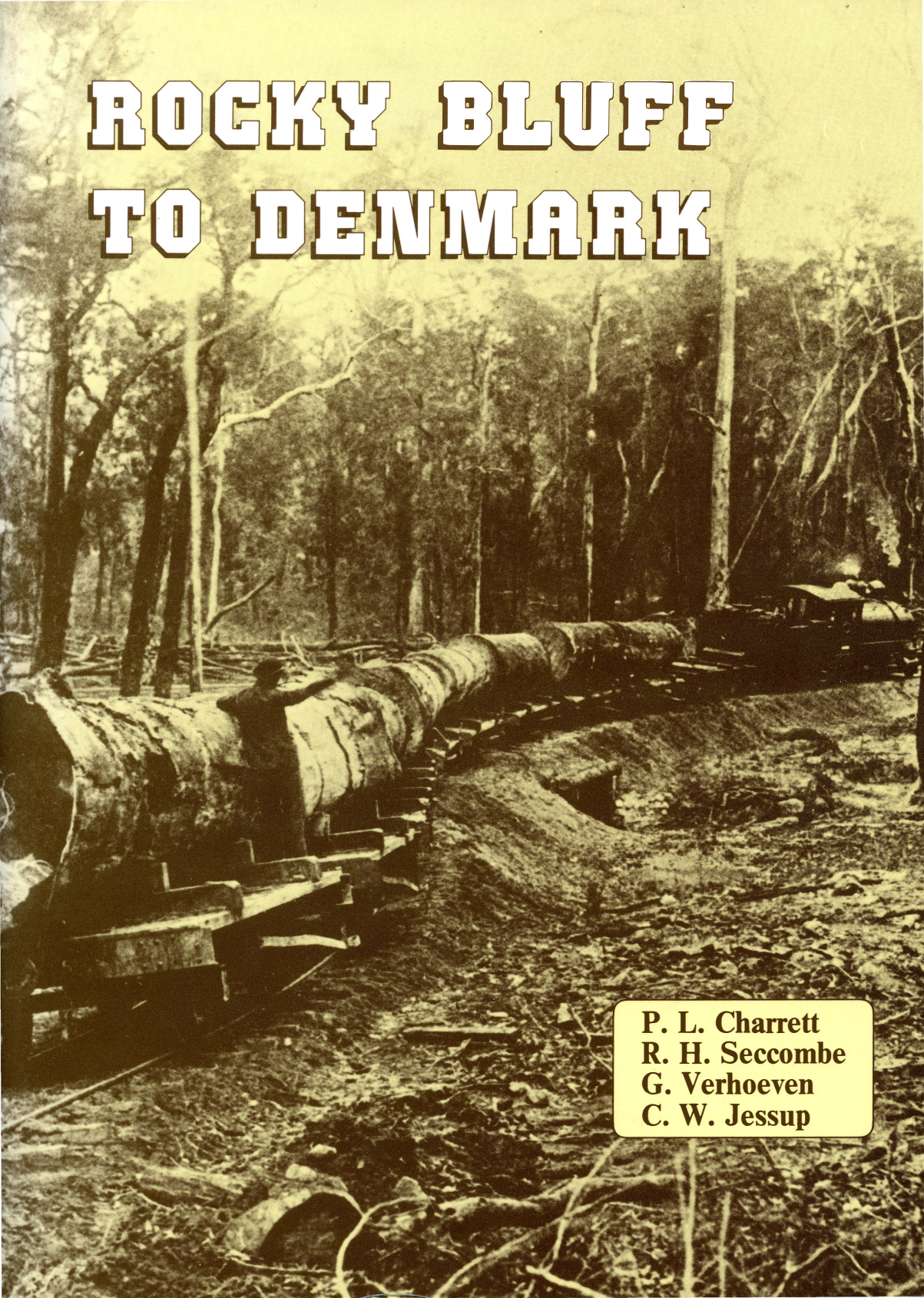


# ROCKY BLUFF TO DENMARK



P. L. Charrett  
R. H. Seccombe  
G. Verhoeven  
C. W. Jessup



# ROCKY BLUFF TO DENMARK

Twenty-fifth Anniversary Selections  
from "Light Railways"

P. L. Charrett  
R. H. Secombe  
G. Verhoeven  
The late C. W. Jessup

MAPS DRAWN BY G. R. THORPE



LIGHT RAILWAY RESEARCH SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA  
MELBOURNE 1986

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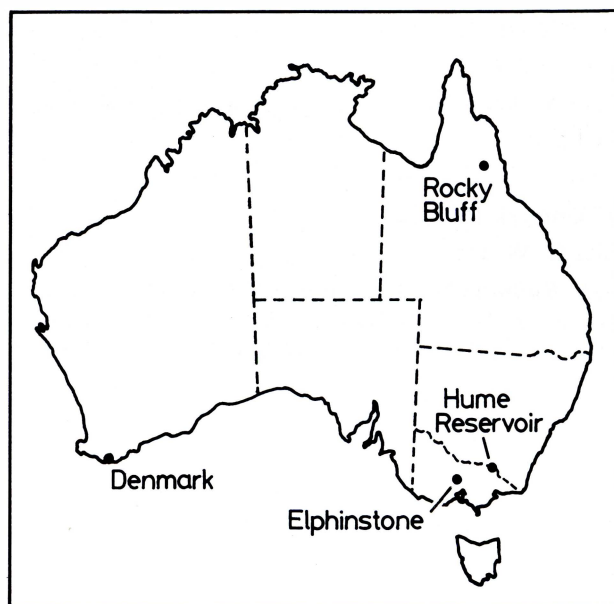
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## Publisher's Note

To mark the Society's Twenty-fifth Anniversary we asked a number of long-standing L.R.R.S.A. members to select their choice of outstanding articles from early editions of *Light Railways*. The four articles chosen for this book were clearly the most popular choices. Each is as relevant as when originally published — a tribute to the thoroughness of the authors who set the standards for other L.R.R.S.A. contributors to follow.

Apart from corrections to typographical errors, and minor corrections to tables, the articles have not been altered in any way, hence where they describe the present-day situation, this refers to the late 1960s. The maps have been redrawn, and photographs added.



## Foreword

Recently whilst trundling along in the van of one of Australia's restored light railways, I fell to a contemplation of the extensive and significant achievements made in the field of light railway research and preservation during the past three decades. In many cases the goals set years ago by adventurous amateurs have been surpassed, and operating segments of light railway history now exist for the person of casual interest to wonder upon.

It is also fortunate that during this period an increasing number of folk turned their enquiring minds in the direction of investigation, verification and documentation of the extensive use made of this form of transportation during the development of our nation. This is fortunate for, although a handful of interested researchers had recorded a deal of basic information, the field ranges so widely that the need was for a concentrated research effort by numerous people.

Twenty five years ago the Light Railway Research Society came into being and has admirably fulfilled that need.

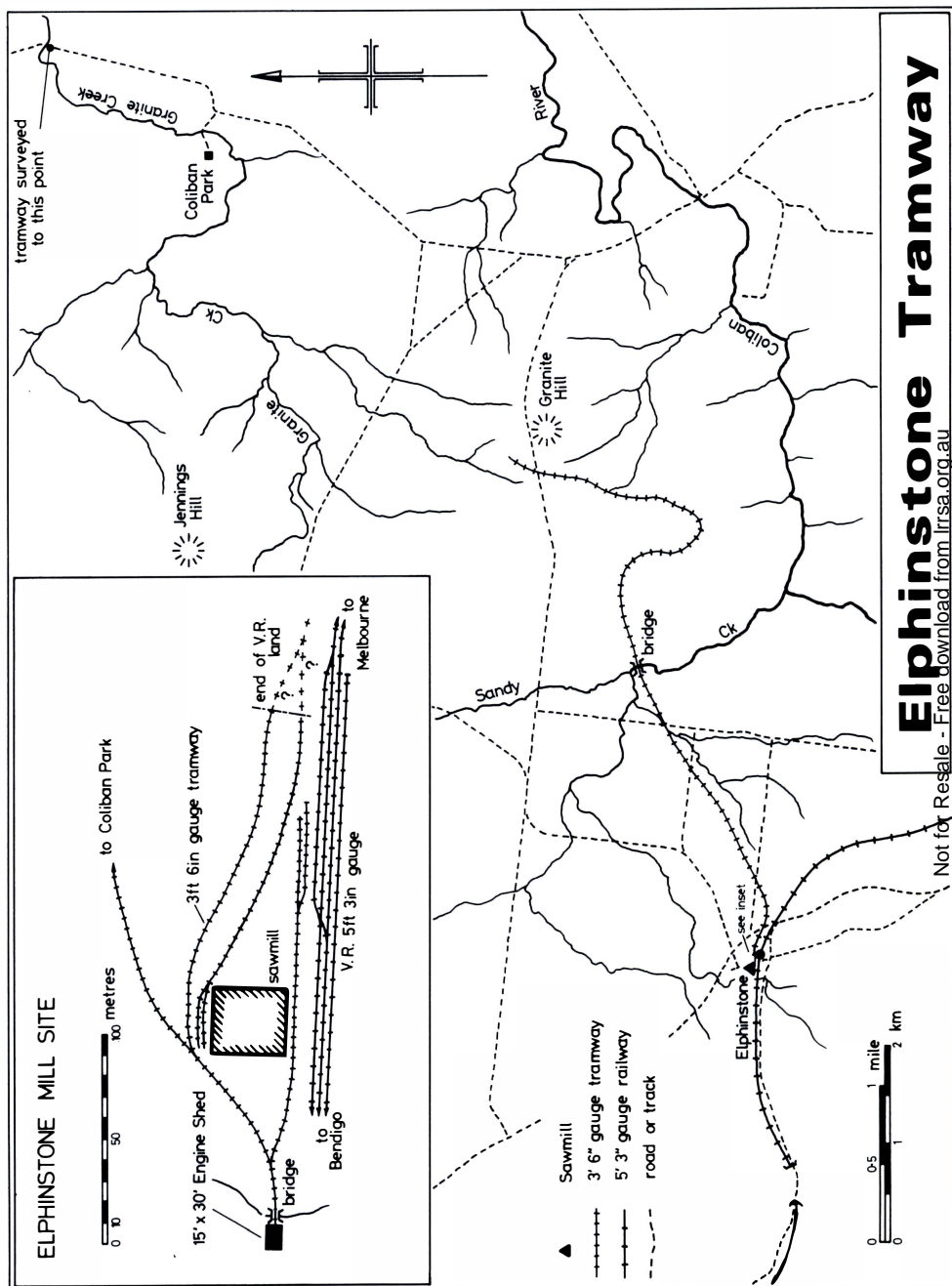
Enthusiastic Society researchers have documented a great amount of material. Not only is this technical in nature but writers have been at pains to place their histories in the context of the communities served.

Correctly, it is often said that history is unfolding at the present, but for that very reason it is often lost. Being aware of this risk the Society also has concentrated on recording contemporary history.

Above all, throughout its existence, the L.R.R.S.A. has communicated. It regularly disseminates information that others might enjoy a little known facet of Australian history and, hopefully, encourage some to add their contribution.

The Society's publications are prepared to a high standard, very well presented and read by many outside the rail enthusiast fraternity. It is indeed fitting that its twenty five years of achievement should be marked by this special publication.

Norm Wadeson  
"Kuralie"  
Baxter, Victoria





## 2

# Elphinstone Timber Tramway

by Roger H. Seccombe

The Elphinstone timber tramway was probably one of the shortest lived tramways of its type in Victoria. Constructed in 1923 and operated from 1924 to 1928, it had the distinction of being constructed to process a timber reserve which proved to be, at best, poor quality, or to accept the view of a contemporary observer, rotten.

The Elphinstone area (originally known as "Sawpit Gully") was settled early, having close associations with the gold boom, situated as it was on the outskirts of the Forest Creek goldfields. As on all Victorian fields, liquor was forbidden until 1854 and Sawpit Gully did a roaring trade in 1851-53 at its inn, its "five-gallon houses" and "coffee shops" (sly grogeries)! However, unlike similar "watering places" and halts for gold prospectors, such as Lancefield and Diggers Rest, Elphinstone as a settlement did not experience any period of marked decay after its heyday; life in Elphinstone had been a slow twilight after the gold rushes. In contrast, Lancefield, with its bizarre array of empty hotels sporting the decaying facades of their early prosperity, witnesses the great disparity between the wealth brought to the town by the gold rushes and the collapse of its economy once the gold boom was over.

Elphinstone's identity changed from that of a "watering place" on the diggings to a railway settlement, when the Great Northern Railway was opened to Bendigo, (then named Sandhurst) in 1862.

In respect of its topography, the country is partly basalt, granite and sandstone and its undulating terrain carried an extensive eucalypt cover which only began to disappear with the opening up of the area for agricultural and pastoral pursuits. The potential revenue from these timber resources was soon recognized as the neighbouring large landholders commenced felling the hardwood forests in order to implement more intensive land development. The favourable terrain was conducive to the implementation of schemes to put the felled timber to commercial use.

One of the chief properties in the vicinity of Elphinstone was "Coliban Park", established by a Mr Crawford in 1855 and comprising 5000 acres. The owner in 1923 was Mr A. Barber who had purchased the estate several years earlier and had developed plans to clear the property for pastoral pursuits.

### The Coliban Park Scheme

An Elphinstone sawmiller, Mr C. D. Hancock, purchased the whole of the standing red gum for milling purposes, estimated at 25 million super feet. Under the terms of the Agreement with the property owner, he had five years to cut out Coliban Park; however, the lease specified that the timber, after felling, had to be milled off the property.

As a result, Mr Hancock planned to construct a 3 ft 6 in gauge tramway to remove the felled timber from Coliban Park to a mill and transfer siding to be located adjacent to the Victorian Railways' Elphinstone Station. The Company leased an area of land from the V.R. for the purpose of providing such a siding, capable of accommodating at least 12 timber wagons. Contemporary press reports state that Mr Hancock intended to build a steam tramway, nine miles in length, operated by a "powerful locomotive" hauling a number of 8-wheeled bogie wagons to be obtained from the Queensland Government Railways. The felled timber would be transported from the cutting area by 15 haulage units (comprising traction engine, bullock and horse teams) to the Company's line site on Coliban Park. From here the logs would travel by the tramway to the Elphinstone mill where, after processing, the milled timber would be transferred to V.R. broad gauge wagons. The Company anticipated a mill output of 4 million super feet per annum. The timber was described as being of "splendid quality". The actual mill site would measure 60 ft x 130 ft (later revised to 90 ft x 145 ft) and would be constructed upon concrete piles. "Spacious and lofty" sleeping quarters would be provided for the mill hands and high wages would be offered to attract the most "efficient and steady workers". (Press reports indicated a yearly payroll of 20,000 pounds.) The unusable milling offcuts would be reduced to one foot firewood blocks for loading by elevator into V.R. vehicles. It was on this optimistic highnote that the Company embarked, towards the close of 1923, to construct the tramway.

### Construction Progress

September 1923 saw the sleepers waiting in readiness for laying to commence and on Thursday, 27 September, the first sod was turned, to the accompaniment of a "salvo" provided by a man beating with a stick on a kerosene tin, in the absence of any firearms. By now the manager's house had arrived in sections from Guildford and was awaiting erection.

The early days of October found Elphinstone a hive of industry, as between six and eight horse-teams hauled lumber and supplies to the railhead. The fever of activity is described in an enterprising railroad ballad of the day set to the metre of Banjo Patterson's *The Man From Snowy River*:

"When it's trench in at the edges,  
And it's undermine below,  
A bar or two behind it,  
Heave away and let her go!  
And the shouting of the gangers can be heard above the din,  
From the banks below the township where the lads are linking in . . ."

It is to be regretted that no further evidence of this ballad writer's art can be traced.

With the arrival of the rails imminent (30 ft lengths of 28 lb rail) a gang of men commenced construction of the line's major bridge over Sandy Creek some two miles out from Elphinstone. Described as measuring 90 ft in length, the remains today indicate a four-span bridge, about 15 ft high and 60 ft in length built on piles driven into the creek bed. The method of construction followed closely the principles of V.R. trestle bridge as can be seen in the accompanying photograph (on page 24).

By 1 November work had commenced on erecting the mill manager's residence (named "The Crescent") and engine shed; about ¼ mile of track had been laid out of Elphinstone including curves, one of which had a 3½ chain radius and the line's deepest cutting of 10 feet was being excavated near Granite Hill, a distance of some three or four miles from the mill. Supervision of track laying was carried out by Mr E. Davitt, an ex-V.R. road-master, with a gang of twelve men.

A report of 9 October anticipated the arrival of *two* locomotives from Tasmania, but by 13 November only one had arrived. Reputedly weighing 15 tons with a haulage capacity of 40 tons, it was assembled from sections during the latter half of November. The bogie trucks arrived on 17 November.

The V.R. commenced laying the broad gauge transfer siding on 12 November and by 30 November the tram line had been extended another ¼ mile and was

Rebuilt Sharp Stewart locomotive, B/No. 2030 of 1870, at work on the Elphinstone timber tramway in the mid 1920s. Reproduced from an original photograph provided by D. Berryman on which expert artwork by L. D. Crow has restored part of the engine headstock originally obscured by the photographer's thumb in the printing!

*Photo courtesy: John Buckland*





now within 5 chains from the boundary of Coliban Park. By 11 December some 82 men were employed on construction and on 18 December the steam boiler arrived at the Mill. Concurrently, the Manager invited applications from persons interested in operating a firewood plant as an adjunct to the sawmill's activity.

The Company gained added impetus to its plans in January 1924 when Mr Hancock won the tender for supplying timber for the construction of three Melbourne Harbour Trust wharves. Worth some 127,599 pounds, the tender specified the supply of 1¼ million super feet of timber which was expected to bring a desirable fillip to production at Elphinstone. In anticipation of completing the tramway, felling commenced on Coliban Park in the Granite Hill area. By 12 February the timber reserves in this locality had been depleted and the felled timber hauled ½ mile to the railhead line site by three bullock and horse teams and a traction engine. However, the logs were still awaiting transit to the mill as the tramway had not yet commenced operation (the Company was expecting the Metcalf Shire Council's approval of its specifications for tramway crossing points on Shire roads) after protracted discussions, approval was finally given at the Council's February meeting reported in the local press on 27 February.

In the meantime the locomotive had been tested on the line to the head of the road, about three miles out on Coliban Park, and the Company had expressed satisfaction with the efficiency of both locomotive and track.

On 19 February a plate laying gang was putting down the 3 ft 6 in gauge sidings at the mill and the Company expected to commence railing the felled timber to the mill within a few days.

At this point we might inquire how extensive the tramway was intended to become. The present manager of Coliban Park asserts that the line was actually surveyed to a point approximately ¼ mile south of a ford over Granite Creek on the Coliban Park — Sutton Grange Road (Map reference: Army Survey — Castlemaine No. 817, Zone 7, 1 in to 1 mile). Such a railhead location would have been generally in accord with the previously noted press statement which indicated the Company's original intention to construct a tramway *nine* miles in length. In reality, construction of the tramway appears only to have reached the vicinity of Granite Hill, movement of the felled timber to the railhead from beyond this point being handled by horse and bullock teams: when demolition of the tramway commenced in 1928 contemporary reports appear to corroborate a tramway terminus in the Granite Hill area, some three to four miles out from Elphinstone; finally, when the mill's assets were eventually disposed of in December 1928, the trackwork was described as comprising "three miles" of rails. (In preparing this history, the full length of the original formation has been traversed.)

### **The Locomotive**

Despite inadequate documentation, it would appear definite that the sole locomotive purchased by the Company was an ex-Tasmanian engine. Misses K.

and J. Hoinville who today occupy the original Manager's residence at Elphinstone assert that it was "definitely from Mt. Lyell".

Described by 1923 press reports as a "15 ton engine" it was otherwise estimated by Mr J. Blow (Manager of Dickson Primer Industries Pty. Ltd. of Melbourne) who cut up the locomotive in about 1940, as having weighed close to 7½ tons, with a copper firebox (weighing between ½ and ¾ ton on Mr Blow's estimate), circular, screw-type, firebox door and brass tubes measuring about 6 ft in length. It was almost certainly a tank engine (*not* a saddle tank) with a "small flat" integral tender measuring some four feet wide. It is believed to have been painted dark green.

If reliance is to be placed on the contemporary weight estimate of 15 tons, it might be questioned if this included the weight of a *separate* tender; e.g. like those often constructed as appendages to stock tank locomotives used by the Colonial Sugar Refinery. We can find corroborative evidence for such a theory in the statements of the Misses Hoinville who aver that they have near their woodpile, portion of the tender belonging to the Elphinstone locomotive. A former axeman at Elphinstone, Mr Ern Swift, also supports the theory of a separate tender. However, the final word should come from Mr Blow who asserts that the locomotives he purchased from the auctioneers, E. M. Purdy and Co. of Melbourne, in about 1940 possessed only a small integral tender.

Based on the sum of evidence from contemporary and present day sources, and Mr Blow's view that it *could* have been a British (definitely *not* a German) locomotive, it is proposed that the locomotive may have been built by Sharp Stewart, Builder's number 2030, built in 1870 whose history is as follows: an 0-4-0 tank locomotive; cylinders 8 in x 15 in; diameter of driving wheels 29 in; originally 4 ft 6 in gauge as used on the Mersey and Deloraine Tramway 1871-72; sold to the Tasmanian Government Railways and became No. 6B on conversion to 3 ft 6 in gauge; sold to Boland and Scott (contractors) in 1888 and re-purchased 1889; used for construction of the Mt. Lyell line; stored 1894 and sold 1895 or 1896; disposition is unknown.

The rolling stock comprised 8-wheeled bogie trucks obtained from the Queensland Government Railways.

## Operation

Mr Ern Swift and Mr S. Knox (who also worked at the Elphinstone Mill and whose wife ran the men's boarding house) recall that the locomotive used to make three or four trips a day, starting work at about 8.00 a.m. and finishing at 5.00 p.m. Mr Swift adds that the locomotive would "often drag its own logs" (presumably out at the Company's line site on Coliban Park).

## Milling By-products

After the milling processes, the offcuts yielded quantities of timber from which a Mr T. Pidd produced supplies of one foot firewood blocks at a mill established nearby. In addition, other surplus waste was acquired free of charge by a Mr J. J. Mazzocchi, merchant of Woodend who employed a gang of 10 Italian workmen



**Above:** Logs being unloaded at the Elphinstone sawmill.

*Photo: R. Seccombe collection*

**Below:** The remains of the trestle bridge over Sandy Creek, 1968.

*Photo: R. Seccombe*





for the purpose of producing supplies of charcoal. He constructed a series of retorts at Elphinstone and the smell of charcoal was observed to mingle with those of garlic and macaroni; a pungent aroma!

### **Subsequent History**

Throughout the major part of 1924 the milling venture was plagued by inclement weather. As successful operation of the tramway depended intimately on the efficiency of felling and transporting methods employed on Coliban Park, it was only to be expected that the persistent heavy rains which turned the felling area into a quagmire would affect milling operations. Sandy Creek and the Coliban River were in flood in August and by October operation of the tramline and mill had halted and only a handful of men were being kept on. The local cricket team loudly lamented the enforced departure from the district (and from the cricket team) of six mill workers who had been laid off!

Besides the weather, the Company also suffered numerous accidents, generally of a minor nature, involving damaged fingers, broken legs and bruised kneecaps chiefly among the men working the breaking-down saws. There was also the case of Mr E. Potts who was employed clearing the red gum tops on Coliban Park. One night all his possessions went up in smoke (possibly through the agency of Mr Potts' pipe or campfire) including tent, saddle, double-barrelled shotgun and chaff, valued at £200 10s 0d!

The Mill commenced again in February 1925, but prolonged rain again halted milling in the latter part of the year.

### **Administrative Problems**

However, the Company's internal problems were already beginning to multiply and were given a startling public "airing" in a legal wrangle in September 1925. On 17 September hearing of the case of the alleged wrongful dismissal of the sawmill's general manager, Thomas Alexander Wilson, commenced in Melbourne. Wilson was claiming damages against Charles Daniel Hancock, Arthur Orlando Hall and Edwin James Hooper, "directors" of the Company. Wilson had been appointed general manager of the Company for the period 24 October 1923 to 31 December 1928, at a fixed salary of £500 per annum, together with the use of a cottage adjacent to the mill. Wilson asserted that, on 31 January 1925, he had been dismissed. Defendants claimed he was negligent and not a qualified sawmill manager.

More significant as an insight into the Company's operations, Wilson counter-claimed that, while the Mill plant was intended to treat 20,000 feet of logs per day, during 1924 the plant had only averaged 9300 feet per day. Wilson was quoted by the local press as stating that the plant was "a farce" and that "better results could be obtained from a second-hand scrapped plant". Marketable timber was averaging 1500 to 4000 feet per day against a predicted 12,000. Cutting costs (in March 1924) "varied between 11 shillings and 37/9d per 100 feet" instead of an estimated 4/4d. The Company was reported to be losing money. The case was concluded out of court, the press reported.

On 29 June 1926, a Company was registered by C. D. and C. L. Hancock under the name of "The Elphinstone Redgum Milling Company Pty. Ltd.", for the purpose of acquiring the existing business of Mr C. D. Hancock, sawmiller of Elphinstone. The nominal capital of the Company was £5000.

However, on 6 July 1926, shareholding interests were transferred to Hall (solicitor of Geelong) and Hooper (Manager of Geelong). Named assets comprised the sidings at Elphinstone, the Mill, tramway, horses, rolling stock and motor vehicles.

By now the demise of the milling venture could be foretold. Expectations had not been fulfilled and clearly it must have been seen as only a matter of time before the scheme foundered.

## **Failure**

Why did the venture fail? It would appear that the failure was chiefly a result of inadequate planning and miscalculation, added to, if not occasioned by, the Company's internal dissension and management difficulties. While a local press report of 1 November 1923 states that Mr Hancock had expressed satisfaction with the quality of the redgum already cut, which was described as "very solid", it would seem that this timber, probably cut in the Sandy Creek area for the purpose of constructing the bridge, was representative more of the quality in the locality of Mooney's property rather than of Coliban Park. A contemporary observer noted that the Company did not bore the trees and one can only suppose that it was assumed that the quality of the initial fellings would be representative of the red gum over the whole of Coliban Park. Reference to the accompanying photograph on page 24 (the only original photograph that has been traced) depicts several log bogies at the Mill and appears to verify the poor quality of the logs: evidence of severe splitting and deterioration is visible.

When the timber resources proved uneconomic due to their inferior quality, the Company salvaged the best of the eucalypt and then sued the owner of Coliban Park. The case was settled out of court. It is said that the only person who profited from the whole venture was Mr Pidd, who had been turning the Mill waste into firewood blocks.

With the end in view, on 28 November 1927, the Victorian Railways gave notice to the Company that it intended to terminate maintenance on the transfer siding. The agreement governing use of the siding was cancelled on 1 March 1928, and the siding was dismantled in May 1928.

After the closure of the Mill a start was made on disposal of the Company's assets. In the latter half of June 1928 the tramway between the Mill and Granite Hill was pulled up and the rails and sleepers stacked near the Mill. On Tuesday, 11 December 1928, the sale of the Mill's assets was conducted. J. W. Styles and Son, Auctioneers, sold 370 lots including trucks, *three* miles of 30 lb (sic) rails, fastenings and sleepers; the locomotive was not sold. The sawn timber was reported to have brought "a fair price" but the Mill equipment and log bogies "went cheap".

The locomotive was stored in the engine shed where it remained for many years. The shed and locomotive were subsequently purchased in about 1940 by Dickson Primer Industries of Melbourne. The Manager of Dickson Primer (Mr J. Blow) states that he sold the shed to a local poultry farmer for 20 New Zealand pounds and brought the locomotive back to Melbourne where he cut it up. He found its copper firebox and brass tubes "very valuable". He incidentally recounts that, while inspecting the locomotive in situ at the engine shed at Elphinstone, a possum resident in the smoke box bit his hand and that, on the locomotive's arrival in Melbourne, a black snake crawled out of it!

## Postscript

Today Elphinstone has fallen asleep. As a community centre for its area it can boast of little. Castlemaine and, further afield, Bendigo, are the magnets that draw to themselves the life of the area and direct its pattern.

However, the relics of earlier days still cling tenaciously to the present: the Manager's house (close to the site of the Mill) still stands, inhabited by Misses K. and J. Hoinville who have time to remember . . . the derelict remains of a timber and iron shed nearby is reputed to be the original shed and may soon disappear beneath a new Country Roads Board overpass . . . the impressions of sleepers and raised earthworks mark the course of the transfer sidings while the stark concrete foundations of the Mill linger in an open paddock.

Travel out along the old formation (most of which can still be traced) and you can locate the decaying remains of the four-span trestle over Sandy Creek. From here the formation climbs on a steeply-rising grade, scoured by water-cut gullies and the activities of myriads of ant colonies (the ardent sidorodromarchaeologist is recommended not to linger too long or he may not weather the years as well as has the Sandy Creek bridge!). It is in this vicinity that the 3½ chain radius curves can be located. On the rising grades south of Granite Hill there are numerous examples of earthworks, although the reported ten foot cutting cannot be located, the deepest cutting measured being only some five or six feet in depth. The care in road bed construction, including the provision of drainage channels, is everywhere apparent despite the passage of years, while numerous sleepers abound, their dog-spikes still in situ.

The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the following:

Mr J. Blow, Dickson Primer Industries

*The Castlemaine Mail*

Misses K. and J. Hoinville, Elphinstone

Mr S. Knox, Geelong

Latrobe Library, Melbourne

Mr M. Plummer, East Brighton

Royal Historical Society of Victoria

Mr C. S. Small: *Locomotives of the Railways of Tasmania* (unpublished)