up in the early 1970's. With the closure of these mines the population of Minmi rapidly decreased as men sought work elsewhere. During 1926 to 1927 thirteen locomotives were operating on the railway ²⁵ but during the 1930's depression, coal production was affected and operations at Richmond Main were curtailed.

22. Leaflet from Richmond Vale Railway Museum

23. Australian Geographic, p 81

24. Eardley, Railways of J. & A. Brown, p 103

25. Australian Geographic, p 81

On 5th March, 1930, John Brown, the "millionaire mining magnate" died.²⁶ His plans to build a large marshalling yard at Stockrington were never realised, however, ~~the necessity for~~ wartime requirements in 1939 saw a revival in the mining industry and during the 1940's the railway kept growing with some seventeen locomotives in operation servicing six mines.²⁷ The Stockrington No. 2 colliery began operations as well.

The increasing use of oil during the 1950's and 1960's led to steady reductions in coal production once more and many mines were closed. With the mines closures the railway's purpose was being depleted. In 1955 Duckenfield No. 5 colliery closed and in 1956 Stockrington No. 1 was abandoned. In 1961 Pelaw Main Colliery also closed but the office and locomotive running shed continued to operate.²⁸ In June 1962 an average of seven coal trains were running between Richmond Main Colliery and Hexham and in September 1962 it was decided to revert to a single track working over Hexham swamps.²⁹

On 7th July, 1967, due to economic difficulties, Richmond Main colliery ceased operating, the shafts were sealed, the headframes demolished and the railway stopped operating beyond Stockrington.³⁰

26. Eardley, Railways of J. & A. Brown, p. 117

27. Australian Geographic, p. 81

28. Eardley, Railways of J. & A. Brown, p. 145

29. Ibid.

30. Leaflet from Richmond Vale Railway Museum.

This unused section of track was lifted but the elaborate surface and haulage equipment at the mine together with the sidings and the access railway west of Stockington was retained.³¹ This then made the Hexham-Stockington track the main coal line. The locomotive running shed at Pelaw Main colliery also closed and the coal wagons and engines were moved to the Hexham sidings.

In 1976 with the power station at Richmond Main colliery also being closed, demolition and levelling of the site was scheduled. But at the last moment it was realised that very little of the coalfields mining heritage existed and a permanent preservation order was placed on the site. The Richmond Vale Railway Museum was formed in May 1979.³² Cessnock City Council acquired the site and plans were formulated for the establishment of a Mining Museum and Historic Park.³³

Coal and Allied Industries evolved from various amalgamations and mergers of the Brown's family business.³⁴ The fleet of the present day Richmond Vale Railway were formed from the steam engines of the South Maitland Railway. Up until September this year, four engines were operating, each taking turns to haul coal from Stockington to Hexham.³⁵

31. Leaflet from Richmond Vale Railway Museum.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. Australian Geographic, p. 81

35. Ibid, p. 83

Another nine engines are stored in the Maitland sheds. All thirteen engines are built by the same company, "Beyer, Peacock & Co. Ltd. between 1911 and 1922 in Manchester, England." ³⁶

With the closure of the Richmond Vale Railway the coal from Stockington No. 2 colliery is being transported by truck direct to the port and to Hexham. Coal and Allied's decision has been met with much opposition from those interested in preserving this historic railway. Indeed, the employees of the railway commandeered an engine and staged a sit-in on the track ³⁷ between 24th September and 15th October, 1987 and gained much publicity as well as a petition with approximately 7,000 signatories.

Many railway buffs from all over Australia and the world have visited the railway to take photographs of what is perhaps "the last gasp of the steam age in Australia." ³⁸ The future is still unsure but the longer the engines are out of commission, the harder it will be to preserve their working order.

36. Australian Geographic, p. 83

37. Newcastle Morning Herald, 19.9.87 & 6.10.87

38. Australian Geographic, p. 83

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Information Sheet from Richmond Vale Railway Museum