

First train to Coolgardie, 1896



Description

This is a black-and-white photograph, measuring 13 cm x 20 cm, taken at Hines Hill Railway Station, about 20 km west of Merredin in Western Australia. It shows a steam-driven train from Perth, on its way to the eastern gold fields in 1896, and the driver, guard and several passengers. The engine has a fender on the front to clear the line. The siding can be seen to the left, with a wagon parked on it. The station building and platform are behind the coaches.

Educational value

- This asset features the first official train to travel the line from Perth after the completion of the extension from Southern Cross to Coolgardie - the opening of the extension on 23 March 1896 was a cause for much celebration and was described as heralding a 'new era in the history of Western Australia'; WA's Governor Sir Gerard Smith told the 10,000-strong crowd that the opening was an event of worldwide importance and that the news would be telegraphed to every capital of every great nation; Coolgardie's streets were cleaned up, foliage was hung from the telegraph poles and a procession, including Afghans mounted on camels, paraded through the town.
- It indicates the importance of the gold finds to the future of Western Australia - after gold was discovered in 1892 the Government was prepared to build a railway line between Southern Cross and Coolgardie, a distance of 150 km; the Bill to extend the government-owned railway passed unopposed in November 1894; one reason for its easy passage was that a new train line would mean that there would be no further need to find and develop water supplies for travellers on the road to the gold fields.
- It depicts the train that marked the end of Coolgardie's isolation - the railway reduced freight costs to the gold fields and allowed a much greater volume and range of supplies to be delivered; it also facilitated the importation of heavy mining equipment to further develop mines; historians have argued that the pipeline project, which solved the water supply problem, would not have been



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possible had there not been a railway line along its route; the railway line enabled large tonnages of pipeline, material and machinery to be distributed; the railway ended dependence on an estimated 4,000 horses and more than 3,000 camels previously used in transportation.

- It depicts a form of transport used by gold prospectors - the eastern gold fields railway of Western Australia opened its extension to Coolgardie in 1896, only four years after the first discovery of gold; with the opening of the railway the arduous journey by road between Southern Cross and Coolgardie was a thing of the past; Perth was hours rather than weeks away from the centre of the gold fields.
- It shows a steam-driven train - railway dams were dug at strategic sites along the rail route for the engines to take more water on board, as a train on this route could carry enough for the journey in only one direction.
- It shows part of the Coolgardie route, used to transport water to the arid gold fields - until a pipeline carrying water from a dam in the Perth Hills was completed in 1903, trains were used to carry water supplies, particularly in times of severe water shortages; this was not a satisfactory long-term solution to the gold fields' water shortage, since a water train hauled 30 wagons, each carrying a 1,200-gallon tank (total 36,000 gallons, approximately 164,000 L) but consumed more than half of that amount for its journey from the Avon River at Northam to Kalgoorlie and back.
- It shows a pair of locomotives that are typical of those used for long-distance haulage in WA at the time - for this largely ceremonial trip they are hauling a freight car, followed by five passenger coaches and a guard's van at the rear; the first two are probably second class, for staff, and the last three are first class, for VIPs; the second locomotive is probably the 'Maori Chief' belonging to the railway contractors Wilkie Brothers of New Zealand.
- It shows a train destined for Coolgardie despite that fact that the construction of the line was not complete - at the time of the opening, the last section of the railway track was unballasted so the official party, including WA Premier John Forrest, would have had a bumpy ride; no platform had been completed at Coolgardie and officials had to be lifted down from the carriages; travellers had been using the line long before its official handover from the contractors to the Government; the contractors' quoted price per mile did not cover the cost of construction, so they did not hand over the railway line to the Government until the profits covered their shortfall.

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