

Full steam ahead for the Rail Heritage Centre

Turning of the first sod ceremony

There have been a number of developments and changes to the upgrade of the Thirlmere Rail Heritage Centre since the article in the December 2007 issue of *Railway Digest* (page 55), and here Ross Verdich and RailCorp offer an update of both the scope of works, and the construction process.

The launch

Sunday 1 March marked the official start of works on the Rail Heritage Centre upgrade, at Thirlmere, south-west of Sydney. In conjunction with the annual Thirlmere 'Festival of Steam', Minister for Transport and the Illawarra David Campbell turned the first sod, and was joined by RailCorp representatives Chairperson Elizabeth Crouch, Chief Executive Officer Rob Mason and executive staff Ian Keys and Marianne Hammerton. Cabinet Ministers Phil Costa and Graham West were also present, as were representatives from rail heritage groups around NSW.

The turning of the sod ceremony was hosted by the NSW Rail Transport Museum's President Peter Berriman and Chief Executive Officer Richard Mulvaney and paves the way for a number of major works to commence on the current railway museum site.

The hot, sunny day was one of great celebration, bringing together thousands of families and visitors of all ages to celebrate NSW's rich rail history at the annual 'Festival of Steam.'

In addition to the ceremony, visitors were able to enjoy the wide range of attractions at the festival, including the street parade, boutique stalls, food tastings, musical entertainment, fun rides, model railway exhibition and vintage machinery displays. Former New South Wales Government Railways (NSWGR) steam locomotives 2705 and 3526 operated six, sold out train rides from Thirlmere to Buxton throughout the day. The main line train from Sydney—the *Thirlmere Flyer*—was brought into Thirlmere by ex-NSWGR 4-6-0 3642, which proceeded to operate a shuttle to Picton before retuning to Sydney fully booked later in the day.

The NSW Rail Transport Museum (NSWRM) was open for business as usual, providing access to the museum's extensive collection for a busy stream of enthusiastic visitors to enjoy.

The Rail Heritage Centre upgrade

The NSW Government's Rail Heritage Strategy, is designed to support the conservation and display of the State's core rail assets,



Above: The official turning of the first sod ceremony at Thirlmere on Sunday 1 March. Left to right are: State Member for Campbelltown (and Minister for Juvenile Justice and Volunteering) Graham West; State Member for Wollondilly (and Minister for Water and for Regional Development) Phil Costa; Transport Minister and State Member for the Illawarra David Campbell (with the spade); and NSW Rail Transport Museum President Peter Berriman. All images by Ross Verdich

developing heritage skills, and building on the tradition of rail heritage volunteering. This involves sites throughout the state, with a major one being the Rail Heritage Centre at Thirlmere.

As reported in the December 2007 issue, the plan for the site is to create two (later, three) distinct precincts which will allow visitors to gain a complete picture of how the State's rail heritage is preserved and offer a greater level of understanding of the history of rail. The current focus is on:

- **The Heritage Precinct:** will comprise the station building, station master's residence and co-op shed, creating an authentic late 19th century rail setting experience. This will house rail heritage exhibitions and events.
- **The Operations Precinct:** will provide a new workshop with more efficient working conditions for the maintenance and conservation of the heritage rolling stock, with controlled public access and viewing.

In due course a new Exhibition Precinct will house a new multifunctional exhibition building to display some of the State's most historic rolling stock such as the Governor General's and Premier's Carriages and other significant assets. This will also include spaces suitable for corporate and community events and the Centre's administration facilities.

Construction update

To date a design and construct contract has been awarded to Robson's Civil Projects for the new workshop. Excavation work has begun on site with construction due to be completed in August this year. An additional turn-out onto the loop line to access the new Operations Precinct has also been installed.

Restoration works are taking place on the turntable whilst in its current location at the northern end of the site. This process will minimise the duration of time that the turntable will be out of action. The restored turntable will be relocated to the new Operations Precinct, with this due to occur later this year.

The 105-foot turntable was originally located at the No. 3 Roundhouse site at Enfield steam locomotive depot in Sydney's western suburbs. It was installed by the Railway department to turn the massive 260-ton AD60 Class Garratt steam locomotives introduced during the early 1950s. It is one of the few items of Enfield's infrastructure to be preserved and it was relocated during the 1970s when the NSWRTM moved its exhibits to Thirlmere. Turning a locomotive is a fascinating exercise involving skill in driving and balancing the locomotive on the turntable, moving the turntable to the required roundhouse road, centring it and driving the locomotive carefully off again. To find out more about the Rail Heritage Centre visit www.nswrtm.com.au.

Supporting a new era in skills transfer and volunteering

Parallel to the development of the Rail Heritage Centre and, also part of the NSW Government's Rail Heritage Strategy is a renewed emphasis on engaging regional communities with their local rail heritage collections. Local businesses, councils and schools will be targeted and invited to become actively involved in conserving and interpreting their unique rail history.



One of the most exciting developments is the Heritage RailCare Pilot Program to be delivered through Conservation Volunteers Australia (CVA) in partnership with the Office of Rail Heritage and rail heritage groups, over the next 12 months. The Program aims to enable volunteers to learn from each other, share resources, and build stronger networks. At the same time, projects that require specialist conservation skills will be utilised as demonstration opportunities, with the aim of attracting a new generation of rail volunteers.

The pilot program will also generate a Skills Register of volunteers in NSW who have skills critical to rail heritage conservation, and are willing to share their special knowledge. The Skills Register will be supplemented by the establishment of a Rail Heritage Skills Bank.

The Skills Bank will be a central resource, housing blueprints, specifications and guidelines, including step-by-step instructions about how to perform specific tasks, and incorporating photographs, action tapes, voice recordings, diagrams, and any other material that might help people to replicate authentic conservation processes and tasks in the future.

The Heritage RailCare Program will provide hands-on assistance for some of the non-specialist tasks associated with caring for heritage assets. For example, CVA recruited a team of external volunteers to plant more than 100 trees on the Rail Heritage Centre site. This regeneration project, supported by Wollondilly Council, is part of the overall intention to establish an 'environmentally responsible, seamless connection' between the Centre's grounds, the local township and the surrounding rural landscape.

Above: 4-6-0 steam locomotive 3642 arrives in Thirlmere with the *Thirlmere Flyer* from Sydney on Sunday 1 March.

Below: The circular concrete footing for the turntable's ring rail has been recently poured. The overhauled 105-foot turntable, upon installation, will present a raised 'stage' for displaying locomotives. The footings for the sector roundhouse are being formed-up on the right. The adjacent Loop Line has been slightly slewed to accommodate the width of the works.

