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Sugar Mills and Tram Lines

In the early 1980s J. Browning wrote an interesting article on the sugar mills which were once very important at Alstonville and Rous, and on the tramway which took the cane from cane-fields to mills. It is not known who the author was but perhaps he was a local school teacher of the time.

In the 1870s and 1880s sugar-cane growing was a major agricultural industry throughout the Richmond Valley. Small mills were built on many properties to extract sugar as roads were practically non-existent and it was difficult transporting the cane for any distance. Mills were often experimental, most using heavy rollers to crush the cane, and the products were often of poor quality. After much negotiation the Colonial Sugar Refining Company mill was established at Broadwater in 1881. However, this was too far for some farmers, especially those on the Alstonville plateau.

In 1882 the Melbourne Sugar Company purchased Robb's Mill at Alstonville and in 1885 the Richmond River Sugar Company took over Staines' Mill at Rous. Both companies bought up properties so that they would have a large quantity of cane of their own to mill as well as providing a service to local farmers. Usually their land was worked by indentured Indian labourers. Later most of this land was sold back to individual farmers.



The Melbourne Company's mill closed in 1887 and its assets were purchased by the Richmond River Company. It was decided to construct a small gauge tramway to link the two mills and a locomotive was ordered from England. This arrived in 1891 and shortly afterwards it was successfully hauling iron cane trucks laden with cane for the mills. The tramway could also be used to carry passengers such as in 1892 when it conveyed 80 people from Rous Mill to the Alstonville Show. It is interesting to note that this was the first passenger railway vehicle to be used on the Richmond, several years before the Lismore-Murwillumbah railway line opened.

about this time the Manager, Alfred Bennett, suggested building a tramway down the range to Wyrallah which would give the Mill an outlet to the Richmond River and from there to outside markets. A locomotive was ordered but later cancelled when the route to Wyrallah was found to be too difficult and therefore too costly. This loco was later delivered to Bingera Mill near Bundaberg.

The tramway to Alstonville was interesting in the way it affected the price of land along its route. Some of the tracks were semi-permanent while others were portable and so were moved about as required. It was found that when sold properties with a semi-permanent track running through them could demand a much higher price. One major event in the life of the tramway was carrying the Premier of N.S.W., George Reid, from Alstonville to Rous Mill in 1896 where he was to make a speech.

The little loco apparently had a life of its own. It attracted a dog which drove off horses and cows that got in its way. It is not known what happened to the dog but the loco was possibly lost off Moreton Bay when the mill folded and its machinery was being shipped to Queensland about 1902. The vessel broke up and all cargo was lost.

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