

# The Mirboo North - Boolarra Rail Trail



Walk The Line



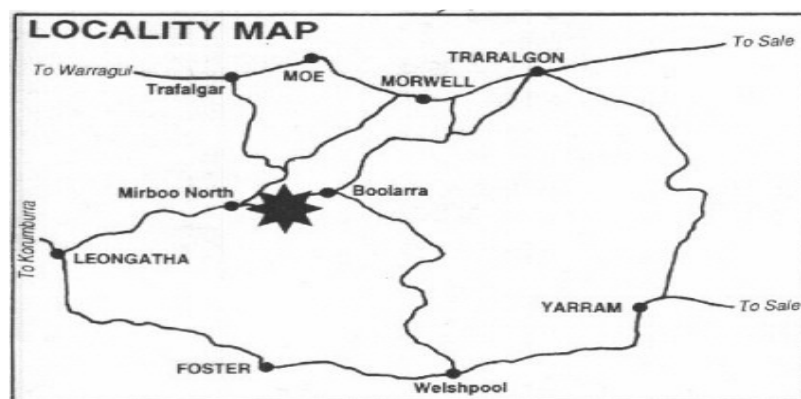
*A rail trail rich in historical significance and natural beauty.*

The Mirboo North/Boolarra Rail Trail wends 13 picturesque kilometres between two lovely rural towns located in the Strzelecki Ranges in Gippsland. As a rail-trail it is unique in being continuously along the site of the railway track, and having end points easily accessible within the two towns, and also having easy access along the track at the township of Darlimurla.

## The Walk

The walk itself is approximately 12 km from Mirboo North to Boolarra. It takes four hours to complete the walk one way. A two car shuffle can be employed to leave a car at either end. It is approximately 20 minutes by car between the two towns. A shorter walk can be done by starting/finishing at Darlimurla which is roughly half way between the two towns. The walk itself is of an easy standard, although there are two bridges with numerous steps down to them between Darlimurla and Boolarra.

At the Mirboo North end the walk commences at the rear of the Mirboo North Brewery (Victoria's only boutique brewery, and a great spot for a thirst quencher after the walk). At Darlimurla the walk commences where Old Darlimurla Rd joins Darlimurla Rd, while at Boolarra the walk begins immediately opposite the newsagency and Post Office. The whole of the rail trail is rich in historical significance and natural beauty. Your co-operation in preserving this by not littering or damaging the area is greatly appreciated.



## History of the Rail Trail

The railway between Morwell and Mirboo North was approved for construction by the Victorian parliament in November 1880, as the result of a great deal of local agitation by the local settlers. Roads in the area at the time were virtually non-existent, and it was difficult for settlers to bring their families and supplies in, and almost impossible to send produce out in an economic manner. Construction began in January 1883 by Mr John S White; by March the workers were striking for better conditions and pay (although they were being paid the set scale of 7/6 , or 75c, per day). By May work had almost ceased due

to bad weather and industrial strife, and Mr White found the works were costing a great deal more than calculated, despite the fact that the bulk of the work done had been along the "easy" portion of the track between Morwell and Yinnar. In June 1880 his contract was cancelled.

A new contractor was not appointed until 17 January 1883, and Mr John Robb was quickly on the job, as the contract called for the line to be finished by January 1884. A construction camp developed at the "12 mile peg" , and a school inspector found 32 children of school age, 31 of them from railway families. This settlement became the present-day township of Boolarra. Interestingly, the planned terminus of the new railway was in open farmland, about 1 1/2 miles (2 km) from the existing town of Mirboo. A new town sprung up around the terminus and became known (eventually) as Mirboo North. Mirboo faded into insignificance, and became known as Baromi, while the name Mirboo now applies to a region six miles (9Km) to the Southeast.

Work soon bogged down due to the difficult terrain and the very wet weather. The Strezlecki's later became known as the "Heartbreak Hills" due to the difficulty of eking a living from the steep, thickly forested, sodden and remote country, and no doubt John Robb would have endorsed the name as he struggled yard by yard to complete the construction. The surveyed route did not follow the contours, but necessitated immense cuttings and massive embankments to be made to reduce the gradient to workable levels, and the building of 29 bridges in 20 miles to cope with the watercourses along the way. The effort involved in completing these constructions with all power supplied by horse and manpower, surrounded by dense bush and constant rain, is difficult to comprehend today. John Robb's self-sufficiency is indicated by his locating a source of ballast rock near Yinnar and building a spur line and mining the required material for the railway, and likewise the development of a brick kiln at Darlimurla to produce bricks for use in the many culverts which are a feature of the line.

The railway from Morwell to Boolarra opened on 10 April 1885, and to Darlimurla (at the 16 mile peg) on 8 September 1885. The whole line was formally declared open on 7 January 1886, amidst great celebration in Mirboo North. An official banquet was held, with a special train from Melbourne bringing prominent politicians and railway officials. Typically, it poured non-stop, but apparently this could not dampen the festivities.

The railway operated for 88 years, with the last train being run on 22 June 1974 as a special celebration event. It contributed significantly to the opening up of the area to settlement, allowing the economic transportation of produce which encouraged the development of new industries in the area. The products railed out of the area included from Mirboo North timber, bauxite, potatoes, chaff, hay and black coal (between 1929-30) and rabbits, from Darlimurla, timber and rabbits, and from Boolarra, bauxite, milk products (1900's-1940's), timber, especially blackwood, willow for cricket bats, rabbits and coal.

It also was a major means of transportation for people for many years. The peak year was 1890 when there was 769 passengers from Hazelwood, 4614 from Yinnar, 6074 from Boolarra , 3006 from Darlimurla and 8954 from Mirboo North, a total of 23417. Patronage dropped as roads became better, and as cars became more common; in 1923 there were 15566, in 1936 3577 and by 1966 only 1694.

The railway also contributed to the social fabric of the community it served, with special trains being run for races, football games and sports gatherings, and on one memorable occasion to bring a contingent of American sailors from the "Great White Fleet" which visited Melbourne in 1908.

The railway itself was 20 miles (32 Km) long, from Morwell to Mirboo North. There were stations at Hazelwood (2 miles from Morwell), Yinnar (7 miles), Boolarra (12 mile peg), Darlimurla (16 mile peg) and Mirboo North (20 miles). In addition there were small sidings developed to service mines and timber mills as required. The remains of Skinner's siding can be seen approximately one mile (1.6 Km) east of Darlimurla. Between Morwell and Boolarra there is an altitude rise of 20 feet (6 M), and from Boolarra to Mirboo North a rise 494 feet (240 M).