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The Oberon -Tarana Branch Line

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(Members, Oberon -Tarana Heritage Railway Inc.)

Abstract

The Tarana to Oberon branch line runs from the village of Tarana on the main western line (198 km from Sydney) to the town of Oberon, a distance of 24.3 km (15 miles 7 chains) and a climb of some 320 m. The maximum grade of the line is 1:25, one of the steepest in NSW. The line was opened in 1923, with 19 class steam locomotives providing both passenger and freight services. Passenger services were suspended in 1971, while freight operations ceased in 1979. The line was never formally closed. Currently the line is being restored for planned tourist operation by the Oberon - Tarana Heritage Railway group (OTHR).

Introduction

The Oberon-Tarana line is arguably one of the last remaining and best-preserved Branch Lines of the NSW rail system, dating from the days of rail dominance in the transport infrastructure of the state. The line, to the town of Oberon in the Central West of New South Wales, is of light, unballasted construction and was completed in 28 months, traversing some 24 km of the steepest (for a railway) terrain in NSW – grades of 1:25 are common and 5 chain radius curves are the norm through the gorge between Hazelgrove and Carlwood, the former being some 6 km north of Oberon (see map). The line was built at a total cost of £163,420 and served the local communities for some 56 years before operations were “suspended”.

Calls for a Rail Link

The opening of the Oberon -Tarana railway was a significant historical event in the European development of the Oberon Plateau. The prime mover behind the development of the line was a local MLA Valentine Carlyle* Ross Wood Johnston – in conjunction with the local “Oberon Railway League”. (*See note)

A public meeting was held in Oberon in August 1884 (*Bathurst Times*, 8 August) to discuss the reason for a lack of progress in getting Government support for building a railway line from Tarana to Oberon. The meeting noted that the “... great want of the Oberon people is a better way to get their produce to market”. They shared this view with communities across the state and, after just over thirty years of rail expansion, those communities who

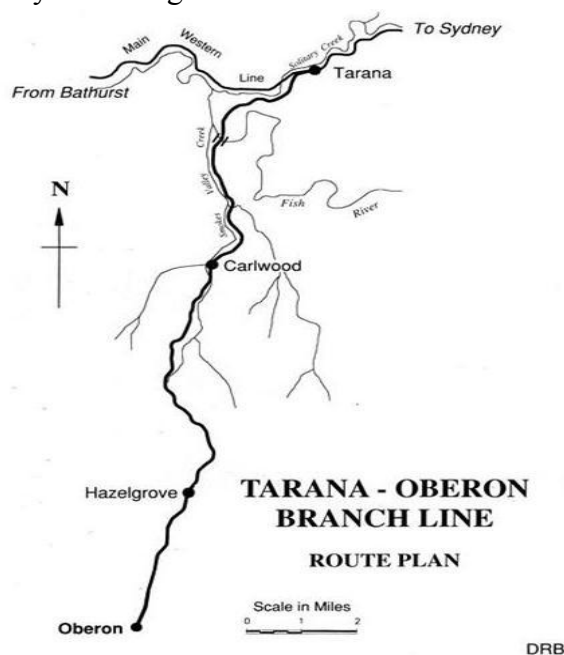


Figure 1: Locality Plan. Drawn by David Bennett – reproduced by courtesy of Eveleigh Press.

had the “loudest” voice or influential social or political constituents had the greatest leverage. The fact that the line would have to pass through much private property was considered an indication that the land was very productive and well settled.

By October 1884 a Progress Committee had been formed with the view to surveying potential passenger and freight traffic as well as to organise a deputation to the Minister for Public Works. The survey was completed late in 1885 but nothing positive eventuated. By August 1908 the *Lithgow Mercury* was reporting the formation of an Oberon Railway League. The visit by the Minister and Secretary for Public Works, Charles Alfred Lee, occurred on 30th April 1909 when he was honoured by a public banquet. The most significant outcome was a reaffirming of the route for the line to be from Tarana rather than Rydal which route had been promoted by Black Springs’ residents. The Minister was reported (*Lithgow Mercury*, 4 June 1909) as saying “that Oberon had nothing to fear as far as railway connection was concerned, and that the route from Tarana to Oberon was already surveyed and presented no engineering difficulties”.

There was considerable rivalry about the route of the prospective railway line and serious lobbying occurred largely by various Leagues formed to further local interests. Black Springs and Rydal Leagues were favouring a route to or near Jenolan Caves from Rydal but the *Lithgow Mercury* (9 July 1909) reported that the Jenolan Caves League had decided “not to support the Rydal route, and the one most likely to be constructed would be through Oberon from Tarana”.

By 1910 the Oberon Railway League was lamenting the lack of action despite the promises made by Minister Lee in 1909. The League continued to organise likely usage surveys and petitions to further their cause. A deputation to the local MLA the Hon. G.S. Beeby led to a promise of a visit by the Public Works Committee for a full enquiry and chance for representatives to present evidence to the committee. Petitions in the Oberon area “now contained over 400 names, principally farmers” (*Lithgow Mercury*, 6 June 1910). Indeed, farmers were keen to offer land for the railway – and it was reported that Mr. Thomas Hogg (Hazelgrove) “offered the necessary land for the construction of a railway line running for two miles through his property” (*Lithgow Mercury*, 16 January 1911).

The Public Works Committee had committed to the construction of the line via Oberon but had ruled out going the complete distance to Burruga, instead suggesting that “the circumstances of the district would be met by the construction of a line to about six miles from Burruga, thus tapping the whole of the extensive fertile district and enabling the proprietors of the Burruga copper mine to link up with it by means of the construction of a tramway” (*Lithgow Mercury*, 20 Dec 1911). In the event the latter did not occur due to the mine remaining commercially unviable.

Whilst the matter was tentatively decided, all parties lobbied to keep the matter before parliament. However, the intervention of the war slowed public works and it wasn’t until 1916 that the Minister for Works moved for the adoption of the Public Works Committee’s recommendation. The MLA for the district, Mr Carl Wood Johnston began to appear regularly in the press in his efforts to facilitate the project. His involvement continued for many years and he is widely attributed with successfully championing the cause through to fruition.

By 1918 the Oberon Railway Bill was passed by the Legislative Assembly but lapsed, as it did not go to the Upper House. Again financial constraints brought about by the war had stalled the project. In 1919 C.W. Johnston was pressing the Minister for Works who promised to have the Bill introduced in the current session of Parliament. He was as good as his word and the Bill was introduced in September 1919. The Oberon Railway League then invited parliamentarians to visit the district so that they would have "...first-hand knowledge of the district" (*Lithgow Mercury*, 15 September 1919). Later that month the *Mercury* reported a survey team at work on the line to find a better grade. The bill was passed eventually but loan estimates had to be drawn up and this dragged on through 1920 and 1921.

The Oberon Railway League under the Presidency of Mr. A. E. Burcher and the long serving Secretary Mr. M. J. Looby continued to agitate for action by pressing for an early commencement of work. Finally, the date for the turning of the first sod and a public banquet was set as Wednesday 18th May 1921 but for reasons unknown, although probably related to the availability of the Minister, the ceremony occurred on Saturday 28th May 1921.

Construction and Opening of the Line

The site of the turning of the first sod was on land owned by a Mr. J. Lambert on the current location of Oberon Station. As reported in the *Lithgow Mercury* (30 May 1921) the parliamentarians present were the Acting Premier (Hon. J. Dooley), the Minister for Works (Hon. J. Estell), Mr. S Nicholls (MP), MLAs J. C. L. Fitzpatrick, C. W. Johnston and Hugh Main (a member for Cootamundra) and MLC J. Ryan. President of the Oberon Railway League, Mr. A. E. Burcher introduced the dignitaries and presented the Minister with a "handsome silver spade, with a polished wooden handle. It bore the inscription:- Presented to the Hon. John Estell, Minister for Public Works and Railways, by Oberon Railway League, on the occasion of his turning the first sod of the Oberon-Tarana Railway, May 28, 1921." The presentation spade was reported to be approximately 14 inches (35cm) long. After numerous speeches the Minister turned the first sod, and the Secretary of the Oberon Railway League, Mr. M. J. Looby, "drove a substantial peg into the little cavity. Cheers were also given for the King". (*Lithgow Mercury*).

In Oberon that night a substantial and well attended banquet was held in Rutter's Hall with an extensive display of local produce including timber, meat, minerals, fruit, vegetables and frozen products (rabbits and poultry). The acting Premier promised that work would start within a month and that the line should be finished in approximately two years. These promises subsequently proved to be correct. Homage was paid to the exemplary work put in for the past 14 years by the Secretary of the Oberon Railway League Mr. J. Looby and the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported "many eulogistic references were made to the persistency with which Mr. Carl Wood Johnston, M.L.A. had advocated the claims of the district for a railway" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 May 1921).

On 3rd June, the *Lithgow Mercury* noted that initial work had commenced at Tarana and "carpenters are erecting offices and tool sheds ... and numbers of men are already camped in the neighbourhood awaiting the actual commencement of the line

construction”. Actual construction work finally commenced on 20th June 1921 when the *Lithgow Mercury* reported “a plough team and eight drays made the first start on the Tarana-Oberon railway this morning ... the men are working about two and a half miles (4km) from Tarana, near the Mutton Falls Creek. Excavation is being proceeded with”.

By early March 1923 the girders for the Fish River Bridge had arrived and by July the bridge was in daily use by the construction trains. On the 8th June the first unofficial consignments of goods from Tarana to Oberon were carried and the *Mercury* described the conveyance as at “owners risk and only by the (railway) truck load”. The station previously named (on the builder’s plans) Kierstone was renamed Carlwood in honour of the local MLA, Carl Wood Johnston. It is interesting to note the extent of his support – his last wish was to have his ashes scattered on the line and this was done in 1957 – in front of the Oberon Station.



Figure 2: The crowd and official party at Oberon Station awaiting the arrival of the official train for the scheduled 4:45 pm opening ceremony. “Nature smiled on Oberon’s great day. The severe wintry weather of the previous few days ended early on Wednesday, and the temperature was genial and spring-like.”(*Lithgow Mercury*, 5 October 1923). The gentleman on the left is Mr David Jamieson of Edith School and his pupils are behind him on the platform. (© Alan Sharp collection)

The first scheduled train left Tarana at 3.20 pm on Wednesday the 3rd of October 1923 to bring some 200 passengers to the grand opening of the line. The scheduled time for the journey to Oberon was 85 minutes with the return journey taking some 95 minutes due to the maximum speed limit of 24 km/hr (15 miles per hour) on the steep downhill run. After the train had arrived at Oberon station, speeches were made and the train set back in the platform for the ceremonial ‘cutting of the ribbon’. The ceremony at Oberon was carried out by the wife of the President of the Oberon Railway League – Mrs Burcher. Photographic evidence suggests that the locomotive was travelling tender first into Oberon, as it was the rear of the locomotive that cut the ribbon. The *Mercury* reporter wrote that as the train “moved slowly forward, and just

as the engine, gaily bedecked with flags, was about to touch the ribbon, Mrs. A. E. Burcher (wife of the President of the Railway League) cut the ribbon, to the accompaniment of great cheering. Mr. Fitzpatrick (Minister for Mines and senior Member for the district) then completed the ceremony by declaring the line open. He also presented Mrs. Burcher with the scissors as a memento of the occasion". The Oberon Railway League had served its purpose and at the final meeting on the 20th October 1923, the League was officially dissolved.

Impact on Oberon Plateau Communities

The purpose of the line was to exploit local agricultural, forestry and mineral products. It was anticipated that the local gold and copper mining activity would generate revenue for the railway, but with the closure of the Burruga mine in 1919, this did not eventuate. Freight carried out of Oberon and district included sheep and cattle, timber from the sawmill, fruit, cereal, peas (up to 2 or 3 trains per day to Tarana), potatoes and in earlier days, valuable local timbers such as blackbutt, mountain ash, cedar and various hardwoods. Freight into Oberon was largely to service the local agricultural industry and businesses in the town and district and included livestock, fertilizer, hardware supplies, produce supplies, beer and spirits, whitegoods and all the items typically sold in rural towns.

Local industries also benefitted considerably from the rail infrastructure as in 1943 a huge boiler was brought by rail to service the local timber mill. The *Western Times* (26 October 1943) noted "Oberon's rapid rise to a flourishing district during the past ten years is best depicted by the railway statistics". The paper reported total revenue earnings of £70,696 in the preceding ten years at an annual average of £6,430. Perhaps a more telling figure was the improved capital value of the town of Oberon which increased from £98,000 in 1933 to £169,500 in 1940, an increase of nearly 73% in seven years. During the same period, the total value of the shire increased nearly £500,000 and the paper asked "what other district can show such marked improvement".

In the early days of the line, when roads were poor and private vehicles few, Oberon residents were glad of the ease and relative cheapness of rail transport to Bathurst and places further afield. Students attending schools in Bathurst also regularly patronised the "new" rail line. Much later, the railway also contributed towards the building of the Fish River Dam at Oberon (in 1943), with the provision of a special siding near the station for delivery of construction materials (McLachlan, 1997).

History of Operation

The Oberon branch had the distinction, along with the Batlow line, of having only one class of steam locomotive (class 19 0-6-0s) operating on the line. These locomotives were originally designed by Beyer, Peacock & Co. of Manchester in 1877 (Booth, 1979). Steam power, in the form of these 19 class locomotives, ruled on the line, with engine '1919' having the longest association with the branch line (18 years). Other steam engines also had considerable time working the line - with '1957' (10 years) and '1942' (7 years) being prominent. The latter two were scrapped and '1919' has passed into the care of the Glenreagh Mountain Railway and is now once more operational.

The Bathurst Depot provided the 19 class locos for the Oberon operations and they were specially fitted out for the line, with a bogie tender being used instead of the 6-wheel rigid frame type and additional slack being allowed in the engine-tender coupling to accommodate the sharp curves. These tenders had the additional advantage of providing extra coal and water capacity for the round trip Tarana-Oberon and return. The locos were coaled direct from a wagon at Tarana siding, using coal from Lithgow open cut. To cope with stock on the unfenced line the engines were fitted with cowcatchers and electric headlamps (Booth, 1979). One engine would spend a fortnight on the branch and then be exchanged with another from Bathurst. The organisation of the Tarana-Oberon mixed was done from Oberon itself. The crew lived in Oberon and the engine stabled there overnight. A double-header was run if the loads were heavy.

The following table (Booth, 1979) shows the maximum loadings on the branch line for the 19 class locos:

| Section | Load – (Tonnes) | |
|---------------------|-----------------|-------|
| | Mixed | Goods |
| Tarana - Hazelgrove | 117 | 117 |
| Hazelgrove - Oberon | 203 | 203 |
| Oberon - Tarana | 132 | 258 |

On 21st January 1963 a 49 class diesel locomotive displaced regular steam operation on the line. Later 45, 47 and 48 class diesels were pressed into service. The use of diesels allowed an increase in train frequency to two trains in each direction daily. Lithgow drivers and firemen operated the locos and crews were no longer required to be stationed in Oberon. The announcement that diesels were to replace steam led to the last steam service on the line being hauled by double-header 19 class locos – ‘1919’ and ‘1957’. These were specially painted for the historic occasion, with many railway enthusiasts enjoying the journey on 9th March 1963.

In more recent times, loco number ‘1904’ was the subject of a negotiation between the then Public Transport Commission and the Oberon Tarana Steam Train Company Ltd (1975). A cheque representing 10% of the purchase price was paid to the PTC in late 1975. It is not known what happened subsequently both to the Oberon Tarana Steam Train Company or to the deposit paid to the PTC, but loco ‘1904’ is currently in the possession of the Dorrigo Steam Railway and Museum.



Figure 3: A hard-working 19 class loco climbs the 1:25 grade towards the summit with the Oberon mixed on its way from Tarana to Oberon – note the sharp curves with checkrails and essentially unballasted sleepers. (© Dennis O’Brien collection).

The Demise of the Line

Despite the rosy predictions, the *Bathurst Times* (21 June 1930) reported that the line “has been a losing proposition since it was constructed” and that it “shows a steady loss on capital outlay”. The paper reported the working expenses, total earnings, interest payments and operating losses for the years 1927 and 1928 as:

| Year | Working Expenses | Earnings | Interest | Op. Losses |
|------|------------------|----------|----------|------------|
| 1927 | £5,000 | £3,400 | £8,700 | £10,487 |
| 1928 | £4,800 | £2,400 | £8,700 | £11,205 |

Whilst these are somewhat dire figures, it needs to be remembered that these were uncertain economic times and that there were other less tangible considerations such

as regional development, tourism, and industrial development which could offset these losses to some extent.

In 1943, the *Lithgow Mercury* (25 October) reported that the “Oberon railway goods yard has been found too small. The goods traffic has been so congested that it is necessary to enlarge the yard and build another loop.” By 1950 the *Western Times* (26 October) ran an article, possibly by an Oberon resident, generally making the case in favour of adopting road transport rather than rail. The slow movement of rail freight and the number of staff required to work the line were used as arguments in favour of road transport. The article is interesting in giving a snapshot of operations in 1950 – “...we have a stationmaster, and two porters stationed permanently at Oberon, while the train crew consists of an engine driver, acting engine driver (fireman), and guard. Normally these men make the trip to Tarana and back to Oberon once a day, which constitutes their day’s work”. The latter observation is a trifle unfair as the train crew were also responsible for preparing and servicing the locomotive, checking the rolling stock, shunting the yard at Oberon and then Tarana and finally banking the loco fire for the night. “On the maintenance side we have at least four fettlers permanently engaged, ensuring that the line is fit for safe travel ...”.

Various procedures were adopted in an attempt to improve operations. Fast stock trains to the Flemington markets were implemented in 1958. Special connecting services were run from Oberon to meet these fast services. Bulk freight rates were offered to businesses serviced by rail in 1961 in order to provide competitive rates. An extra train was added each day in 1962 to better service the timber industry and pyneboard factory.

By 1971 the *Western Advocate* (25 August) was reporting, “all passenger train services on the unique Tarana to Oberon line will cease from August 20 because patronage has become almost non-existent, according to railway authorities”. In August tenders were called for the demolition of the two small station buildings on the line at Hazelgrove and Carlwood. In 1974 the Australian Railway Historical Society ran a last passenger trip on the line to celebrate the running of the last steam hauled passenger train in NSW. Steam was used from Sydney to Tarana on the main line, but a diesel hauled the train on the branch.

In 1975 the *Western Advocate* was reporting moves by the Public Transport Commission to review the future of the rail line. In the same year, the Oberon Historical Society investigated the possible purchase of a 19 class locomotive (No.1904) and carriage to run as a tourist attraction but the requirements of the Public Transport Commission proved too onerous for the Society to meet. On 4th July 1975 the *Advocate* reported the formation in Oberon of a company called the Oberon-Tarana Steam Train Company Ltd. “with the object of purchasing a veteran steam engine and three carriages and have them brought from Sydney to Oberon at a total cost of £6,000.” Activities of the company were still being reported by the *Western Advocate* in 1976, but no further public comment appeared and the company slipped into oblivion.

The impact of alternative road transport, which was both quicker and more cost effective, resulted in a “temporary” cessation of freight operations in August 1979. The *Western Advocate* (17 August 1979) reported that “the freight service will be

continued on with a road motor vehicle service operating through the goods shed at Bathurst ... with this service the people of Oberon will receive a better service for goods freight than the current once a week train service". On 22nd August the Advocate reported that "the Minister for Transport, Mr Peter Cox, has told Oberon Shire Council that in the advent of a wood pulp mill being established in the Oberon area, consideration will be given to re-introducing the rail freight service."

However, this was not to be. The line operated for passenger services until the 27th August 1971 with the last freight service running on the 27th September 1979. Services were "suspended" on the 1st of October 1979 with the line never formally closing. Oberon station remained open as a parcels office until the 28th March 1980.

During the latter part of 1992, expressions of interest were called for the operation of freight services on the Oberon – Tarana branch line. In subsequent years feasibility studies and environmental studies were carried out and the prospects of re-opening the line looked hopeful. By 1995 the then Minister for Small Business and Regional Development, Mr Carl Scully was reported as saying "the possibility of recommissioning the line is a most exciting one" (*Oberon Review*, 10 August 1995).

However, by July 1996 the proposal was "dead". A number of issues were discussed in the media at the time and included accusations by the Highway Safety Action Group of stalling tactics by the then Transport Minister, Brian Langton and suggestions of failed negotiations and lack of commitment by CSR, the owners of the timber processing facility in Oberon (*Western Advocate*, 5 March 1996). The desire to keep large trucks off district roads had seen the rise of the Highway Safety Action Group and support from the newly elected Independent member for Calare, Peter Andren, who advocated "keeping additional truck numbers off both the Oberon to Bathurst road and the Great Western Highway (*Oberon Review*, 7 March 1996). By July 1996 the Member for Bathurst was reported as saying that the proposal to re-open the Tarana Oberon branch line "is dead and buried ... as far as I am concerned, CSR are not serious about using rail to transport their finished product because someone has come up with a better deal" (*Oberon Review*, 18 July 1996). The *Western Advocate* (26 August 1996) reported that a "CSR representative cited an undesirable service level with rail transport too slow, and the expense of rail transport, as reasons the project would not go ahead". Oberon Council also came in for some criticism in the *Western Advocate* (22 May 1996) for having "acted improperly by removing railway line at the Albion Street intersection ... following a visit from the Bathurst area engineer for Rail Services who inspected the site. The engineer said Oberon Council did not approach State Rail, before removing the line".

The Present Situation

A public meeting was held by Oberon Council in July 2004 to explore the options for the use of the rail corridor between Oberon and Tarana. This resulted in the formation of a Council committee to oversee the proposed use of the rail corridor, as there were a number of potential divergent interests. These included Council, OTHR (see below), walking and cycling groups, line-side farmers, graziers and landholders as well as the broader communities of the Oberon and Tarana districts.

Prior to the July 2004 meeting, a Railway Group was proposed by a small group of concerned citizens to represent community members with an interest in the preservation and ultimate restoration of the complete branch line as a tourist railway. This group was formed in response to the projected removal of the local rail infrastructure and the likely closure of the rail corridor. At the July meeting the walking/cycling group favoured a closure of the line to facilitate building a trail from Oberon to Tarana. This was supported by an Australian Rail Track Corporation (ARTC) representative, however the Railway Group members presented a carefully prepared case for the preservation and restoration of the line as a Heritage Railway. The Railway Group then gained membership of the Council committee (mentioned above) to further develop the heritage railway proposal. Concerned locals recognised the potential of this rare and relatively intact Pioneer Branch line as a Heritage Railway. Thus on 7th February 2005 the Railway Group was formalised as the Oberon Tarana Heritage Railway Association and on 4th March, the association was incorporated as Oberon Tarana Heritage Railway Inc. (OTHR).

This was at a time when established Rail Heritage groups were struggling with the ramifications of structural change, escalating costs, insurance blow-outs and complex requirements of the regulators in terms of safety and operations. Forming such a Heritage Rail group in late 2004 was a leap of faith by the steering committee in the face of predictions of failure and insurmountable odds against success. The difficulty of gaining accreditation and mastering the necessary paper work was continually impressed upon the Board of OTHR. Funding was declared an impossibility and ultimate success unlikely. Nevertheless the Board accepted advice, listened to the experts, ignored the knockers, accepted help, sought out help, researched facts and history and proceeded to achieve accreditation, insurance and the myriad other requirements in developing an operating heritage railway.

Community support has been a cornerstone of this project and no effort has been spared involving the Oberon community in the practical restoration of the historic infrastructure. Farmers, householders and businesses have combined under OTHR guidance to provide labour and extensive machinery and material support. Oberon Council has recognised the importance of the OTHR rail project in providing the single most important potential tourism development for the district.

An Australian Tourist Development Grant together with matching funding from the Oberon Council has enabled OTHR to substantially complete the Stage 1 restoration of the line – from Oberon to Hazelgrove Siding – a distance of 5.5 km. The restoration of a motorised Section Car has been completed and negotiations are underway for major rolling stock. OTHR's work on the line is already showcasing the rail heritage industry to the Oberon community and the touring public. In years ahead this attraction may well form a connecting link in the Zig Zag, Lithgow, Oberon, Jenolan Caves, Katoomba tourism loop.

Summary

The Tarana-Oberon Branch line has had a chequered history, from being a “must-have” development for the Oberon Plateau community to an evolving heritage railway project. Built in the early 1920s - well after the hey-days of rail expansion in NSW - the line served for 56 years as an essential link for the district industries, businesses

and farmers. The line faded into disuse in 1979 with the rising dominance of bulk road transport and with the speed and convenience of private road vehicles. The line remains one of the best preserved branch lines in the state and forms a significant part of the rail heritage of NSW. It is now well on its way to restoration as a heritage railway tourist attraction.

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Historical Photographs of the Oberon - Tarana Line on OTHR website.

<http://www.ozsite.com.au/OTHR/files/histpics.htm>

Note: Both "Carlyle" and "Carlysl" spellings have been found in published works.

The authors would be happy to receive information from anyone who can add to the history of this Branch Line. Contact Colin Bembrick – taranaob@activ8.net.au