

AustralAsia Railway

A Brief History Of The Transcontinental Railway

Southern line

1858	First suggestion of a transcontinental line by Melbourne businessman, J. Robertson.
1862	John McDouall Stuart crosses the continent from south to north.
1863	South Australia takes control of the Territory.
1872	The Overland Telegraph Line is completed between Adelaide and Palmerston (as Darwin was then), linking Australia to the world.
1878	First sod turned in Port Augusta for the Port Augusta to Government Gums (later renamed Farina) railway, on the east of the Flinders Ranges, through the Pichi Richi Pass to Quorn and Hawker and Marree (Hergott Springs).
1891	The line reaches Oodnadatta.
1911	The Commonwealth takes control of the Territory and promises to complete the line (but fails to put a date on the promise).
1913	Surveyors peg the remaining line to Pine Creek, much of which becomes the Stuart Highway.
1927	First sod turned in Oodnadatta for the extension to Alice Springs.
1929	The first train arrives through Heavitree Gap to Alice Springs on 6 August 1929.
1949	As part of the post-war construction process, and recommendations from the Clapp report for standardisation of Australia's railway gauges, the Commonwealth again commits to completing the railway.
1978	The Territory wins Self-Government and begins a sustained campaign for the railway's completion.
1980	New 830 kilometre standard gauge line from Tarcoola to Alice Springs opens, replacing the old Central Line about 150 kilometres to its east. Commonwealth Government commits \$10 million to surveying the rest of the corridor.
1983	Fraser Government and Hawke Opposition commit to completing the railway. The Fraser Government loses the election and the new Hawke Government reneges.

Northern line

1883	<i>Palmerston to Pine Creek Railway Act</i> assented to by South Australian Parliament.
1889	The line reaches Pine Creek.
1917	The line reaches Emungalan (on the banks of the Katherine River).
1926	The line reaches Katherine.
1929	The line reaches Birdum and plans to build as far as Daly Waters are abandoned due to the Depression.
War	The North and Central Australian Railways play a critical role during the Second World War, with passenger numbers on the northern line increasing from 2323 in 1939 to 63,237 in 1945. The number of weekly trains increases from two a week to 56 a week into Alice Springs and from one a week to 147 a week in the north. Troops have to travel from Alice Springs to Larrimah by road.
1976	The northern line closes.
1999	The Asia Pacific Transport Consortium is named as the preferred bidder to build, own and operate the Adelaide to Darwin line.



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Transport history

Overcoming isolation has been a constant theme of the Territory's transport history. In the early days of settlement, ships took up to four months to bring supplies and news around the coast. Camel trains took four weeks to bring freight from Oodnadatta to Alice Springs until the train line was extended in 1929. Coach and bullock travel to the gold fields could take up to six weeks in the Wet Season. Coastal shipping served areas such as Borroloola and Fisherton, now Timber Creek, along with Birt Drew's donkey teams.

Slowly the Territory's isolation was broken down.

In 1919, Keith and Ross Smith landed their Vickers Vimy at Fannie Bay, the first of many planes to arrive in Darwin. In 1937, Guinea Airways started a weekly service to Adelaide. As international travel developed, all overseas flights had to stop in Darwin, the first Qantas passenger flight to London taking 12 days and 42 refuelling stops.

The 1920s saw the advent of cars, the Flying Doctor Service and Traegar's pedal radio in the 1920s. The 1930s saw the first Government Road Train, Dr Clyde Fenton's Gypsy Moth and Connellan's mail planes. By 1937, there were four monthly steamers and five weekly planes passing through Darwin. In the 1940s, during the War, the Stuart Highway was sealed between Alice Springs and Darwin.

A new standard gauge line opened between Tarcoola and Alice Springs in 1980 and the Stuart Highway was sealed between Adelaide and Alice. But still a gap remained. Darwin is the only Australian mainland capital without a railway. After the northern line closed in 1976, a 1400 kilometre gap yawned across the Territory.



Men laying the last section of the line between Wire Creek and Alice Springs between 1927 and 1929. (Photo from the Joe Davis Collection, courtesy NT Archives Service)