

A Hills Rail History by Train



Image Mitcham Heritage Research Centre

This self - guided rail history tour of the Hills line takes you from Mitcham Station to Belair Station. Historic features are indicated along the way. It is recommended you read through the brochure before getting on the train so you know what's coming up.

Introduction

Construction of a rail line between Adelaide and Melbourne commenced in 1879. The greatest engineering project in SA at the time, it took over 800 men four years to complete the first stage from Mitcham to Nairne. The single track twisted through eight tunnels, numerous cuttings and two viaducts. Rubble and stone blasted for cuttings and tunnels was shoveled into wheelbarrows, horse drawn carts and hand pushed rail trucks. The men lived in construction camps established near Lynton, Eden Hills and Blackwood.

The link to Melbourne was completed by 1887. In 1919 a second track was constructed to manage the increasing traffic. Single track tunnels were mostly replaced with rail underpasses.

1. Mitcham Station

Mitcham, Blackwood, Mt Lofty and Aldgate stations were all the same floor plan and included a stationmaster's residence, telegraph station, post office and signal box. A rail siding west of the station serviced the local timber and quarrying industries. Nellie's garden just south of the station was established in memory of Nellie Ellis whose husband was Mitcham stationmaster from 1956 to 1977.

2. Torrens Park Station

Originally called Blythewood Station the station was re-named Torrens Park after the former home of the Torrens, Hughes and Barr Smith families (now Scotch College). In 1918 Bulls Creek Road was re-routed to eliminate dangerous open road crossings at Wattlebury Road and Eli Street. The western section of the road was re-named Price Avenue.

3. Former Clapham Station

After leaving Torrens Park you will pass the former Clapham Station on the right hand side near the two story cream brick flats. Just beyond here a spur line from Mitcham was built in 1905 to separate Hills and suburban traffic with a turnaround point for suburban trains.

4. Look right just before Lynton Station

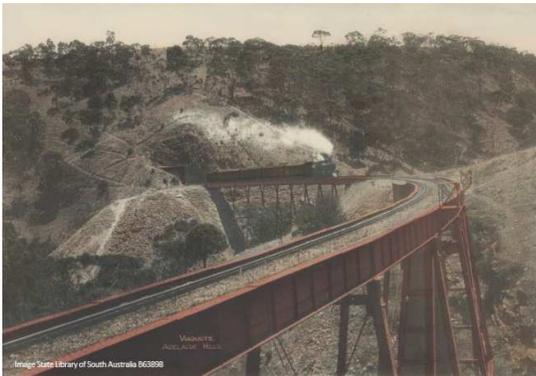
The white house facing Barrett's Road was the crossing keeper's house. As there were no gates at the crossing the keeper would signal approaching trains with a red lantern at night and red flag during the day.

5. Lynton Station

Alight here for the Lynton to Belair bike trails. Between Lynton and Eden Hills remnants of the many quarries which operated prior to WW2 are visible. Quarried stone was transported from the quarries in cable trucks, tipped into huge crushers and loaded onto railway trucks. Just after leaving the station note the heritage listed arches on the left hand side which supported the processing plant.

6. As you emerge from the long tunnel

Look back on the right hand side to see the remains of the Sleeps Hill tunnels and two steel viaducts which crossed the gullies. The viaducts were dismantled when the line was upgraded to two tracks. The decommissioned tunnels now on private property were used for growing mushrooms in the 1930s and for storing State Records and museum artefacts during WW2 and army munitions post WW2. The Sleeps Hill tunnel and viaduct foundations are state heritage places.



The steel viaducts up to 120 metres long x 32 metres high. Despite regular safety checks the height and flimsy appearance of the viaducts concerned many. Even the rail contractor refused to test the viaducts strength on completion, insisting the Commissioner of Railways undertake the first engine crossing.

7. Eden Hills Station

Just before the station on the left hand side an uphill siding stopped runaway trains. Three short blasts of a train whistle warned the signalman to switch to the siding. On the light hand side the three original railway cottages still sit above the station. Alight here to walk the viaduct track through Watiparinga Reserve. Leaving the station the flat area on the left hand side was the brickworks which made 8000 bricks a day for the tunnels. The brickworks operated until 1955 exporting bricks as far as Melbourne.

8. Wittunga Botanic Gardens

On the left hand side. In 1902 land agent Edwin Ashby established the family property 'Wittunga' as a showcase for Australian flora. His daughter Alison became a renowned botanical illustrator and conservationist and later donated part of the family property (now Watiparinga Reserve) to the National Trust. Edwin's son Keith continued his father's passion for native flora and donated Wittunga to the State.

9. Arrive Coromandel Station

Alight here for Wittunga and the Blackwood historical walk.

There was no platform in the 1920s. Passengers flagged the train down and clambered on board using steps lowered from the train. Originally called Brighton Parade it was re-named Coromandel after WW2.

10. Pass under Coromandel Parade Bridge

The brick walls either side of the track are the remains of an original single rail tunnel. (see photo overleaf) The biggest construction camp for the new Hills line was located here.

11. Arrive Blackwood Station

Blackwood Station was the first station to be opened in the Hills. With the improved link to Adelaide Blackwood became a desirable place to live and houses and shops soon sprung up in the area.

12. The Belair Hotel

Look left just before Glenalta Station. The hotel was first licensed as the Blackwood Inn in 1869. A new two story hotel was designed in 1880 by HC Richardson a founding member of the South Australian Institute of Architects.

13. Glenalta Station

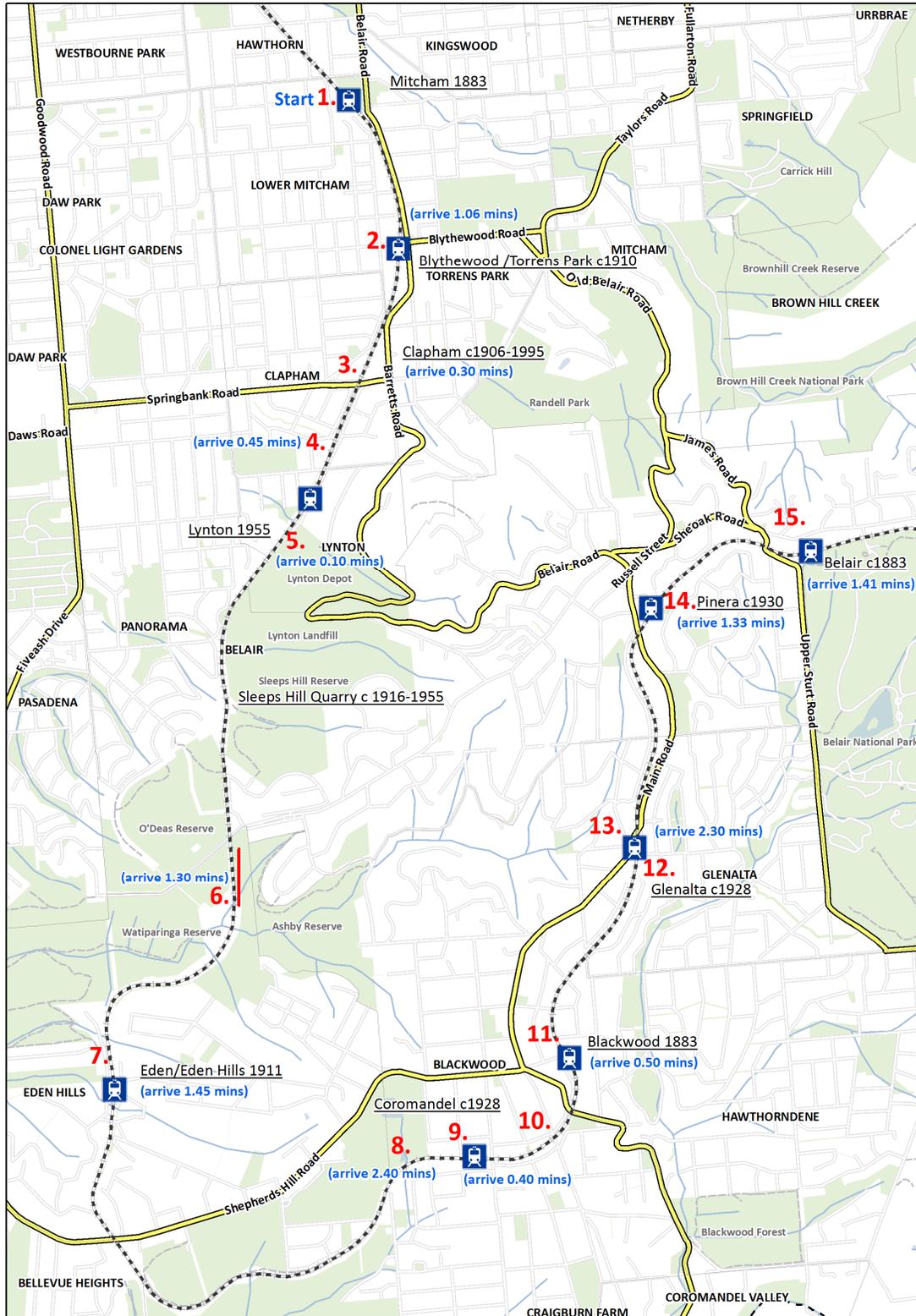
At the Belair Road crossing a telephone was installed c.1911 so crossing keepers did not have to rely on timetables to predict when the next train would come. The crossing keeper's house was on the right hand side of the station at the Hills end. There were very few houses in this area at the time.

14. Pinera Station

One of SA's worst rail disasters occurred on 1 February 1928 just by the road overpass. Six rail workers were killed and three seriously injured when the tunnel they were demolishing for an open cutting collapsed after heavy rain. The Belair Police Station was located on Main Road just beyond the overpass on the left hand side. There were only two officers to keep order in the Mitcham Hills. Only two men could be locked up at a time, so often the troopers had to chain wrong-doers to nearby trees.

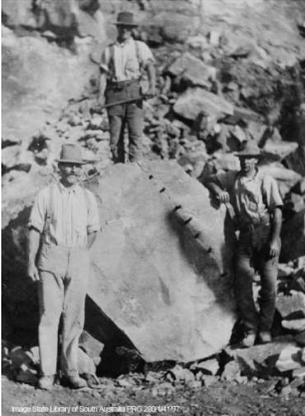
15. Belair Station

Was originally the station for Government Farm, which by the time the Hills Railway opened in 1883 was a popular tourist spot. The original station facilities comprised a ticket office and a signal cabin. Belair is the only timber station on the Hills line. The railway buildings on Sheoak Road the stationmaster house and signalman's cottage are now part of the St John's Primary School campus. Huge crowds of up to 1000 visited the National Park on weekends and public holidays. Three stations served Belair National Park – firstly Belair Station, then Long Gully followed by National Park Station. Alight here for walks through Belair National Park.



INTERPRETIVE PANELS AT MITCHAM STATION

We Built the Railway



The men who built the railway came from Europe, England, Scotland, Ireland and Scandinavia. The construction camps they lived in were wild places. Sly grog sellers, prostitutes, thieves, conmen and card-sharps lived on the edges. With all the heavy drinking and gambling after work, fights often broke out and there were several deaths.

We sorted mail on the train



Mail was sorted into bags ready for delivery at each station as the train travelled along. At Blackwood station, mail delivered by train was transferred to a coach service for delivery to outer lying communities. Railways had their own telegraph network to communicate with one another. This was particularly important along the single Hills rail line.

We left for the War at Mitcham



During WW1, soldiers training at the nearby Mitcham Camp marched up Wattlebury Avenue to Mitcham Station bound for the troop ships at Outer Harbor. Hundreds of locals would farewell them at Mitcham Station. From 1915 - 1918 over 30,000 South Australian soldiers trained at the Mitcham Camp located in the suburb of Colonel Light Gardens.

My Dad grew mushrooms in the tunnels



The single track Sleeps Hill tunnels were closed in 1919 when the line was upgraded to a double track. In 1933 Eric Cox leased the disused rail tunnels for commercial mushroom growing. Eric, his wife and their youngest daughter Cynthia lived in a small shack by the tunnels during the week. The business failed five years later when a fungus infected the soil.

I was Mitcham's last stationmaster



Bruce Jaensch was the Mitcham Stationmaster for nine years until 1986. When the Adelaide Hills line commenced operating the rail service was very labour intensive. At the main stations, railway staff lived at the Class One stations or in railway cottages nearby. As stations became more automated and signals were centralised, staffed stations were phased out in suburban Adelaide.



Original single Rail tunnel under Coromandel Parade Blackwood c.1897. The Rev. Robert Mitchell stands in the centre.