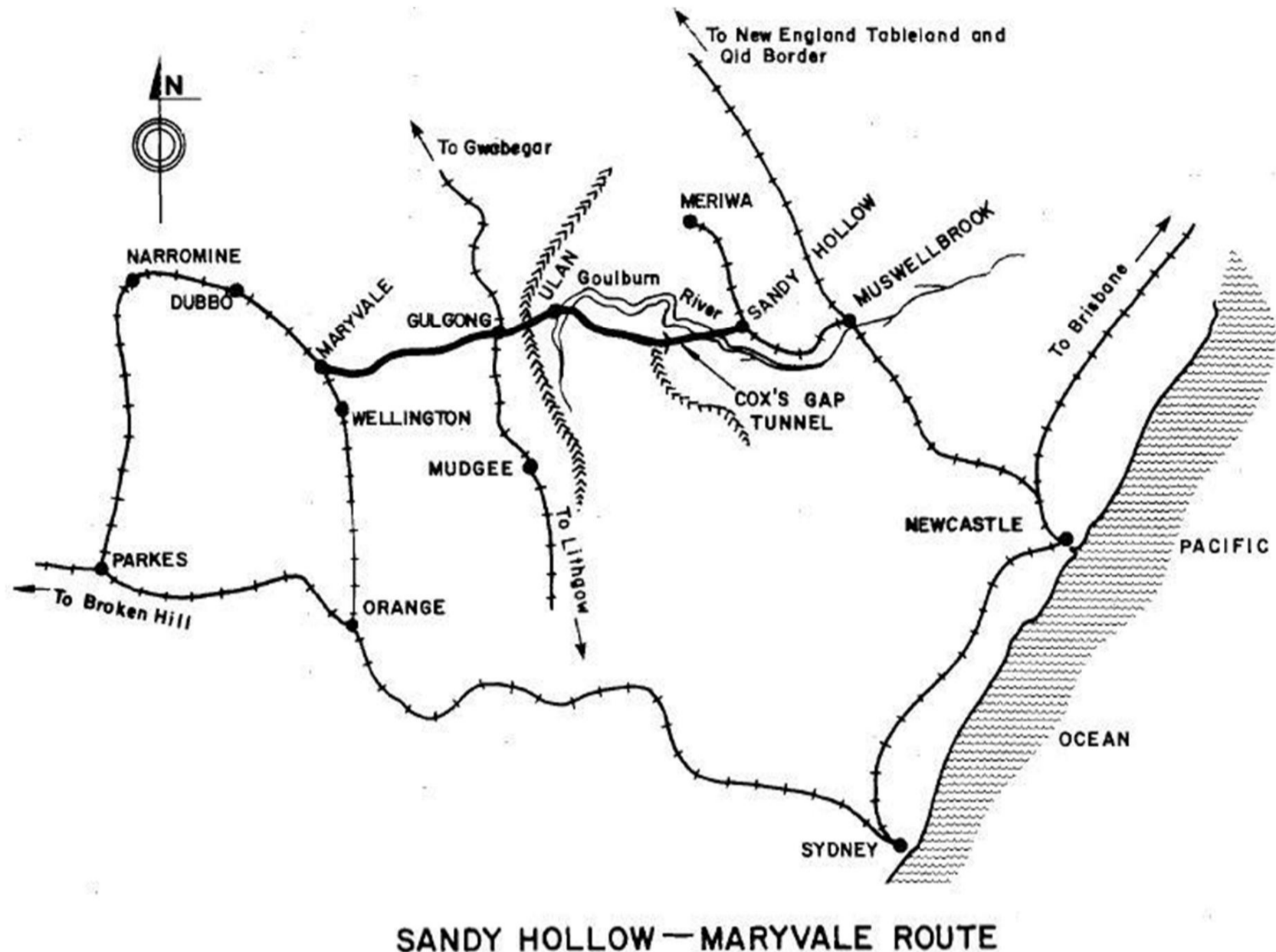


A Short History of the Sandy Hollow Line

The Sandy Hollow Line between Sandy Hollow, Gulgong and Maryvale (between Wellington and Dubbo), was originally surveyed way back in 1860, as a more easily graded crossing of the Great Dividing Range than the Blue Mountains line nearer to Sydney.



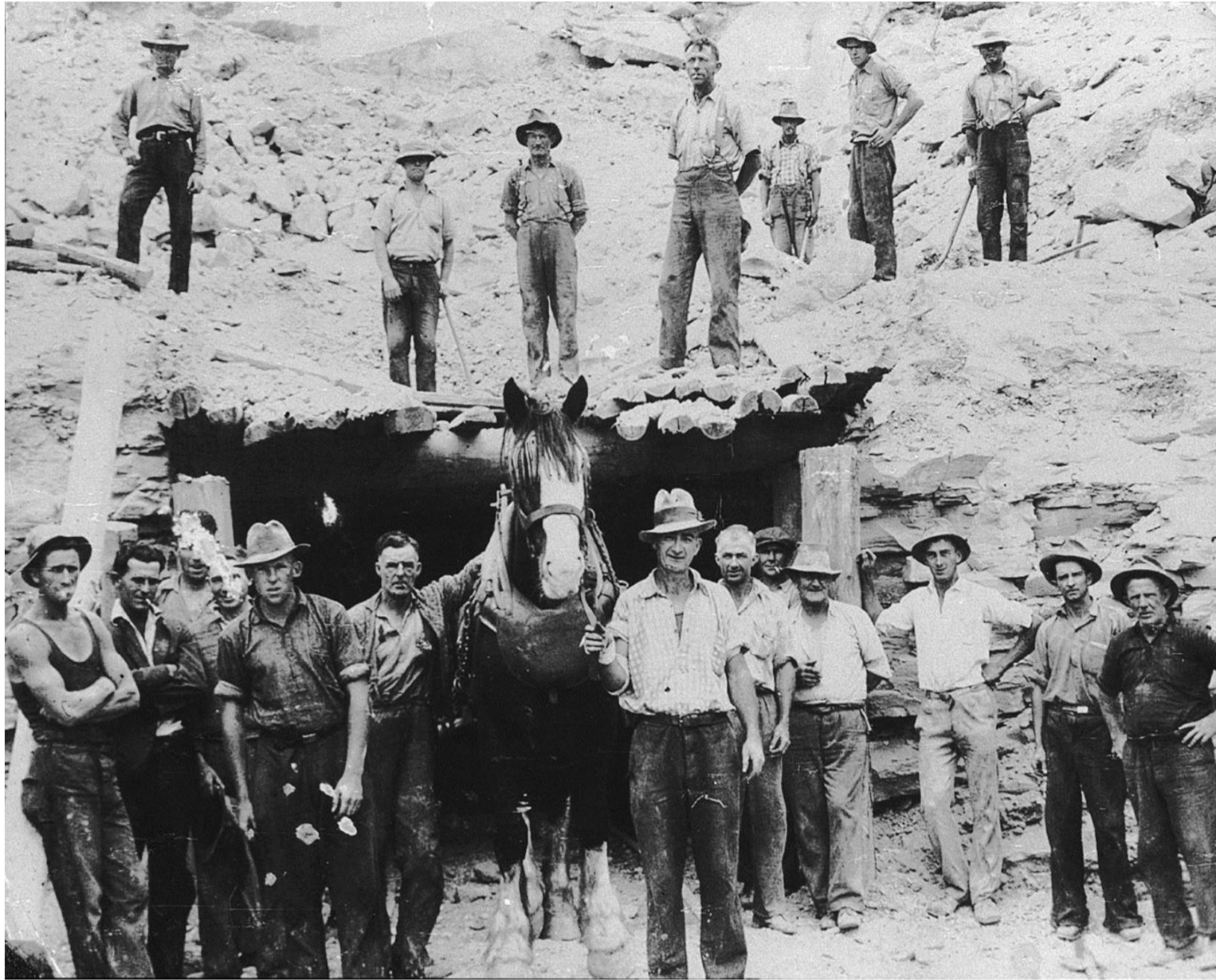
Interest in establishing the line re-emerged in the early part of the 20th century, with the first formal inquiries commencing in 1911. The line was resurveyed in 1918 and officially established by an Act of the NSW parliament in 1927, with an estimated price tag of £1,940,440. It was not commenced, however, until 1937, when it began as an unemployment relief scheme of the NSW Government.

Life on the Line

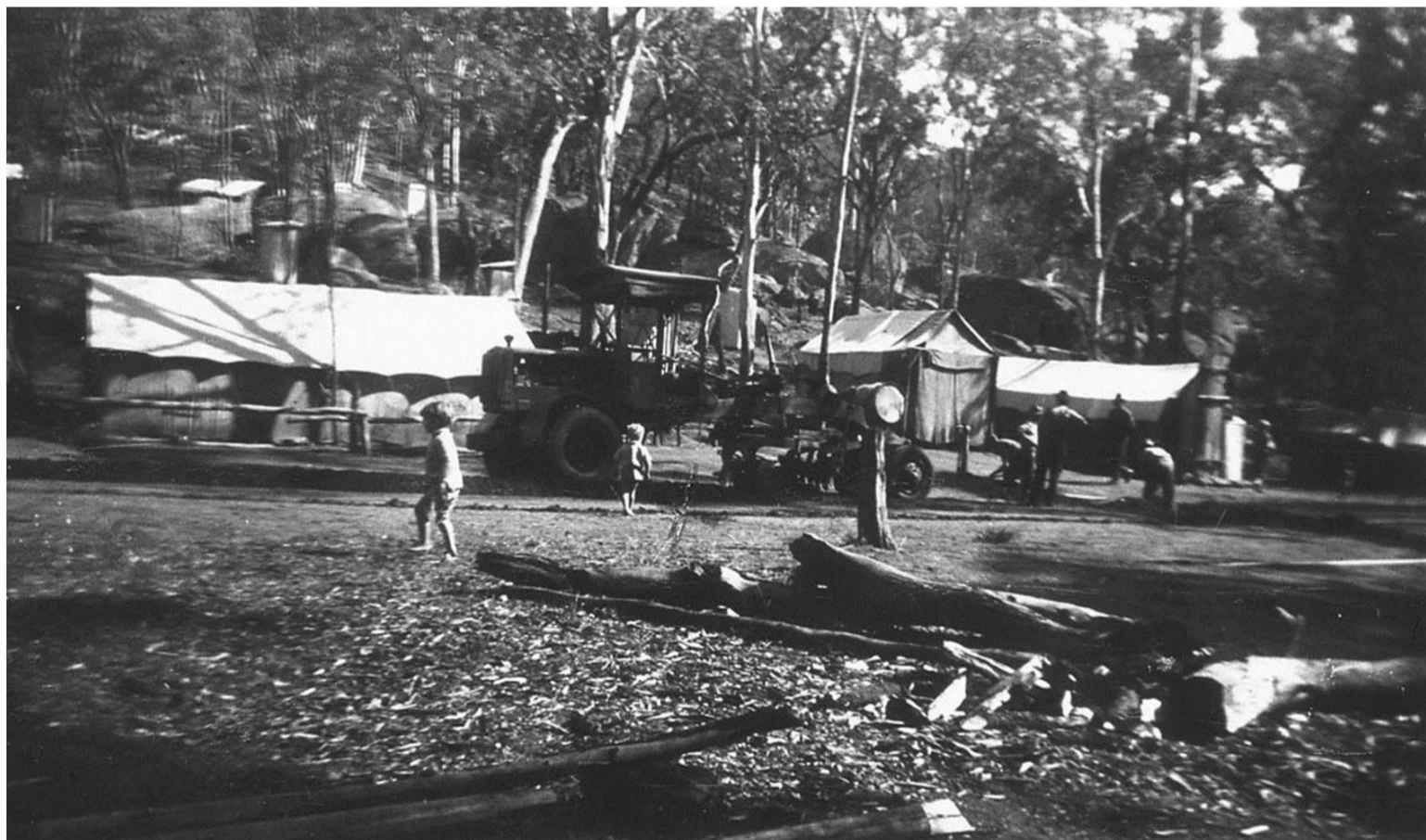
The line achieved considerable infamy for having no modern mechanical devices used on it, other than trucks carrying concrete for the tunnels and bridge piers. All other work was done with picks, shovels, hand drills, horses and carts.

"Men were expendable I suppose, you could say. There was always somebody else waiting for relief work for this job. But we thought when we went out on the Sandy Hollow Line, that this was going to be the greatest thing that ever happened to us because we were going to be paid wages, which of course we were. After having dole coupons for years for food, it was thought to be a big thing, but it didn't turn out of course to be anything like we expected. If people ask me what do I really remember about it, I suppose I could say, "the dirt, the smells, the flies, the broken men, broken women too, the women suffered terribly there." Really dad's poem really covers it all. It says the lot about the feelings of people in those days and conditions we all lived under."

— Linda McLean, daughter of Duke Tritton. Linda's father and her husband both worked on the line, with Linda and her mother living in the railway camps during construction. Duke Tritton's poem is reproduced at the end of this article.



Sandy Hollow to Maryvale railway line construction workers (c1937). The upper face of the tunnel on which the men are standing is called the "chinaman". The rubble from above is shovelled into the wagon behind the horse. The horse's breastplate is used for pushing the wagon back into the tunnel. Image from the collections of the State Library of NSW.



Campsite at the Sandy Hollow to Maryvale railway line construction site (c1937). Image from the collections of the State Library of NSW

A worker on the Sandy Hollow Railway told me he and his mates always took a bottle of Krantz Wine, or Hen Wine, to the Saturday night dance. It cost a shilling a bottle and they rarely remembered anything about the dance.

"Hen Wine?" I asked.

"Yeah. You squawked once and you laid where you drank it."

– Bill Peach, from his column "Peach On Sunday", this instalment entitled "Daze of wine and roses". *Sun Herald*, 22nd December, 1996.

Off Again, On Again

Construction continued through World War 2 at a desultory pace, held up by money, labour and especially steel shortages, only to be abandoned unfinished a few years later in 1951. Subsequent moves to complete the railway foundered in the face of unfavourable economic assessment. In 1980 White Industries recommenced the construction in order to move coal from their Ulan Coal Mine Operations to the Port of Newcastle. The line was officially opened in 1982. The line was later extended to Gulgong in 1985 to link up with western NSW lines.

Tunnels

There are four operational tunnels on the line: Coxs Gap Tunnels 1 and 2, the Bylong tunnel and the Wollar Gap tunnel. A fifth tunnel, between Goolma and Spicers Creek on the planned Gulgong-Maryvale section of the line, was built but then abandoned.

The tunnels under Coxs Gap were built between 1946 and 1949. The No 1 tunnel was used for eastbound road traffic on the Bylong Valley Way until work recommenced in the early 1980s. It was used in 1978 in the filming of the opening scene for the television series *Torque*, hosted by Peter Wherrett. In that scene, a Bolwell Nagari driven by Wherrett approached as lights in the dark tunnel, then the camera drew back as the car drove out of the tunnel. (Ah, them were the days.)

The 1975m Bylong tunnel is the state's longest "traditional" railway tunnel. Construction commenced in the 1940s, with it being partially bored and lined from each end. However, with the abandonment of the line's construction in the early 1950s, the tunnel remained incomplete until the line's reopening in the early 80s.

Being of the age they are, the tunnels were built to a relatively small outline, and ventilation in the them has been a problem, posing an unusual capacity constraint. This is most acute for the Bylong tunnel where trains can be no more frequent than one every 20 minutes, in order to allow for adequate air 'purging'.

Current Status

The line has seen considerable investment over the past decade, with an upgrade of its outdated Electric Train Staff (ETS) safeworking procedures to modern Centralised Traffic Control (CTC) and the construction of a number of additional passing loops in order to increase capacity. The most heavily used portion of the line is, naturally enough, the section from Bengalla to Muswellbrook. Current rail use demand from coal at this point is roughly 55 million tons per annum.

This history was compiled using material drawn from Wikipedia, Trove, NSWrail.net, Australian Railway Story, Fairfax's News Store, ARTC and the State Library of NSW. Produced by the Bylong Valley Protection Alliance, 2016.

THE SANDY HOLLOW LINE

A poem by Duke Tritton (1937).

Harold Percival Croydon "Duke" Tritton (1886-1965) was an Australian poet and folk singer. He was a founding member of the Sydney Bush Music Club. The Sandy Hollow Line is his best-known poem.

The sun was blazing in the sky and waves of shimmering heat,
Glared down on the railway cutting, we were half dead on our feet,
And the ganger stood on the bank of the cut and he snarled at the men below,
"You'd better keep them shovels full or all you cows 'll go."

I never saw such a useless mob, you'd make a feller sick,
As shovel men you're hopeless, and you're no good with the pick."
There were men in the gang who could belt him with a hand tied at the back
But he had power behind him and we dare not risk the sack.

So we took it all in silence, for this was the period when
We lived in the great depression and nothing was cheaper than men.
And we drove the shovels and swung the picks and cursed the choking dust;
We'd wives and hungry kids to feed so toil in the heat we must.

And as the sun rose higher the heat grew more intense,
The flies were in their millions, the air was thick and dense,
We found it very hard to breathe, our lungs were hot and tight
With the stink of sweating horses and the fumes of gelignite.

But still the ganger drove us on, we couldn't take much more;
We prayed for the day we'd get the chance to even up the score.
A man collapsed in the heat and dust, he was carried away to the side,
It didn't seem to matter if the poor chap lived or died.

"He's only a loafer," the ganger said. "A lazy, useless cow.
I was going to sack him anyway, he's saved me the trouble now."
He had no thoughts of the hungry kids, no thought of a woman's tears,
As she struggled and fought to feed her brood all down the weary years.

But one of the government horses fell and died there in the dray,
They hitched two horses to him and they dragged the corpse away.
The ganger was a worried man and he said with a heavy sigh:
"It is a bloody terrible thing to see a good horse die."

"You chaps get back now to your work, don't stand loafing there,
Get in and trim the batter down, I'll get the Engineer."
The Engineer came and looked around and he said as he scratched his head,
"No horse could work in this dreadful heat or all of them will be dead."

"There much too valuable to lose, they cost us quite a lot
And I think it is a wicked shame to work them while it's hot.
So we will take them to the creek and spell them in the shade,
You men must all knock off at once. Of course you won't be paid."

And so we plodded to our camps and it seemed to our weary brains,
We were no better than convicts, though we didn't wear the chains,
And in those drear depression days, we were unwanted men,
But we knew that when a war broke out, we'd all be heroes then.

And we'd be handed a rifle and forced to fight for the swine,
Who tortured us and starved us, on the Sandy Hollow Line.