

RAILWAY ENTHUSIASTS *are Steaming Along*

The friendliest sound on the Peninsula is undoubtedly the whistle of K163, Mornington Tourist Railway's steam loco, as it wends its way across the Northern Peninsula countryside.

It's also the railway's best advertisement, as it lures dozens of young families out of their homes on weekends to experience rail travel the way it used to be. For most children it's the closest thing they'll get to the magic of Hogwarts Express, even if the rapidly growing suburbs on either side of the track doesn't quite measure up to the rolling countryside of middle England.

Next year is the tenth anniversary of the Mornington Railway Preservation Society's move to their headquarters next to the Mt Eliza Regional Park, following previous locations at Cresco Park in Hastings and at HMAS Cerberus. However, the Society's first home was Jubilee Park in Frankston, where its early members worked onsite to restore K163. It had been used as a piece of playground equipment for many years until the Apex Club sold the loco to the Society for \$1.

After 20 years of voluntary labour - worth many millions of dollars - the Society has settled at Moorooduc and has taken its place as an important player in the local industry. On most running days they transport between 300 and 400 people on the 6km journey to Mornington.

It's truly a labour of love for the Society's 150 members, of which about 30 are the 'hard core', who have almost handed their lives over to the restoration and preservation of our little piece of railway heritage.

Three or four days a week the Moorooduc depot quietly buzzes with the activity of the volunteers, who divide into sub groups to work on their particular interests: engineering, signals, electrics, upholstery, carriage work, track maintenance and a myriad of other jobs that a working heritage railway requires.

On operational days the number swells with people needed to inspect the track, man the crossings, sell tickets, staff the cafeteria and, of course, run the train itself. The boiler of the steam loco gets fired up soon after 6am to prepare for a mid morning start and it takes 90 minutes to safely shut it down at the end of the day - that's a 12 hour stint for some of the volunteers.



For Spring/Summer Timetables see our Locals at Leisure section - page 73

Top of the pecking order are the volunteer drivers, many of whom are ex-railway employees or who have trained for more than ten years to get their 'ticket'. The drivers are such a sought-after species that many of them spend weekend after weekend assisting at the other heritage railways around Victoria: Queenscliff, Seymour, Emerald, Maldon, Walhalla and Leongatha. The firemen who stoke the boilers require a boiler certificate and years of experience. Many other roles require a high level of training to meet the rigorous standards required by the government regulator.

"It's all about manpower management", says committeeman Malcolm Swaine.

"We're a group that runs on passion and, despite time demands and the ageing of members, we have never missed a day of operation, but getting the right people in the right place when needed can be a challenge.

"We're delighted to have an active group of people in their late teens and early 20s helping out, because we always need to be recruiting new blood at the bottom end.

"The paperwork to keep us on the rails is almost a fulltime job in itself. Every item replaced or restored usually needs inspection and certification by qualified people, which can be time consuming and often expensive".

The Mornington Railway is one of the newest tourist railways in the State and its forward plans include a five km easterly expansion to Baxter. However, it will take about \$3 million to upgrade the track, including level crossings.

The Society has forged an alliance with long-established Steamrail Victoria. The track extension and upgrade would allow Steamrail to collect passengers from inner Melbourne locations, such as Docklands, rail them in style to Mornington, where they could connect with tour buses to visit the wineries and other attractions.

The upgrade would also make it possible to run special services from the city to Mornington Race Course.

In the meantime the Society relies on the high volume family market to keep them in the black. The \$12 adult return fare and \$6 child fare is kept deliberately low to make it one of the most affordable family outings in the area. The Society is encouraged by the high level of return visits and the overall growth in patronage.

Apart from occasional small grants, the Society largely funds its operations from ticket revenue. It's a 'smell of the oily rag' existence, but railway enthusiasts tend to be bower birds, adept at tracking down free or low cost items from all over the country. The handsome pedestrian bridge over the rails was once part of the North Fitzroy Rail Yards. Over the years it carried millions of Fitzroy Football Club supporters over the lines from St Georges Road into the home ground. A double storey signal box from Somerton is the latest arrival to the Moorooduc complex. Among the rolling stock are quaint carriages dating back to the earliest days of rail travel in Melbourne.

The steam loco K163 and two T-Class diesels are used to pull the carriages on the 12 km round trip. The most popular carriage with children is the Party Car, which provides pre-booked groups with hours of simple entertainment (BYO food). During winter months the Society operates four trips a day, but the longer summer days allows them to run five trips. Whether it is pulled by steam or diesel depends on the weather conditions and fire restrictions.

There's no shortage of roles for people wishing to become involved with the Mornington Railway Preservation Society - everything from café sales, restoration work and even loco' driving for those who have a spare ten years to devote to the training. Membership costs \$30 per family or \$20 for individuals.

- Tim Bracher