

# EAST GIPPSLAND'S GRAND DESIGN

How do you transform a disused rail line into a prized tourist attraction and public space? If a rail trail was on television's Grand Designs or Restoration Australia, the storyline could read something like this...

*"A majestic, neglected dwelling captures the hearts of passionate people with only basic construction expertise, a tight budget and very little time around their weekday jobs. Throw in a natural disaster or two, followed by some planning issues with council, interspersed with some fascinating local history. Somehow, they succeed with volunteer labour and find the funds to employ contractors for the specialist work. At the end of the episode, the renovated home is mostly finished but probably over budget."*

The group behind the East Gippsland Rail Trail in Victoria are proud their "Grand Design" was on time and on budget, unlike most home renovation projects.

Former committee chairperson, Michael Oxer, became involved when he relocated from Melbourne to build his own home at Nicholson, east of

Bairnsdale. A stalwart of the rail trail scene, Michael was involved with the establishment of Rail Trails Australia. The East Gippsland Rail Trail committee, founded by members of a local Rotary group, persuaded him to join their movement. These pioneers included Bob Yeates, a fourth-generation editor of the Bairnsdale Advertiser.

"Looking at some of the New South Wales and Queensland trails today - including the proposed Maryborough to Castlemaine trail - you are looking at

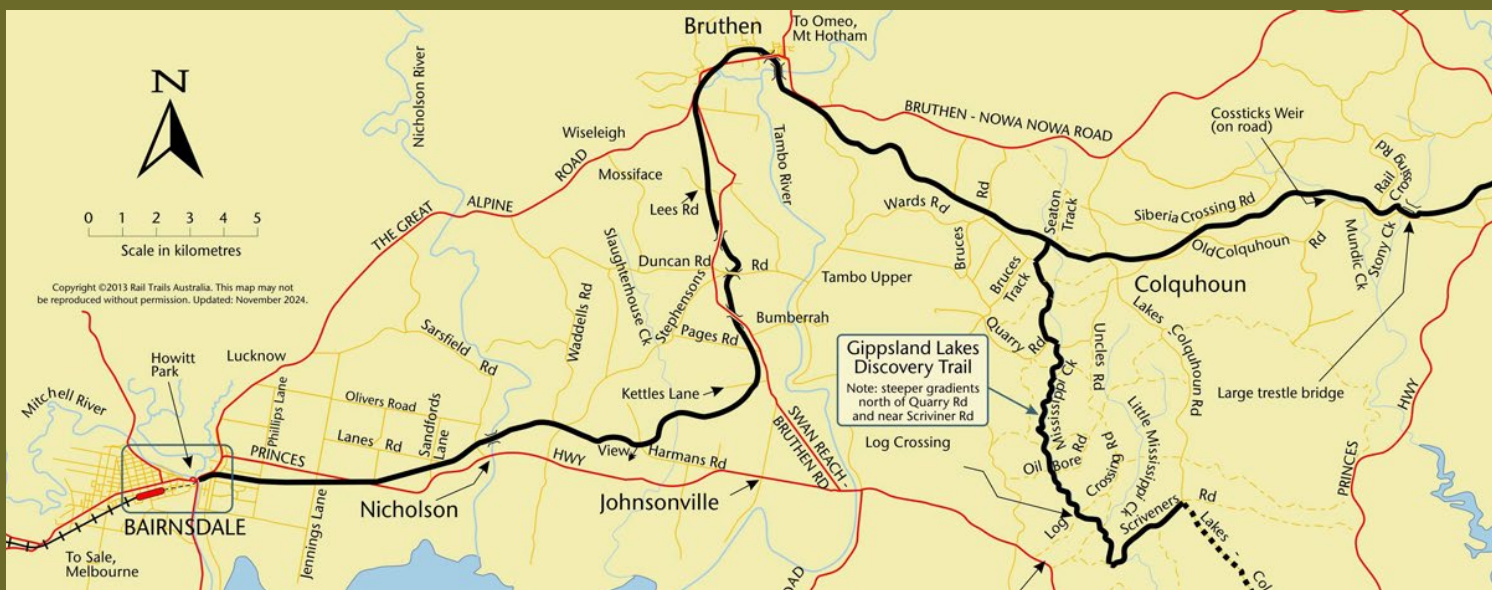
millions of dollars. It was hundreds of thousands of dollars that initially got our trail up and running," reflects Michael Oxer. He says the cost was managed by engaging local contractors for the heavy work, allowing volunteers to focus on revegetation and beautification projects.

Like an historic homestead, the rail line's timber bridges were crumbling and would have been hideously expensive to restore to their full glory. Some tough decisions resulted in certain bridges being detoured, so trail users can appreciate their majesty and history without the eye-watering price tag of a full restoration.

"The trail was becoming established," Michael recalls of the early years. "Local support was strong. It was starting to have a tourist benefit."

The environment, which is enjoyed by visitors and locals alike, presented an

Former and existing long term members of the volunteer Committee of Management receiving awards in 2019 at one of their shelters. Janice Preston, Al Campbell, John Nelson, Andrew Sharpe and Michael Oxer. Janice and Al accepted an award for the whole committee. John, Andrew and Michael chalked up a total of 54 years! Photo: Michael Oxer



Restoring the iconic Stony Creek bridge was out of the question. Photo: Trish Fox

ongoing risk to trail infrastructure, including damage to timber bridges by storms and bushfires. Another challenge was early adopters of the trail who were not recreational users they were local drivers utilising it as a back route home from the pub. "When the line was closed, a lot of it was ripped up, so it became a sort of gravel path and it started to be used by local people. We ended up having quite a problem of people driving on the trail and often causing quite a lot of damage," explains Michael. "There was a big job trying to get people to understand that this was a significant asset. If it got knocked around, people were not going to make use of it."



Current committee member Andrew Sharpe loves the atmosphere of the Colquhoun State Forest east of Bruce Road. "I think maybe because it's close to the highest point on the trail and is a bit open, sunny and drier which is enjoyable for resting, camping or picnicking," Andrew says. "The East Gippsland Rail Trail is so nice because you go through many long sections of forest well away from noisy highways and towns. There's usually native animals and birds to see and you can really find serenity."

Interactions with wildlife are largely positive, although Andrew recounts a yarn about an entrant in a cycling event who was writing an article about their experience. "In a freak and extremely unlikely accident, the participant fell off their bicycle and landed on a snake! It was unknown if they were bitten as they also had blood from grazes. The medical staff checked them out and all was fine. I don't believe they wrote about that in their article, as enough people freak out about snakes as it is!"

Twenty-five years since its establishment, Andrew describes the benefits to the region as "enormous" in the "big picture" of East Gippsland tourism. "The local towns love the trail users who cycle and walk into their businesses and happily enjoy purchasing food and souvenirs," he says.

Andrew's advice to other budding rail trail groups is to nominate a dedicated grant writer to streamline sourcing funds and enlist the help of friends' groups to share the workload. He would like to see more diverse facilities on the trail catering to a range of users, such as an accompanying mountain bike track or a dedicated horse path parallel with the trail.

**David McAlpine**

**Ed:** Recent upgrade achievements of the committee were also covered in the Autumn edition of *Connections*.

Current secretary Trish Fox gave an emotional talk at the recent Rail Trails Conference (page 8) about the challenges that a volunteer based Committee of Management face with no guaranteed funding. This is similar for quite a few other rail trails, especially in Victoria. RTA is working on following this up.

