

## Hobart-Huon Railway

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The 1870s and 1880s were the golden age of railway construction in Tasmania with the Launceston-Deloraine line completed in 1871 and the Hobart-Launceston line completed in 1876. Several extensions and branches were added to these lines in 1885-1900<sup>1</sup>, but no railway line was ever constructed south from Hobart. The debate over a Hobart-Huonville line raged for nearly forty years, from 1885 until 1923, and involved four major enquiries, in addition to a Royal Commission. The fate of this railway is important to the history of Taroona because it was *not* built and so did not affect the steady rural development of the area.

Public debate over a line from Hobart to Victoria (Huonville) commenced about 1880 and on the 7th October 1885 a petition was tabled in the Legislative Council for the "Construction of a Railway from Hobart to the Huon"<sup>2</sup>. The Engineer in chief of the Public Works Department was sent to perform a trial survey to prove the feasibility of the proposed railway. In a comment which showed great foresight on the development of the Kingston area he concluded:

between Kingston and Hobart I think that the large suburban traffic that may be anticipated would amply repay the cost of surmounting any small difficulties that may exist<sup>3</sup>.

This survey was completed by the 14th December 1885 at a cost of £376 15s 5d<sup>4</sup>. The suggested route was to be through Taroona and Brown's River, past North West Bay and then to the Huon either via Grove or Port Cygnet. Following this initial survey there was a period of inactivity until late in 1889 when the Government stated that it "fully recognised the importance"<sup>5</sup> of the line. Two further petitions from the Kingborough and Huon districts were presented to parliament 1889<sup>6</sup>.

The route was resurveyed in 1891-1893 by the Engineer in Chief, Mr H. Cutten, of the Public Works Department. The line chosen was referred to as "Cutten's Permanent Survey" and was pegged out with concrete survey markers. This route remained the basis of all later surveys.

Cutten proposed a tunnel of about three quarters of a mile's length to the west of Sandfly to avoid the steep grades of the hills.

The slopes of Bonnet Hill were also a major obstacle for on the 23rd July 1891 he reported:

On the portion of the line, Brown's River toward Hobart I have made four trials round the Brown's River Cliffs, but as yet no decision has been arrived at as to which shall be adopted, but in any case the works at this particular part will be heavy<sup>7</sup>.

The Engineer in Chief was obviously impressed by the scenery of the Alum Cliffs and their tourist potential. He seriously considered that the line between Taroona and Kingston Beach be constructed along the base of the cliffs:

I have also made a trial round the foot of the Brown's River Cliffs, the results of which are very satisfactory as far as the alignment and gradients are concerned. The section will be heavy and the work of trimming cliffs and protecting embankments from the sea will be the heaviest items to be considered in deciding as to whether this route shall be adopted as against the high level line. This lower line, while being practically level would give splendid access to the beach, and in view of the excursion traffic would be the best, even if a little more costly than the upper one<sup>8</sup>.

The survey of this route was very time consuming and costly. A small boat had to be bought to gain access to the cliff face. Mr Cutten reported on the 22nd January 1892 that the total budget of £3,000 had been spent on the Victoria to Kingston route, but the section from Kingston to Hobart was not yet finished<sup>9</sup>.

The survey of the Alum Cliffs section alone took seven months. The following report on the 1st March 1892 indicates that Mr Cutten was appreciative of the cliffs' natural beauty and wished to cause minimal environment damage:

[The] whole of the alignment [is] marked from Kingston round the cliffs as far as the Quarantine Station. My endeavour has been to so create this portion of the line as to leave the cliffs undisturbed as much as possible, even taking to the shallow and shoal water in preference to going near the cliffs, but in one or two instances where the water is deep and the cliffs bold I have been compelled to hug them so closely as to be quite underneath the over hanging portions . . . The alignment round this part is good and easy, with only two short tunnels, neither of which exceed 3½ chains each. It will be necessary to protect against the sea with rocks three or four tons weight<sup>10</sup>.

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*The Alum cliffs around the base of which it was proposed to run the Railway.*

PHOTO J.C.S. BOWLER.

The remaining length of Taroona was surveyed in about one month. In his next report Mr Cutten revealed that "progress [was] slow owing to the sea interrupting us"<sup>11</sup>. This proximity to high seas was later to make the Alum Cliffs route unfeasible.

The route then followed the foreshore through Taroona, around Alexandra Battery, then between Sandy Bay Road and the sea, through Sandy Bay and beneath Battery Point to the Wharves:

[The] line follows the water to Derwent Water, across the road until Lord St., then along Flinders Lane, with a Station behind the Police Station, down Queen Street to Quayle St., then through St. George's hill to the Customs House<sup>12</sup>.

Following the completion of Mr Cutten's survey in 1893 the plans for the Huon railway were shelved until 1909 when a Royal Commission was established to "Report on the Advisability of Providing Railway Communication with and through the Huon Districts"<sup>13</sup>. This Commission met in February and March of 1909 and collected evidence on the expected usage of the proposed railway and the costs of alternative routes. One of the conclusions stated that Kingston was in need of better transport, as it did not have an adequate wharf, whereas:

With the exception of Longley, Leslie and Sandfly, . . . every other centre in Kingborough and Franklin (Huon) is well served by water carriage<sup>14</sup>.

Besides Cutten's survey route the Commission considered alternative routes, including several via Fern Tree and Longley. No recommendations were made about the choice of routes.

On the 9th August 1910 the House of Assembly appointed a Select Committee to investigate the construction of a "line of electric tramway connecting Hobart with Huonville, with a branch into Kingston"<sup>15</sup>. This committee reported that "the proposed railway will pay interest and working expenses and leave a profit, besides opening up a great asset"<sup>16</sup>.

Mr Goodman, the Chief Engineer and General Manager of Works in South Australia and an authority on railway construction was then contracted to perform a detailed analysis of the proposed railway. His report was tabled

in the Legislative Council on the 28th August 1912<sup>17</sup>. Little or no action followed.

The newly formed Kingborough Council lobbied on several occasions for the construction of the railway. On the 16th October 1912 the *Mercury* reported a deputation to the Premier, Minister of Lands and Works and Chief Secretary by the Southern Tasmanian Railway and Exploration League, City of Hobart and Municipalities of Kingborough and Huon. At this meeting the Warden of Kingborough, Mr Ryan stated:

This railway had been recommended by one of the highest authorities in Australia and on that account alone should be constructed. . . . If the Huon railway was turned down the Huon people were going to agitate until the Huon was dredged sufficiently deeply to permit interstate boats to come up it take away their fruit<sup>18</sup>.

At last the railway appeared to be going ahead and despite the war effort a substantial amount of land was acquired in the Huon for the proposed railway. Later it was necessary to pass a special bill through parliament to restore this land to its previous owners.

In 1919 yet another survey was commenced. The delays since the original investigations now meant that Cutten's Permanent Survey was practically worthless:

[An] almost impossible Tramway [was] suggested by Mr. Goodman a year or two ago, . . . following the streets for the first part of the distance and following the course of an ordinary railway for the remainder. . . . there will be great difficulties in getting out of Hobart and the previous survey made 25 years ago is practically useless and quite impracticable in parts now owing to the growth of Hobart and other causes, such as destruction of marks. [The current] Survey will require to be a quite new survey<sup>19</sup>.

The Alum Cliffs route was now viewed as totally impractical. The surveying engineer proposed relocating the line around the top of the cliffs between the Shot Tower and Brown's River:

the old survey kept close to the foot of the cliffs and would have been a most expensive line, because the only material available for sea walling is sandstone which is not hard enough to resist the wearing effect of heavy seas; also the seas there come in with considerable force and sea walling to be effective required to be blocks of considerable weight. By adopting the



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new route which is on top of the cliffs the line is safe from any sea protection and has much lighter earthworks. . . . The new trial route although on top of the cliffs, nearly 100 feet above the old survey will however reach low enough for a suitable siding to serve Kingston Beach<sup>20</sup>.

In November 1921 the Engineer of Works listed the probable sidings or stations on the Railway:

Hobart Goods yard	0 [miles]
Sandy Bay Rd. crossing (stopping place for passengers only)	2 [miles]
Taroona [near Taroona Beach]	6½ [miles]
Kingston Beach	10¼ [miles]
Kingston	11½ [miles]
Siding	13½ [miles]
Margate Rd.	15 [miles]
Sandfly (Longley)	20¾ [miles]
Vinces's Hill, Lwr. Longley	24 [miles]
Crabtree Rd. Jcn.	27¼ [miles]
Huonville	34 [miles] <sup>21</sup>

After this survey had dragged on for two years the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works began an enquiry in September 1921 into its progress and the feasibility of the railway. This enquiry resulted in the abrupt end of the survey and the death-knoll for the railway being sounded on the 20th January 1922. The message was conveyed in the simple telegram:

Acting Secretary for Public Works to Mr. J.E. Bingham, Huon Survey Camp: Grove Minister instructs Huon Survey party be withdrawn at once. Please make necessary arrangements<sup>22</sup>.

A postscript was added in November 1923 when the Minister for Works requested a cost estimate on the construction of the railway. Including survey, line construction and electrification and land acquisition the total cost was £794,000<sup>23</sup>.

Delays and indecision had finally robbed the Huon its chance of a railway. The Tasmanian railways were already showing signs of decline with the closure of the Sorell line in 1926 and other branch lines shortly after. As part compensation the facilities at Port Huon were later expanded and interstate and overseas shipping increased.

The Huon's loss can be viewed as Taroona's gain. If the railway had been built through Taroona then the area would have rapidly been developed and would probably have suffered

the industrialisation that typically follows rail transport. Instead Taroona was left as a rural back water and seaside resort until its subdivision in the 1940s.

The uncertain fate of the Huon railway can best be summarised by a resident of Taroona in the 1920s who recollected the survey teams passing through on their annual marking of the railway line. As soon as the surveyors had disappeared the local farmers quietly removed the offending survey pegs.

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