

# Full steam ahead for Pichi Richi anniversary

One of Australia's most treasured heritage railways is about to reach an important milestone. July 2023 will mark 50 years since the Pichi Richi Railway Preservation Society was formed to save the first section of what later became The Ghan line to the Northern Territory.



A new railway opened in 1879, connecting Port Augusta and Quorn via the Pichi Richi Pass. It was intended to be the first stage of a scheme that would eventually link Port Augusta to Darwin, however it took another 50 years for the narrow-gauge line to reach only as far as Alice Springs. By then Quorn and the Pichi Richi railway were already part of what became the Trans-Australian Railway, crossing the Nullarbor Plain to Kalgoorlie.

For almost 70 years, trains using the Pichi Richi line hauled people, coal, troops, livestock, minerals and agricultural products. But the line was closed to regular traffic in 1957, after a new standard gauge track was laid from Stirling North to Brachina and on to Maree. By the early 1970s, the infrastructure was falling into disrepair. Spurred by a rumour that the Commonwealth Railways intended to dispose of the track, local people as well as heritage and railway enthusiasts from further afield gathered at a public meeting in Port Augusta's Cooina Hall.

## PICTURED

Clockwise, from top left: Under the sign at Pichi Richi (from left) Malcolm McKay, Keith and Max Munchenberg, Bill Zidov, Geoff Annear, Ken Tunnah and Ken Pearce, 1974 (courtesy Steve McNicol); the Coffee Pot (courtesy Arnold Krueger); a volunteer train crew with the society's NM class locomotive (courtesy PRRPS).







The meeting on 22 July 1973 voted to establish the Pichi Richi Railway Preservation Society (PRRPS), with the objectives of preserving the historic dry-stone walls and bridges along the original track. However, the society soon extended its ambitions, deciding to operate heritage trains using steam locomotives and rolling stock. Volunteers ran the first steam-powered train in July 1974, just 12 months after the society was formed.

Since then, the Pichi Richi Railway has become a significant tourist experience in the Flinders Ranges, attracting around 10,000 passengers a year. In 2021, it was named best tourist attraction in the annual South Australian Tourism Awards. The railway is operated entirely by volunteers, who are committed to conserving, restoring and maintaining the authentic heritage railway, which runs trains from March to November.

A unique experience scheduled just four times a year is a trip on the Coffee Pot, one of the most historic vehicles in the society's collection. Built in England and known as Steam Motor Coach No. 1, the vehicle started service in 1906, making three trips a week to Port Augusta and one to Hawker, hauling a four-wheel van carrying parcels and mail. The steam motor spent its entire working life based at the Quorn Depot. It was nicknamed the Coffee Pot after railwaymen chalked the words 'Coffee' and 'Cocoa' on two water barrels that had been placed on the running boards to provide a spare water supply.

The vehicle was withdrawn from service in 1932 and kept under cover in the carpenters shop at Quorn until the depot was dismantled in the mid-1950s. In 1960 it was transferred to Alice Springs, where it was placed on static display, under the care of the National Trust (Northern Territory). In 1975, the National Trust relinquished control so the vehicle could be returned to Quorn. The last operating example of its type in the world, the Coffee Pot returned to service in 1984 following extensive restoration.

A registered charity, the society has relied on the generosity of donors and visitors since its formation half a century ago to help cover all costs associated with this extraordinary effort.



## 50th Anniversary Events

Two special events are planned to celebrate the Pichi Richi Railway Preservation Society's 50th anniversary. On Saturday 22 July, a short movie will premiere as part of the spectacular award-winning Quorn Silo Light Show. The movie tells some of the history of the Pichi Richi Railway and the achievements of its volunteers. The free event is open to the public, with the light show beginning just after sunset.

Following the silo show an anniversary dinner will be held in the Quorn Town Hall for members and supporters. Three of the key lobbyists who helped form the society are no longer alive, however it is hoped the families of Reg Mayes (inaugural president), L. Quentin Smith (secretary) and Trevor Ward (treasurer) will attend.

Regular train services will also be running during the July school holidays, with the Pichi Richi Explorer scheduled to depart Quorn at 10am on Sunday 23 July, during the 50th anniversary weekend.

**For more information about the society and the railway, visit [pichirichirailway.org.au](http://pichirichirailway.org.au), or for information about the light show go to [quornsilolightshow.info](http://quornsilolightshow.info)**



### PICTURED

Clockwise, from top left: Campaigning to save the railway (from left) Max Sayer, Reg Mayes, L. Quentin Smith and Trevor Ward, c. 1973 (PRRPS archives); volunteer guard Bronwyn Ingram on board with two young passengers (courtesy Damien Butler); the historic Quorn railway station with locomotive Yx141 (courtesy PRRPS).