

MEMBER COMMENTS AND NEWS

Six Months in Bairnsdale Division – 50 Years Ago - by John Smelt

Firstly, a short history of my time with the organisation.

After completing a Civil engineering degree at Monash University, I commenced work in CRB Traffic Engineering Division in January 1975. From Mid 1976 I had four stints of six months in Bairnsdale, Plans and Surveys (twice) and Road Planning Divisions.

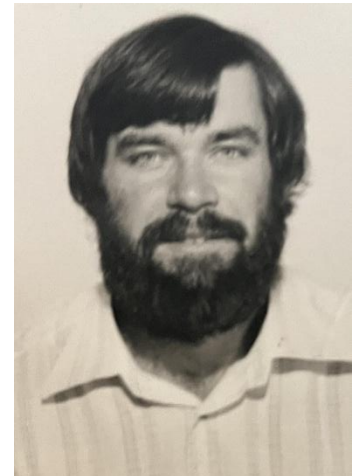
I returned to Traffic Engineering in Mid-1978 to develop the strategic aspects of the SCRAM signal system. From early 1982 to April 1984, I was seconded to the Ministry of Transport and worked on transport planning projects.

I returned to the RTA Traffic Strategies Group. This role was wide ranging and included developing a user-based program structure. In 1987 I became the District Traffic Engineer for about one third of regional Victoria.

With the establishment of VicRoads in 1989, I moved into the Regional Services Support Team and worked on technical and corporate programs and projects, including setting up a queuing and data recording system for Registration and Licensing offices.



John in 2025



John in 1976

From 1993 I enjoyed eight years in Northern Region, Bendigo, in positions including Business Services and Program Development Managers. In 2001 I left VicRoads to work in the State's Planning Department on strategic land use projects in regional Victoria until I retired in 2012.

My wife, Elizabeth Heathcote, also a transport professional, worked at VicRoads from 1989 on strategic planning projects and, when we moved to Bendigo, on road planning and road safety projects and programs and also retired in 2012.

We retain an active interest in traffic, transport and land use activities and have retired to the Bellarine Peninsula.

Bairnsdale Division 1976

It was a frosty but sunny morning at the start of July 1976 as I walked into the Bairnsdale Division Office of the CRB. I had been successful in obtaining a place on the Young Engineers' Training Scheme and Bairnsdale was my first six-month stop. I was looking forward to working out in the bush in one of the best parts of Victoria.

I was greeted by the Assistant Divisional Engineer, Wally Dyall, and the senior engineer for works, Bill Bell.

They described Bairnsdale Division. By Victorian standards it is remote with only 50,000 people. Sale and Bairnsdale are the largest towns. It is over 300km from west

On arrival we were greeted by the project engineer, David McInnes and acting overseer Sandy. The overseer is on site all the time, the responsible engineer visits a few times a week as they may have other jobs and responsibilities. David briefed us about the job and how it was progressing. He finished with 'have you got anywhere to live?' I mentioned the Sandhill Camp. He said, no, 'that's not much, you can come and stay at my place until you find a place of your own'. That sounded much better.

The job was a commutable distance from Bairnsdale, so each morning two Hi-Ace vans picked up the gang from their homes and travelled to the site. 'Be waiting outside your place by 6am each morning starting tomorrow was the message to me as well!' We returned to Bairnsdale about 6pm Monday to Thursday and 2pm on Fridays.

Some days we went via Bruthen and other days via Lakes Entrance depending on who we had to pick up. It was quite spectacular as the days grew longer to see the sun rise over the sea as we came down the hill into Lakes Entrance.

The men in the gang were mainly in their 40s and 50s, with a few younger and older. Most had worked 'on the Board' for a long time, although others had previously worked on farms or in timber mills. On the bus, they made me feel welcome even though I didn't know much about the local football teams and local wildlife, especially birds, and I wasn't a fisherman. They were the main topics of conversation in the bus apart from talking about who was being moved to which jobs. It seemed the men could be sent to any location in the Division as needed, often at short notice. Over the weeks in the bus, I had time to gain some understand of their way of life.

On site I undertook a range of activities like levelling, teaching levelling and learning about the plant and how to use it efficiently and effectively. I learnt early on how skilled the road workers were in their jobs. A good overseer is vital too.

The most impressive skill is that of the grader operator. The grader is a piece of equipment that shapes the road and the operator is a sculptor using the flexibility of its blade to create a smooth, safe road based on a mixture of cross fall, grade and curvature.

I saw the pride and care the road gang members and engineers had for their work on their highways. Life on site certainly was different from a comfortable office in Kew.



The Simpsons Creek project in 1976



Overseer Sandy checking for soft material on the Simpsons Creek project

Somewhere to live

Living in David's house worked out well. It was also an opportunity to talk about the job and the area. David's house was sparsely furnished so my CRB camping kit came in handy. On my first night in Bairnsdale, I slept soundly in my CRB bedding, on my CRB bed and CRB mattress. After some months I moved to a rented flat on the shore of Lake King in Paynesville, a magnificent location.

The weekdays were busy and, combined with the early starts, meant evenings were quiet and short. On weekends, I had friends come and visit, hung out with friends in Sale, explored the area or went back to Melbourne.

Back in Bairnsdale by 2pm on Fridays

One very important rule in the Division was that all Bairnsdale based gangs had to be back in town by 2pm on Friday for personal business and services. Weekly work hours were adjusted to meet this requirement. This was 1976 so there were no electronic banking and businesses and shops were keeping 9 to 5 [only on Monday to Friday].

On Friday afternoons, I also need to go down the street. I would hardly recognise men from the gang, now all cleaned up and dressed up for town.

Road building materials search

After several months, I left the Simpsons Creek job to search for road building materials for the next job. It was the reconstruction and widening of about 4 to 5 km of the Princes Highway in the locality of Manorina, 130km from Bairnsdale, between Orbost and Cann River.

The materials search initially required finding records or talking to people with knowledge of where previous gravel had been obtained for the Forest Commission and others as well as the CRB.

Being this far east, we were in very dense bush. There was an upper storey of big trees and a lower storey of thick vegetation of all sorts which made movement through it very difficult and also difficult to see ahead or to the ground.

I initially travelled out from Bairnsdale each day with Steve Prosser from the Division's laboratory and one of the field construction crew, who dug holes efficiently. After a while I learnt what to look for so Steve stayed in the lab to analyse the previous day's samples.

When we found a promising location, we called in a backhoe and operator to dig further.



Searching for road building materials east of Orbost in 1976

After some weeks we found good material. Holes dug by the backhoe confirmed this. The site had been a gravel pit a long time ago and was now covered in thick vegetation above head height with a lot of medium to large trees spread through it. We needed to ascertain the extent of the good material. We pushed our way through the undergrowth and put pegs in a grid for sample holes.

Based on the samples from the grid I was able to calculate the amount of good material. It proved to be extensive enough so, after obtaining Forest Commission approval and doing quite a bit of work on the track into it to take many truck trips, the pit was ready to open up.

A very big, hired dozer (Caterpillar D9) arrived in dramatic style on a float covered in flags, due it being an over dimensional load. The contractor fired the machine up and it made its first cut. Bush, trees and whatever else were flying in all directions.

After a while, the contractor stopped and let fly with a long list of expletives. Most of the expletives referred to snakes. We saw that there were three or four unhappy snakes just in one small area he had just cleared.

I'm thinking to myself I almost blindly was pushing through that very dense bush last week. The contractor continued with the expletives basically saying that he wasn't going to get off his bulldozer for anything! We sat in our 4WD more than usual that day.

That was one of many run ins with snakes.

Manorina and Bemm River

In October it was time to move most of the Simpsons Creek road gang out to start the job on the Princes Highway at Manorina as the Simpsons Creek job was pretty well finished.

Manorina was located in thick bush and really consisted of only a few buildings. There was also a basic service station because with a couple of petrol pumps and shop which sold lollies, but not much else.



The Manorina project in 1976

It was no longer feasible to do it as a daily commute, so accommodation had to be found. The nearest suitable accommodation was at the Bemm River Hotel, 22 km down the Sydenham Inlet Road. The tiny, quiet town of Bemm River is on the shore of a large, beautiful lake – Sydenham inlet and is popular with fishers.

The small pub had some basic accommodation in huts, but these were rarely occupied. Accommodating and feeding about 12 or so road workers, including me, from Monday night to Friday morning over many months was a challenge for the pub. So, it was arranged that the wife of one of the roadworkers would work in the hotel with the publican's wife to feed the workers and generally house keep. There wasn't any trouble. It was agreed that the publican was a pretty tough character, not to be messed with.

About 5 other members of the road gang stayed in caravans on site at Manorina. A spot for the caravans was found near the petrol outlet and vegetation cleared. The ground was very muddy, and the caravans became bogged as they were being put into place.

The men requested pathways clear of the mud to access the ablutions van and to enter and exit the area. Their request was not acted on and this escalated into an industrial dispute with a visit from the union representative. After a meeting it was agreed that the CRB would provide crushed rock paths, which seemed the reasonable thing to do.

The men who stayed on site were paid a camping allowance and provided their own food. In wilder days, not that long before 1976, men would just take a loaf of bread, a



Luxury CRB accommodation at Manorina in 1976

bottle of tomato sauce and a gun for rations. I think the people who stayed down at the pub didn't get any other allowances since the food and accommodation was provided by the CRB.

Life was quite pleasant at the end of the day when the Hi Ace arrived back in Bemm River. Many of the fellows went fishing before dinner. On occasions we had some of their freshly caught fish for dinner.

There wasn't any trouble. It was agreed that the publican was a pretty tough character, not to be messed with.

Communications

One major issue when working out at Manorina was communications. If vital equipment broke down the whole job could stop. It was urgent to message a fitter to come out. The fellow who lived in the house attached to the petrol outlet often slept during the day. It was agreed that he would leave the door to his house open so we could use his phone. We would go into his bedroom where he was sleeping away, take the phone away off his bed side table and go in the hallway shut the door and make reverse charges calls. A bit primitive but it worked!

Rain

Weather, particularly rain, has a major impact on roadworks and the roadworkers' job. East Gippsland, particularly east of Lakes Entrance, has a wet, often warmer east coast of Australia climate.

Wet weather for Head Office people means a remembering a jacket or umbrella and a bit of nuisance in walking from the cutting to the buildings before settling into a warm dry office. For most people their work role is unaffected.

However, for those CRB workers on site their whole day or week is completely changed by wet weather. They pivot from continuing to build the road to preserving what has been done by continually checking and clearing temporary drainage lines and maintaining a safe route for road users. When the rain stops it may take some time before the equipment can be usefully and safely put to work in the mud. Many days can be lost after major rainfall events.

For the workers, it is demoralising sitting in the bus or site huts for hours while the rain pours down watching good work being washed away. This is only broken by the need to go out into the weather to maintain drainage lines and keep the road safe for users.



Rain Damage on the Simpsons Creek project

On the Manorina project there was a significant weather-related incident. The project was running a bit behind schedule and the engineer in charge decided to attempt to speed things up by ripping a long section of existing road at one time. This was completed by the end of the day. The work gang retreated to Bemm River and the campsite. During the night we all heard rain beating down on the roof. Over breakfast some expressed concern.

When the gang from the pub arrived at Manorina a scene of organised chaos welcomed us. Queues of vehicles stretched from both ends of a sea of mud where the road had been yesterday.

Vehicles had become bogged in the exposed pavement which had turned into mud. Those gang members on site had been woken by angry motorists at about 1 am. By the time we arrived, emergency signing and a system were in place to get vehicles through.

Mobile plant was carefully towing vehicles, one at a time, for some hundreds of metres through the muddy ripped section. Due to the narrowness of the road this was a delicate task with two-way towing. Large vehicles mostly managed to make it through, although some needed rescuing, causing further delays. The traffic churned up the road material and water seeped in further.

This activity continued for most of the day, luckily the Highway was not too busy out there. On this morning, we didn't get the usual cheery wave from the Mallacoota mail van driver.

With more workers on site, work started on building a temporary sidetrack for all vehicles and this was eventually successful. Many drainage lines were dug to clear as much of the water as possible off the exposed road material.

It took nearly a fortnight to return the job to where it was on the evening before the heavy rain. A considerable amount of additional fill had to be brought in. There were also claims by motorists for damage and cleaning and general letters of complaint to be dealt with by the engineer.

At the end of this event several older members of the gang reminded us that we should have noticed the black cockatoos flying inland which, in East Gippsland, means serious rain is coming.

Snowy River Bridges

I had time out from the road projects to learn about the construction of new bridges for the PHE at Orbost across the Snowy River and its flood plain. The project was nearing completion.

The project was managed by a project team, independent of Bairnsdale Division and lead by Stan Jarvis. I was shown over the project by Senior Engineer David Jellie and Peter Ryan.

It was a big, busy project. Ashby's Gulch bridge across part of the flood plain was, at that time, one of the longest road bridges in Victoria. Many of the structural elements, including beams were fabricated on site. The beams and location of the bridge piers have been designed to maximise water flow in floods and minimise impact from large floating debris.

Bituminous Surfacing Gang

There was much speculation in the road gang about when the Bituminous Surfacing (BS) gang would start up and who would join it. In Bairnsdale Division the BS gang commenced road resealing in about late October, although the start date depended on coldness of the preceding months. The gang operated over the warmer months when the ground temperature enabled the seal to hold to the existing pavement. The BS gang was staffed by divisional workers and seasonal workers. Quite a lot of different items of plant are used requiring skilled operators. The spray gang worked long hours all over the division on CRB and council roads as well as resealing other areas such as the Bairnsdale airport runway.

I gained some understanding of how they operated from a few days with them.

Conclusion

Six months in the bush, out of the office stretched my comfort zone. I learnt an enormous amount about building roads. This was very useful background in later planning and financial roles. I also learnt a lot more about working with people and teams and appreciating the wide range of important skills they bring to jobs. This was important in all my later working environments and generally mixing with people.

I thank the people in Bairnsdale Division for explaining their work and for providing me with great experiences.

I apologise for errors and omissions as over 50 years the memories can blur.

John Smelt 23/5/2026