

WHEN THE LOCOMOTIVE CAME TO WOLLONGONG

It is just on 45 years ago — in the year 1878 — that the silence of the bush was disturbed by the whistle and rumble of the first locomotive. In that year the Mount Keira Company imported a loco to draw the waggons from the bottom of the incline to the wharf. Prior to that horses were employed for the work. Mr. Robert Cook — still living at Garden Hill, with a memory of 75 years for district events — was the driver in charge of the teams. The locomotive, Keira No. 1, was brought to Wollongong

in sections on the "Illawarra" — one of the I.S.N. Company's boats — and assembled and put together at the wharf.

The first driver of the Keira locomotive was Mr. Chambers, who drove the engine for about two years. I remember he lost his position through running over Mr. William Murphy's bull. The next driver was Mr. David, father of the David Bros., of the Wollongong Foundry, Mr. George Fell being the fireman. Then followed Mr. Bill David (at present the owner of the "Hit and Miss" Foundry) as driver.

At Bulli a locomotive was also running on the Bulli line, about the same time, or perhaps a little prior to the Keira Loco. The Bulli locomotive was built in Sydney.

The next locomotive to come was a loco, for the Mount Pleasant Company. This was secured from Belgium about the year 1880, and with it came a Belgian engine driver and engineer. This loco was a narrow gauge engine to suit the gauge of the Mount Pleasant tram-line(1). For some weeks it refused to do its work, but eventually, after certain alterations, it worked very satisfactorily. George Beadle, father of George Beadle, the Wollongong plumber was fireman to Louis Billett, the engineer, and became the first driver for the Mount Pleasant Company.

In the history of Wollongong and its locomotives, a rather unique loco was purchased by the Mount Pleasant Company about the year 1888. This locomotive was secured to haul the skips on a narrow gauge railway from the mine, along the side of the mountain, a distance of about three quarters of a mile. The loco was very light, and this proved its failure. Under any kind of a load the wheels would not grip the rails, and after many trials the loco was sold.

During the years from 1880 to 1886 Wollongong became quite used to the loco whistles. In these years Proudfoot and Logan, the contractors for a section of the Illawarra line, from Unanderra to Helensburgh(2), had three locomotives running on the new railway. One engine in particular, the "Gladstone", was a fine stamp of fast-running locomotive. The driving wheel of this engine was six feet in diameter, and for speed and strength she had no equal in the colony(3). She was a very big and heavy engine, and was employed in drawing blue metal ballast from section of the Illawarra line under construction. During the time this engine was running an amusing incident occurred at the Mount Pleasant railway crossing. For a considerable time there was a dispute between Louis Billett, the driver of the small Mount Pleasant locomotive, and the driver of the "Gladstone" as to which engine should have the right-of-way at the crossing. Billett contended that his engine should be given first place at the Proudfoot and Logan's quarry, on the Kembla line, to the the crossing. The driver of the "Gladstone" was equally determined that he must not slow down. The result was a collision one morning. George Stephenson was asked by a friend what would happen if his engine met a cow on the line and he replied in good Geordie vernacular, "It would be bad for the cow".

This little Belgian locomotive was the cow in this case, and a badly damaged cow at that.

— "Old Pioneer", in the Illawarra Mercury, 23 Nov. 1923.

1. 3 feet 8½ inches.
2. According to Mr. C. C. Singleton's "Railway History in Illawarra", Proudfoot and Logan's contract was for the section from Clifton Tunnel to Macquarie Rivulet.
3. This suggests that the "Gladstone" was a single-driver express engine, a type totally unsuitable for construction work. Mr. J. F. Webber, in the A.R.H.S. Bulletin for September, 1964, stated that she was an 0-6-0 inside-cylinder tender locomotive with 4' 6" wheels, built by Beyer Peacock & Co. in 1876 for the Australasia Coal Company, Newcastle, and sold in 1879 to Proudfoot and Logan, who gave it the name of "Gladstone". — Ed.