Bananacoast Railway: Rails of the Coffs Coast
A Century Plus of service 1906-2015

Scott Schache
The "Korora Incline" also known as Coast range ascent

1908 Railhead: Jordans Creek Log Depot

1913: replacement mill proposed by BATCo

The “Korora Incline” also known as Coast range ascent

Planned reversing station (not build)

1905: timber tramway proposed by William Langley

1908: McLean & Bushell
1912: William Langley

1908: McLean & Bushell
1912: William Langley

1905: Henry Edgar Day’s proposed timber tramway

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PACIFIC HIGHWAY

NORTH COAST RAILWAY LINE

NORTH COAST RAILWAY LINE

COFFS HARBOUR JETTY

BATCo Jetty Sawmill

North Breakwater Line

BATCo 220 acre lease

Turntable

1906 - 1913 The British Australia Timber Company 3ft 6in

1915 / 17 Port Layout 4ft 8in

North Coast Railway Line 4ft 8in
I would like to dedicate this book to all the past and present Railworkers that have worked this section of the NSW North Coast line over the past century. I would also like to dedicate this book to my mother Maree from where I get my interest in history, and to my late father Alan from where my interest in photography and railways came from. And I would like to thank those that believed in me and this project from the beginning. Special thanks to Terrie Beckhouse, Bill Whippen, Leon Batman, George Chapman and a very big thank you to Jarrod Mitton.
Chapter 1

Coffs Harbour History

Nestled about halfway between Sydney and Brisbane is located the City of Coffs Harbour and the Coffs Coast, currently home to around 100,000 people. Coffs Harbour is surrounded by the towns of Nambucca Heads, Woolgoolga, Bellingen, Urunga and Dorrigo.

The first landmark on the Coffs Coast would be named by Lt. James Cook Commanding Officer of "HMS Endeavour", who on the 15th of May 1770 sailed past the future site of Coffs Harbour. As part of his log entry he wrote "the small rocky islands between us and the land." which he named the Solitary Isles. Captain Matthew Flinders on his third and final voyage around Australia in 1802 sailed up the east coast of Australia adding another five Isles to the ones found by Lt. Cook in 1770. However, neither of these explorers had reason to further examine this part of the coastline, and as a result, Coffs Harbour would remain undiscovered until the 1840's. Seeking shelter behind a headland (known as either Corambarra Point and or South Coffs Island) from a southerly gale in 1847 would see Captain John Korff seek shelter for his ship "Brothers" and her crew in what would later become Coffs Harbour. Captain Korffs destination had been the Bellinger River, impressed by the safety offered by the coastal configurations and the water depth. Korff wrote a report when he returned to Sydney. What was written in the report is unknown as no official documentation appears to exist.

Captain Korff is officially recognized as the discoverer of Coffs Harbour. No immediate European settlement would follow the 1847 visit. The suitability of the area was recognized by the authorities, and with the passing of the Robertson lands Act in 1861, this allowed the government to forestall any claims by prospective selectors for harbour side land by reserving some 960 acres of it. In the reserving of this land the name Korff was misspelled and appeared as Coff's Harbour but was eventually altered once more to become Coffs Harbour.

European settlement did not begin in Coffs Harbour until the 1870's through to the 1880's, unlike the adjacent districts of the Clarence Valley in 1838 and the Bellinger Valley during the 1840's. Settlements were also recorded in the Orara Valley and Woolgoolga districts in the 1860's. Delays in settling Coffs Harbour had come from the difficulty of access, for there were no navigable rivers and the formidable escarpments of the Great Dividing Range were posing problems. Timber getters began to ply their trade on the major rivers of the Mid North Coast from the 1840s, and by the 1850s were well established on Nambucca and Bellinger Rivers. Walter Harvie and George Tucker began Cedar getting around Coffs Creek. The Harvie Tucker camp being one of the first semi permanent settlements in the Coffs Harbour area.

Aboriginal
Bushmen were employed by timber getters using their skills to locate and rapidly identify cedar trees. In the early years of cedar getting, bushmen would use their skills to locate and rapidly identify cedar trees. The economic mainstay from the mid-1800s was the timber industry, which relied on the clearing of land for agriculture. The early 1880s saw tentative forays into fruit, dairy farming, gold mining, and sugarcane. Sugar mills developed in the area, but frosts, low prices, and transportation difficulties had virtually killed the industry by the end of the century.

The sinking of the “Carrywell” in 1865, a small cedar-getting vessel, led to a boycott of the local timber industry until a lighthouse was built in 1878. 1885 saw the first school open. The following year the town was proclaimed and laid out. Originally named Brelsford after the Crown Surveyors boss, but the name did not take. Transportation held the timber industry back until 1892 when a jetty was completed. In 1890, after much consultation among the leaders of the town and Government at the time, the construction of the Jetty began. Even as construction of the jetty continued, the ship “Byron” used the incomplete jetty to take onboard a load of sugar from Alexander Herman’s sugar mill based at Korora.

The discovery of gold saw mining operations pop up between 1881 and 1898, but much of the gold was only on the surface and the hardness of the sandstone created additional difficulties. The gold mining was hit and miss and short lived, some mines were prosperous others not so prosperous. Though some ventures were prosperous, all were short-lived. However, they did draw prospectors, some of whom settled in the area as farmers.

South Coast dairy farmers began to settle the area, with a butter factory being built opening in 1910. The quality of the pastures saw many dairy farmers switch to bananas soon after World War 2 and saw the dairy industry shrink. The early form of tourism began to grow after the construction of the first access road in 1884. A side effect of the railway’s construction (and simultaneous work on the harbour) was the development of the banana industry. Herman Reick introduced the first bananas from Fiji in 1881, but it was the hungry mouths of 1500 workers and their families which provided a fillip to the industry. The rail link with Sydney was completed in 1923, adding further stimulus to local farming and, when disease wiped out the banana plantations further north in the late 1920s, Coffs Harbour became the country’s major centre of production.

The Railway would propel Coffs Harbour on a journey that would see it evolve to the city it has become.
Chapter 2

Other Railway and Tramway Operations

As the North Coast Railway was being planned and routes considered the first railways in the Coffs Harbour area were appearing in the 1890’s, these railways were owned and operated by the locally based timber companies. Hand trolleys were utilized at the beginning but these were soon phased out and replaced by steam haulage in the mid 1900’s. One of the provisions attached to building the timber tramways was that the surveying of the line had to be completed within 3 months and construction had to be completed within 2 years. British Australian Timber (B.A.T), Great Northern Timber Company (GNTC), Langley Brothers, Coffs Harbour Timber Company CHT (Maharratta and Nondaville Sidings) criss crossed over around and through Coffs Harbour Woolgoolga and the surrounding areas. Be it through poor management, fire, competition or the outbreak of World War 1 or due to overcutting along the coastal areas combined with the trees not growing back fast enough saw the need for the sawmills to search further a field for a supply of logs which saw one by one the tramways were closed. The last tramway would close in 1930 when CHT closed their Maharratta Tramway as the company went into liquidation. In many cases little is left to show what once existed, rails buried in the dirt at Coffs Harbour Jetty and the alignment for Bruxner Park Road about the last tangiable remains to the early days of the Coffs Harbour Timber Industry.

British Australian Tramway Coffs Harbour 1904–1914

In 1903 George W. Nichols applied for and was granted a lease to operate a sawmill in the Coffs Harbour Area. Ill health would see the mill sold in 1905 to the North Coast Steamship and Navigation Company (NCSNS), NCSNS subsequently sold the former Nichols Mill in October 1906 to the British Australian Timber Company known as B.A.T. The mill had been bought, including plant and machinery, five and half acres of land at Woolgoolga and three contracts for 3,500 pounds. The sale gave B.A.T. two mills in the area one each in Coffs Harbour and Woolgoolga and a Mill to the south. B.A.T. Was formed in 1906 by parent company Dalgety Holdings, who had held an interest in taking a more direct involvement in the timber industry. Dalgety Holdings ended their ownership of the B.A.T. Company in September 1911 when it was taken over by an unknown English consortium.

1907 saw approval sought for the construction of a tramway for the carting of logs to the mill, construction began soon after the approval was given. Acquisition and approval of Leases from the Forestry Department were approved for 1,000 hectares in reserve No. 642 located near Macaulay’s Headland, using 35lb/
37. yd rails sleepers cut from local hardwood and set at centres of two foot six, the line cost 1500 pounds a mile. The line was rough and to save cost sharp corners were used. Ballast used on the line was made up of rock or sand. Construction of the tramway cost one life, that of navy John Norton killed on the 5th of February 1909 when a tree he and his gang were felling was blown back onto him killing him instantly.

From June 1910 the line was re-laid to connect the jetty was added as part of the work. The placing of logs and hauled by bullock teams were built along the line. Each train carried six logs with two return trips a day being made. The B.A.T tramway started at the jetty heading towards Coffs Creek, crossing the creek then proceeded to Macaulay’s Headland where the first timber depot was located. The extension of the B.A.T tramway saw the line continue from Macaulay’s Headland before it scaled the hillside to Bruxner Park as far as the turnoff to the North Coast line. Tension began to build as rail delays in getting the tramway bridge over Coffs Creek was used as a connection between the jetty district and Park Beach. This Bridge was replaced in 1928 when a new road bridge was built over Coffs Creek. Photo Courtesy Coffs Harbour regional museum mus07-2808

The Shay locomotive was too heavy for the lightly laid rails and hauled on a 27 tonne Shay locomotive. The Shay locomotive Holdings sought a more suitable locomotive settling the rails in various locations. Unimpressed Dalgety of the tramway, and on several occasions it spread the locomotive was found wanting. Once in service handled the run to Macaulay’s Headland where the first timber depot was located.

The first steam locomotive used over the B.A.T. tramway was bought second hand in 1904. It was the Shay which had been idle for 12 months. The cause of the fire was never determined. The locomotive was too heavy for the lightly laid rails of the tramway, and on several occasions it spread the rails in various locations. Unimpressed Dalgety Holdings sought a more suitable locomotive setting the line on a 27 tonne Shay locomotive. The Shay locomotive arrived on the “Cooloon” on July 8th 1909. In service

Woolgoolga in 1916. The outbreak of World War 1 being the final nail in the b.A.T. coffin. The B.A.T. Co’s manager’s cottage on the corner of Camperdown and Nile Streets was taken over by the railways and became the Station Masters cottage. The tramway bridge over Coffs Creek was retained and timber planks placed over the spans to make the bridge into a footbridge. This bridge was then looked after by the local Surf Club. The bridge was removed in 1928 after the predecessor of the current concrete bridge over Coffs Creek was opened. The B.A.T. tramway bridge was then demolished. Very Little of the old tramway operations remain. At the forest floor level appearing through the soil on the northern side of Marina Drive. An other is a section of the B.A.T. Tramway running from the Pacific Highway to Sealy Park Lookout. The current road uses part of the old alignment.

British Australian Tramway Woolgoolga 1906-1916

British Australian Timber Company also operated a tramway in Woolgoolga. The arrival of the ship “Dorrigo” in November 1906 saw the arrival of 200 tons of rails and machinery for the Woolgoolga Mill. The local expectation was that there was enough timber for two up-to-date mills and a timber supply for twenty years. Construction on the Woolgoolga Tramway began in mid 1907, a decision based on delays about by dirt roads being torn apart in wet weather by bullock teams and traction steam engines. The line began at the Woolgoolga jetty and headed towards lower Bucca like many tramways of its day it was built to 1067mm or 3ft 6in. By August 1907 the tramway had reached the first log depot. Concerns had been raised during several wet periods when the flow of logs had slowed due to poor conditions of the roads. The arrival of the ship “Nymboida” saw the landing of 30 tons of rails at Woolgoolga. By the end of January 1908 the tramway had reached its desired destination. The locomotive used to operate the tramway was acquired in 1908 from Joadja and after the closing of the mill was transferred to the Boambee Tramway. By the end of March 1909 the tramway had been extended to cover 5 miles or 8.1kms. By April the same year it had been extended to 6 1/2 miles or 10.5kms with upto 16 logs being hauled per load, the mills were cutting timber faster than it could be shipped out from Woolgoolga. A second mill was commissioned by the company in 1913 with output from the mill allowing six ships to be loaded each week. Wet weather and the outbreak of World War 1 saw B.A.T’s operations thrown into doubt. With most of its orders from Germany, Japan, South Africa, India and Great Britain. Operations ceased in November 1916 with all equipment being sold off during December 1916. At the height of operations plans had been floated to link both the Coffs Harbour and Woolgoolga tramways but nothing ever came of it.

Coffs Harbour Timber Company or CHT

Coffs Harbour Timber Company was a large investor in the Coffs Harbour area, paying wages buying plant and equipment. CHT listed its head office as being Castleleagh St Sydney with Mr. C.W.Elliot and Mr. A.C.Mackay listed as joint managers. Delays in getting rails for section 7 Coffs Harbour to Raleigh during 1913 frustrated CHT. They had hoped to rail their timber from Maharatta (Borville) and Nondaville(Boambee) through to the Port of Coffs Harbour. During March 1915 CHT acquired the rollingstock a shed engine.
and 8 miles of rails from the defunct B.A.T. Company's Tramway. An exclusive agreement saw CHT have 8,000 acres of forest reserved for their exclusive use. The Bonville Mill opened in 1912 and Boambee in 1913, both mills and associated tramways cost between 50-60 thousand pounds. March 1st 1918 saw the announcement made that the Boambee Mill would close. The mill was closed for the last time in February 1919, CHT went into liquidation in 1931 which saw the closure of Bonville Mill soon after.

Maharatta Siding. 1915-1930

Maharatta Siding was built just south of Bonville Station, near the future location of Archville Station. Maharatta Siding had been built for use by the B.A.T. Company but was taken over by CHT. Maharatta siding was in operation between 1915 and 1930. It operated from the main line near Archvilles station and run to Crossmaglen. The tramway was 8.9kms long and of 914mm or 3ft Gauge track. The mill was located near the local Public School. A fire on the 18th of December 1930 destroyed much of the plant and equipment used at the siding. The Railway Department of December 1930 destroyed much of the plant and equipment used at the siding. The Railway Department

Langley Brothers 1906-1914

Langley Brothers were represented in Coffs Harbour by their shipping agent Mr. Alfred Lloyd Walsh of Upper Orara. The Langley Brothers mill was located near Murdoch Street Top Town. They cut both soft and hardwoods obtained from both private and forest reserve 136. Langleys went onto to purchase the mill of Messes Maclean and Bushell in April 1912. Work on clearing a path from the jetty to the Langley Mill begin in October 1906. Initially work on clearing the track moved at a fast past, with a considerable portion cleared by March of 1907. In the 12 months that following March 1907 work on the line slowed with only four miles of land being cleared in the direction of the 136 forest reserve. As part of the proposal a couple of carriages were to be attached for the carrying of passenger behind the wagon of sawn timber, Council did not approve of this method and may explain the reasons for the lack of substantial progress or any major activity on the line. Langelys did buy a locomotives but it was used for their shipping concerns after they found the loading of timber product by horse and truck was too slow. A 10 ton 0-6-0 saddle tank was bought in July 1909. The government had promised to buy one but did not have one suitable to the 1067mm gauge track then used on the jetty. Langley's locomotive was also available for use by the public for the hauling of loads along the jetty. It had been bought second hand from Joadja Creek and had been used by the Australian Kerosene and Mineral Oil Company. After being retired in Coffs Harbour the locomotive was scrapped on site. Langleys mill closed in October 1914.

Great Northern Timber Company/GNTC Woolgoolga 1913-1918

Great Northern Timber Company Woolgoolga began operating in 1913, its head office was listed as Pitt Street Sydney. Plant and machinery for the GNTC mill was landed from the ship “Fitzroy” in March 1913. GNTC’s tramway would link Woolgoolga Jetty to the company’s timber leases in the Corindi Creek. The line running via Bloodwood Hill, then westward towards Arrawarra before arriving at the log depot near Corindi Creek. The second tramway was to run to Sherwood Creek but was abandoned in 1915 despite all the approvals and rights required having been obtained, insufficient timber given of the decision. Special lease for using part of the Police Reserve was approved in early May 1913 with the support of many local residents. Accommodation was supplied for workers with married men preferred as they were deemed to be more stable. In July 1913 orders for 10 miles of rails had been placed. Earthworks for the first 4 miles of line had been completed by October 1913. By January 1914 earthworks for 11 miles of line had been completed. February 1914 saw the arrival of the steamer “BAY” which delivered 150 tons of rails. During September 1914 trains were covering the first four miles of the line. During 1915 the mill became idle due to issues with log flow. The mill and line would not be back in full swing until August 1916. The tramway had been extended to 12 miles with up to 12 logs per trip making up the load, and as required up to two trips a day would be made. GNTC went into liquidation in August 1917 due to the lack of labour and other issues brought about by World War 1.