ALL CHANGE AT WATERFALL

Some of the changes made by the new railway timetable will be very welcome—particularly some extra trains to fill the long, long gaps when nothing ran between Wollongong and Sydney. Less welcome is the fact that a lot of changing at Waterfall will be involved, restoring to that station some of the importance it once had as the railhead, where everyone changed from train to coach, or from coach to train.

For many years after the opening of the main Southern line as far as Campbelltown, for travellers between Sydney and Wollongong the longest way round, in distance, was the shortest way home, in time. It was quicker to take the train from Sydney to Campbelltown, and the coach thence to Wollongong, than to take the little-used road via Lugarno or Tom Ugly’s, or trust oneself to the steamers, whose running, subject to the vagaries of sea and weather, was inevitably erratic.

It was even quicker, as Helen Hargrave (afterwards Mrs. Gray) found on her first visit to her Uncle Ralph in 1884, to get to “Stanwell” by train to Campbelltown, four-horse coach to Bulli; and two-horse buggy for the rest of the way—a journey of well over sixty miles to reach a destination less than thirty miles from Sydney as the crow flies.

Then, on 9th March, 1886, the Illawarra Line was opened as far as Waterfall, a single platform on the western side of the line about 32 chains south of the present station, adjoining the level crossing of Bulli Road (later replaced by the southernmost of the two road overbridges) near its junction with the road to Port Hacking River. Coaches then began to ply between the new railhead and Wollongong, via Blue Gum Forest, Bald Hill and the Cliff Road. The latter had been described a few years earlier as a “Spanish mule-track,” and the coach trip must have been a hair-raising experience on a stormy night.

When Helen Hargrave made her third visit, “the regular four-horse coach from Waterfall to Bulli [actually Wollongong] was working daily and continued until the tunnel and railway were opened.”

But the coaches did not work over the whole distance for long. Railway construction over the comparatively easy section at the Wollongong end was away ahead of that on the extremely difficult section between Waterfall and Clifton. The wear and tear caused by the contractors’ road vehicles was making the local roads almost untrafficable. Agitation began for the opening of as much of the line as was usable. On Queen Victoria’s Jubilee day, 21st June 1887 (hence Jubilee Bridge) the line was opened by Francis Woodward, M.P., at probably the proudest moment of the honourable and learned member’s chequered career. A contretemps had been created when the government engine (shipped down to Wollongong Harbour in sections) was found to have been assembled on the wrong side of the coal staithes, which it was too big to pass under; but the contractor, Mr. Logan, saved the day by lending his engine, the famous “Gadstone.” The government engine was knocked down, carted
piecemeal to the right side of the staithes, and reassembled.

Twice a day thereafter (thrice on Wednesdays and Saturdays) it set out from Wollongong at the head of two carriages, likewise sent down from Sydney by sea, and rumbled ponderously to Clifton—twelve or thirteen miles in forty minutes. There it unloaded its passengers, to be carried by William Hanley's Star Line of Royal Mail coaches to Waterfall to catch the train to Sydney. If everything ran to time and all connections were made, the whole journey took 5 hours 23 minutes. Apparently the trains on the Sydney side of the gap were even slower than on the Wollongong side—a protest meeting complained that “the rates of speed on the line between Waterfall and Sydney were most vexatious... an hour was wasted in travelling from Waterfall to Como, a distance of about 10 or 12 miles.” Not only that, but “the fares per mile were by far the highest in the colony”: Wollongong to Clifton 3/- first and 2/- second, and no return tickets.

The meeting sought Mr. Woodward’s aid to redress their grievances. He was not entirely unsuccessful—the extra train was increased to thrice weekly, and return tickets issued at single fare and a half, but single fares were reduced only by 2d., the Commissioner evading the question of the exorbitant mileage rate by pleading that travel by road and coach was now cheaper than by sea. And before long the time to Clifton had stretched out to fifty minutes, possibly because of the engineer’s misgivings; he had expressed doubts as to whether the section near Clifton was really fit for use, and his doubts were justified in the great rains of 1889-90.

However, some relief was at hand. Coalcliff (or Clifton) Tunnel having been completed, the line was extended through it to a temporary terminus (opened 25th July 1888) about a mile further north; which at least saved the coach passengers from the most alarming part of the road.

Then, on 20th September of the same year, the old “Governor-General,” the oldest engine on the strength of the N.S.W.G.R., got through from Sydney. On 3rd October through services officially began, and “Change at Waterfall” became a thing of the past—until 1980.

Even while struggling to be born, the Illawarra Line had become, as “Sing” described it, “the Cinderella Line of the State.” We are not ungrateful for small mercies; but it seems the Fairy Godmother has yet to put in her appearance.

[Acknowledgements to the late C. C. Singleton’s “Railway History in Illawarra”].