

In Depth

# Proposed Richmond Vale Rail Trail follows a path from the past

By Scott Bevan

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TUNNEL VISION: Billy Metcalfe and Leigh Gibbens inspect the historic No.1 Tunnel on the former Richmond Vale Railway. Picture: Jonathan Carroll

LEIGH Gibbens is walking the line to her past.

Actually, the line itself has all but gone, overgrown with bush and, apart from some rail tracks rusting and rotting into the earth, taken by time.

But as she strides where steam trains once chugged, Gibbens' memories of this section of the former Richmond Vale Railway, near her home at Stockrington, remain vivid.

"I thought it was beautiful," Leigh Gibbens says. "I liked the ambience of having the steam train go through the valley, with all the smoke on an early morning.

As a younger woman, Gibbens rode her horse over the railway line, passing the loader that filled rail wagons with coal mined at the nearby Stockrington No.2 colliery.

Leigh would head into the bush. While trees were felled for pit props, and the Richmond Vale rail line cut through the valley, the country around Stockrington still offered the promise of escape.

"It was just such an idyllic, peaceful Australian place to be," Gibbens says.

Gibbens believes those qualities that made this place so special to her has not been lost to history. What's more, in her eyes, the old rail line could offer a route to the future for the region.

Leigh Gibbens is part of a group called the Richmond Vale Rail Trail.



A view from the proposed rail trail at Fletcher, near Hunter Wetlands National Park. Picture: Jonathan Carroll

The group has a vision of converting the former rail line into a 32-kilometre cycling and walking trail between Kurri Kurri and Hexham and on to Shortland.

The trail would link up with other paths, so that users could cycle or walk all the way to Newcastle.

If the group's plans are realised, the trail would pass through historic tunnels and over creeks, across wetlands, traversing coal country, and all the while creating an active transportation corridor for locals and a major attraction for tourists.

"To me, it's connecting communities, it's a connection between towns," says Billy Metcalfe, the president of the Richmond Vale Rail Trail's committee and publican of the Station Hotel in Kurri Kurri.

"It's really about connecting the lake, the beach and the vineyards by a cycleway. It's not only for cyclists, it's for pedestrians, wheelchairs.

"And we need that in our community, to get people out of town and see how good it is."

Yet the trail from dreams towards reality has been long and littered with obstacles. Not the least of which has been money.



New journey planned for old Hunter coal line

THE trail that the group wants to craft into a public asset began life as a private railway.

This track slices through some dramatic countryside, and it traces a line through the Hunter's industrial heritage.

The first section of the rail line was built in the late 1850s by John Eales to haul coal from his mine at the village of Minmi to Hexham, by the Hunter River.

Eales' land was bought by coal magnates James and Alexander Brown. As the Browns' empire grew and more collieries were opened, the line was extended west into the heart of the Coalfields. It became known as the Richmond Vale Railway.

The trains transported coal from a string of pits - Stockrington, Stanford Merthyr, Pelaw Main, and Richmond Main - along a railway almost 27 kilometres long. So the rail line was an artery, carrying the region's lifeblood.

In the second half of the 20th century, as mines closed, the line shrank. By the 1980s, there was just one 11-kilometre section still open, from the Stockrington colliery to Hexham.



A locomotive near Stockrington in the early 1970s. Picture: John Currey, University of Newcastle Cultural Collections

Even so, the locomotives chugged on, determinedly carrying the age of steam through the years and across Hexham Swamp.

"Oh, it was a great job," recalls Ray Cross, who was an engine driver on the railway. "It would have been a thrill a minute."

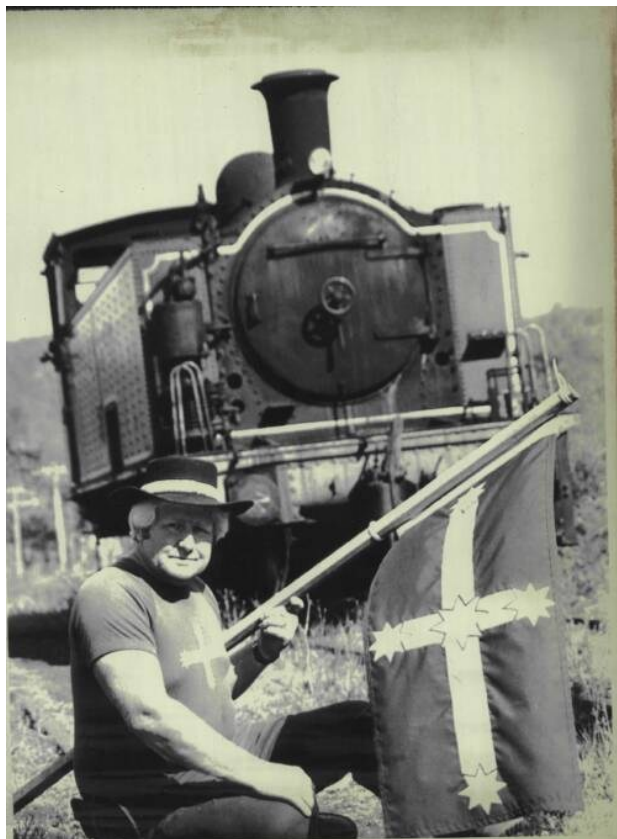
Hauling at least 60 wagons, each carrying about nine tonnes of coal, Ray Cross would head from the colliery at Stockrington to the washery by the river at Hexham. The journey along the rails would take between 20 and 25 minutes.

"It was like paradise, I reckon," Cross says of the "light steam" across Hexham Swamp, later to become part of the Hunter Wetlands National Park. "All the birds there, they didn't worry about us, since we were up and down the line all the time."

Yet "paradise" abruptly ended in 1987.

Coal and Allied, the company that owned the Stockrington mine and the line, decided it would shut the railway and haul coal via road.

Australia's last commercially operating railway using steam locomotives was about to pass into history. But not without a fight.



Ray Cross holds a Eureka flag in front of the locomotive that was at the centre of the workers' protest.

A group of workers, including Ray Cross, staged a protest against the closure by taking a locomotive, which was used as the focus of a high-profile huffing, puffing sit-in.

"It was the last [commercial steam train line] in Australia, so we thought, 'Whatever the cost to try to save it'," Ray Cross recalls.

After about three weeks, the protest ran out of steam. The men returned the locomotive to its shed, ending an era that stretched back 130 years.

"It was destined to be," muses Cross. "We gave it our best shot. Not long after that, the mine closed. It was only delaying the inevitable."

For a time, Ray Cross hoped the line could provide the foundation for a museum railway, where tourists could ride on steam trains. But that wasn't to be.

The tracks were largely dismantled, leaving only the ghost of a rail line. But on that scar across the countryside, the idea of using it for other forms of transport gradually bloomed.



Leigh Gibbens at Stockrington, at the same spot where the photo in R.G. Preston's "The Richmond Vale Railway" was taken.  
Picture: Jonathan Carroll

IT looks like a road to nowhere.

A steel gate is across the crumbling and potholed Stockrington Road.

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, which manages this strip as part of the Stockrington State Conservation Area, has installed a sign explaining the road is closed to vehicles due to mine subsidence and illegal dumping.

But the gate is no barrier to foot power.

Billy Metcalfe, Leigh Gibbens and local mountain biker Martin Parker are guiding *Weekender* on an eight-kilometre walk along the old rail route from a place called the Dog Hole at Stockrington, through a couple of the historic tunnels, to a spot near George Booth Drive.

The Richmond Vale Rail Trail group's vision extends beyond there, but the trio figures this will give a taste of the environmental and heritage riches that can be found along the track.

Like Leigh Gibbens, both Metcalfe and Parker have deep connections to the railway.

Martin Parker grew up in a cottage right beside the line in the Coalfields community of Pelaw Main.

"'Chuffing of trains' is pretty romantic sounding, but it wasn't romantic," Parker recalls. "It was heavy industry. It was a great big, bulky, hulking, noisy, dirty, smelly train going past, belching out black smoke."



A tunnel on the proposed Richmond Vale Rail Trail. Picture: Jonathan Carroll

Billy Metcalfe is also a product of Pelaw Main.

Coal has shaped his family. His great grandfather, William Yates, was the first miner killed in the Pelaw Main pit, and his father, former Cessnock councillor Jim Metcalfe, almost lost his life in the same colliery, when coal poured onto him. For a time, Jim Metcalfe also worked as a fettler on the Richmond Vale Railway.

"That's one of the reasons I'm so passionate about it," says Billy Metcalfe of the trail.

As boys, both Martin and Billy would jump on the trains, hitching a ride to local waterholes. Now, as older men, they ride their bicycles along the same trail.

Pieces of these three local guides' past, and that of this region, are scattered along the trail, if you know where to look.

Near the Dog Hole, they point out the ruins of a bridge tumbling towards Blue Gum Creek. We walk through deep cuttings and past the remnants of sidings.

Further along the trail, we clamber down a rock face. Above us is a section of the Hunter Expressway.

While the 21st century rushes by up there, Martin Parker guides me into an overhang that cradles colonial history.

It is known as the Jewboy Cave, because a notorious bushranger gang of that name reputedly holed up here in the early 1840s.



Martin Parker inspects Jewboy Cave, reputedly the hiding place of a colonial bushrangers' gang. Picture: Jonathan Carroll

The rail trail committee has also been working with the Wonnarua Nation Aboriginal Corporation to ensure Indigenous history is acknowledged and preserved.

The project itself has gathered a fair amount of history, as it has taken years to get it moving.

The proposal has been the subject of all manner of studies, designs and a promotional book, *Towards the Richmond Vale Rail Trail*. But all those words and plans have still not led to a trail.

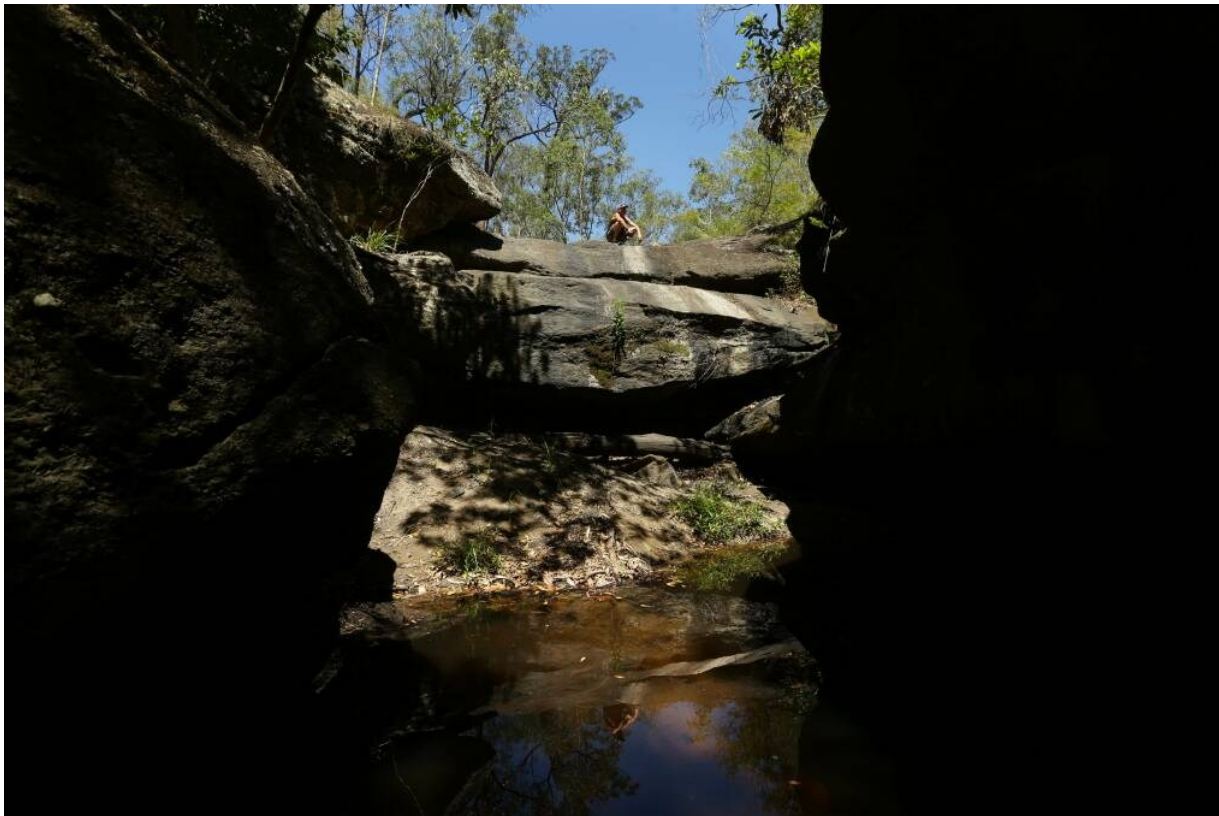
"It's frustrating," concedes Billy Metcalfe. "We're moving, but it's moving at a slow rate."

Sam Reich, the president of the Newcastle Cycleways Movement, says this project has been discussed for at least 20 years, adding "it makes unbelievable sense to make use of these moribund tracks".

"Everyone thinks it's a good idea, but until now, the politicians haven't been motivated to do anything about it," Reich says.

The trail traverses a patchwork of political interests. It cuts through the Newcastle, Lake Macquarie and Cessnock local government areas. State government agencies have authority over a lot of the old line, and it also goes through private properties.

To help push the project along, City of Newcastle announced a year ago that it would form a working party with the other councils, and it would lodge a development application for the section of the trail in its local government area before mid-2019.



A section of Blue Gum Creek near the Richmond Vale Rail Trail. Picture: Jonathan Carroll

Yet the very things that make the rail trail an attractive idea - the industrial heritage and the range of natural environments - also make this very sensitive ground to tread on for planners.

So the timetable has stretched out.

Now, according to Newcastle Lord Mayor Nuatali Nelmes, the DA should be lodged in February or March.

"It is going to be amazing when it's planned, approved, and funded and actually developed," Cr Nelmes says.

"But making sure we have all of the environmental impact statements ticked off, and all of that work done, is a really important part of the process."

Newcastle's development application will cover a route from Shortland to Tarro, following the old Chichester pipeline, as well as a section of the former rail line from Hexham, along the edge of the Hunter Wetlands National Park, to Pambalong Nature Reserve, near Stockrington.

Beyond that, the trail to Kurri Kurri is mostly in the Cessnock local government area.



Leigh Gibbens and Billy Metcalfe walking along the former Richmond Vale rail line. Picture: Jonathan Carroll

And Cessnock's Mayor Bob Pynsent concedes his council is not ready to lodge a development application, asserting it doesn't have the finances to fund what it needs to prepare the DA.

"If we could get \$140,000 for a project manager, and the \$75,000 for the engagement of a consultant for the completion of the studies, we'd be a long way down the track," Cr Pynsent says. "But there's no way that we'd be looking at early next year to be lodging a DA."

Money - or more pointedly, where it needs to come from - is entwined around the Richmond Vale Rail Trail.

The committee's Billy Metcalfe estimates the project could cost about \$25 million. However, Cr Nelmes says for the Newcastle section alone, the estimate is about \$20 million.

Those involved in the project say it needs state and federal funding to get off the ground.



Along the old Richmond Vale Railway. Picture: Jonathan Carroll

"I think that's the only way you'll end up being able to fund infrastructure of this significance, regional significance, and this cost," says Cr Nelmes.

"We will put money into it as a council, but to really get the whole Richmond Vale Rail Trail constructed, it's going to need state and federal grant funding, without question. It's a huge project, and it's beyond local government."

The council leaders say the trail has been recognised by the state government as important for the future, featuring in its Greater Newcastle Metropolitan Plan.

"The frustrating thing for me and to council is that there's no funding that comes with that," Cr Pynsent says. "Yes, it's in the plan but it's back to the council to sort the issues."

Emeritus Professor Tim Roberts, from the University of Newcastle's School of Environmental and Life Sciences, has had a long involvement with the proposal, including co-writing the *Towards The Richmond Vale Rail Trail* book.

Professor Roberts believes one reason governments have been slow to embrace the project is the cost. But he points out it has the potential to save public money, such as improving people's long-term health, as well as generating revenue.



The proposed Richmond Vale Rail Trail. Picture: Jonathan Carroll

A 2014 feasibility study indicated the rail trail could pay its way within a few years from economic tourism, worth \$5.2 million annually.

Since that study was done, Professor Roberts says, "there's been a huge growth in the exercise, cycling, tourism dollar".

"There are so many people now looking to get on their bicycle and go travelling," he says.

A colleague of Professor Roberts and rail trail committee member, Alec Roberts, says the project requires more than government money. It needs the support of the community, and for people to be willing to literally get their hands dirty. There is a rail trail Landcare group, for instance, with Leigh Gibbens as its convenor.

"So it's the people in the area who are working on improving the amenity and biodiversity of the corridor," Alec Roberts says. "That provides ownership back to the people, rather than it being a top-down thing."



Inside one of the historic tunnels on the proposed Richmond Vale Rail Trail. Picture: Jonathan Carroll

FOR the advocates of the rail trail, this is probably the metaphor they are looking for. I can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

We are standing at the eastern entrance of the first of three historic tunnels along the proposed trail. No.1 Tunnel is about 160 metres long with a bend in it, as it pushes through the Sugarloaf Ranges. This brick-lined tunnel is more than a century old and heritage listed.

"The architecture, how they built it," marvels Billy Metcalfe, as he shines a torch up at the soaring arch. "It's just unbelievable."

"A walk back in time," adds Leigh Gibbens.

Yet time is telling on the walls of this tunnel. Leigh Gibbens points to some cracks and a small bulge in the brickwork.

The tunnel has been monitored by the Transport for NSW, as a section of the Hunter Expressway is directly overhead. A spokesperson for Transport for NSW says the tunnel is inspected biannually.

"The last inspection was in May 2019 and the tunnel is in good condition," the spokesperson says.

Other pieces of industrial heritage along the trail, such as bridges, would need major restoration, or replacing.

Newcastle Cycleways Movement's Sam Reich has recently been along part of the track. He believes any restoration or replacement work needed just bolsters the argument for the rail trail project to be funded and launched.

"It's a deteriorating heritage asset that needs to be protected anyway, so why not turn it into something that would be world renowned?," Reich says.

The passing of the years is hardly the only threat to the old railway. While we are standing at the opening of No.2 Tunnel, headlights appear at the other end.



Headlights indicate a four-wheel-drive vehicle is approaching through No.2 Tunnel. Picture: Jonathan Carroll

Those lights grow into two 4-wheel-drives slushing across the tunnel's muddy floor.

Leigh Gibbens explains vehicles are not allowed in here. When one of the four-wheel-drivers, Shane, stops his vehicle as he emerges out of the darkness, he says he wasn't aware of that.

Shane asserts he'd be in favour of the track becoming a pathway for cyclists and pedestrians.

"That would be beautiful if they did develop it, because it's such a waste," he says.

"That might be a deterrent for all the rubbish and the burning of cars."

The group argues that if it became a rail trail, the environment would be better protected.

"It's become an area where people think, 'It's so isolated, I can go and dump my rubbish and burn my car, burn stolen cars', things like that," says Leigh Gibbens.

"If there were people coming for quiet enjoyment of the place, I think it would be less prone to the vandalism that has gone on."



A trashed and abandoned car on the proposed Richmond Vale Rail Trail. Picture: Jonathan Carroll

With the Richmond Vale Rail Trail group holding its annual general meeting on December 19, the committee is hoping to raise awareness and community support for the project.

For a glimpse of what this rail trail could be, the group's members cite examples from around the globe, where disused corridors have become major tourist attractions, bringing millions of dollars into the economy.

Yet the greatest inspiration and precedent for what is possible is much closer to home: Fernleigh Track.

Sam Reich says the plan to convert the old Adamstown-to-Belmont line into a recreational track met with official reluctance and resistance for many years.

Now, Fernleigh Track is so much a part of life in Newcastle, few could imagine the community not having that 16-kilometre corridor.

"That step change is one of those things that shows if you build it, they will come," Reich says.

Professor Tim Roberts and students from the university have studied the fauna and flora along the Richmond Vale trail.

"To my mind, there are about seven ecological communities you traverse when you walk along the railway line, and they are within two or three metres of you on either side," he says

"The public can see these and very easily learn about them. So there are opportunities for education as well as just the sheer joy of seeing the plants ... It's wonderful."



The ruins of a bridge at Stockrington. Picture: Jonathan Carroll

Despite the challenges that the project faces, Professor Roberts remains confident the rail trail will go from being a grand plan to being an even grander reality.

"I think by 2025, it will be in existence, and there will be people riding from Newcastle through to Kurri Kurri, through to the vineyards," he declares.

"And it will go gangbusters."

Coalfields mountain biker Martin Parker rides in the bush around the old rail line several times a week. And he has ventured far and wide on two wheels, riding a lot of renowned tracks around Australia and the world.

But Parker firmly believes one of the greatest trails could take shape in his own backyard.

"Well, I'm biased and I'm a local and I've grown up with it," he says of the Richmond Vale Rail Trail, "but it could be as good as the Munda Biddi Trail in Western Australia, it could be as good as the Mawson Trail [South Australia] or the Larapinda Trail in Alice Springs.

"Where we're walking today speaks for itself. If the general public could come out here and have a look, they'd enjoy it, they'd embrace it, fall in love with it. And they'd come back.

"For the Hunter, it would draw tourists from other parts of Australia and internationally. It could become a feature ride."

When asked if he thinks all that is being dreamed of for the Richmond Vale Rail Trail can happen, Martin Parker stops, looks ahead through a cutting carpeted with old coal shards and smiles.

"Oh certainly," he replies. "We're walking on it now, aren't we? It's only engineering. And the will of someone to fund it."



Walking through a historic tunnel on the proposed Richmond Vale Rail Trail. Picture: Jonathan Carroll