

Ipswich rail project helps keep history alive

It's a bright Ipswich morning, and a thirteen strong rail gang are keeping busy under a mild autumn sun.

Fasteners are first removed from suspect sleepers and the supporting ballast dug out with pelican picks, a tool engineered especially for the task at hand. The old sleepers are grabbed at one end by a worker with purpose-built forceps designed to guide their removal. At the other end, a worker drives the worn out sleeper from beneath the tracks with a sledge hammer. The team then measures and marks up the new sleeper, each weighing well over 100kg, and sees to its insertion to fill the vacant space. The sleeper is jimmied up by one worker, while another drills in the new fasteners – two enormous alloy screws offset from each other at an angle. Once completed, the ballast is replaced between the tracks.

It's time for the next sleeper. The supervisor, Dallas Crowe, is happy with the team's work – known as 'boodling' in rail jargon – and mostly there for quality control. He also likes reminding everyone to keep hydrated. The team look like they've been doing this all their lives.

It's hard to believe then that the members of this well-oiled machine are newcomers to the game – participants in a Certificate II in Rail Infrastructure course delivered by Energy Skills Queensland (ESQ) in partnership with from Centre for Excellence in Rail Training (CERT). Dallas is their trainer and under his supervision, participants labour on a stretch of rail extending from the historic Swanbank Railway Station, which is the home of the Queensland Pioneer Steam Railway (QPSR), a not-for-profit volunteer-based organisation dedicated to keeping the region's rich rail heritage alive through guided weekend steam train tours.

The arrangement is a win-win scenario, says Dallas.

"After covering the theory and doing some initial practical training at The Workshops Rail Museum in Ipswich, we had the golden opportunity to come out here. It's just great, serving different purposes at once. The Pioneer Railway relies on volunteer workers for everything you see here today. Maintaining an operation like this without funding is extremely difficult. And then you look at what we've got for our training participants – it's real work. It makes perfect sense. These guys are gaining brilliant experience. This is an absolute bonus doing this," Dallas says.

Rob Shearer, Chairman of the Queensland Pioneer Steam Railway agrees.

"We only survive on the money that comes in through the train trips. It's only about six thousand dollars a run. If you look at the sleepers we're replacing here today, they go at \$77 a sleeper. It all costs, and it's only our volunteers that keep us going," says Rob.

"So having these students here makes life a bit easier because our other volunteers can keep working on the steam engines while the track keeps going thanks to these guys. And they're learning on the job while they're training. It's mutually beneficial. The students have been great, they're just good hard workers. It's been really good. And they're mostly living just nearby in Ipswich, so there's a real local connection there as well," he says.

The future of the Pioneer Railway is not the only history the ESQ program has a shot of preserving. For several participants, the story of railway in Queensland already courses through their veins.

Ammon Rose stands to join the fourth generation of family members steeped in the railway industry, commencing with his great grandmother in Southwest Queensland. But it was the story of his grandmother who followed in her mother's footsteps that sparked off a proud family tradition.

"She really joined Queensland Rail out of necessity after my grandfather died. Back then, the policy of Queensland Rail was that a widow had to be offered a job. So she was offered a position as a Station Mistress as they were called back in those days. My grandmother was a widow with eight children, which was a tough spot, especially back in those days. So that's how she got a job," Ammon says.

"And then my uncle and aunt, since they were the youngest of the eight siblings, basically when they weren't at school, they'd have to be with my grandmother, so they'd naturally be at the station with her. She taught them a lot of what they needed to know about the railway. At times they even found themselves in a classroom environment taught by QR officials about how to run stations, about what to do in the case of emergency, and all that. So they just grew up around that as well."

Ammon rattles off more than a dozen family members who have occupied roles ranging from signal conductors and engineers, to guards, drivers and station masters, and in places ranging from Bundamba to Mackay to Stanthorpe and everywhere in between. His brother has just recently joined QR's ranks.

"I've obviously been exposed to the influence of all that, and by my mother and older brother as well. They've all been an inspiration to me," Ammon says.

Indigenous participant, Krystle Ghee, is also a proud descendant of Queensland Rail workers. She recently left a productive career in administration to build on this legacy.

"It's very physical, but it's good. I didn't think I'd get into this course because I'm from an admin background. But I was getting tired of what I was doing, and thought I'd love to give this a go. When they called and said I was in, I was so happy. It's been really enjoyable. And I like working in the outdoors. It's really good," Krystle says.

Her commitment to the course is obvious, including a two-hour round trip with her brother-in-law each day, who is also participating in the program.

"The drive is a big commitment, but it shows I can actually do this kind of stuff. You don't think you have it in you when you have a nine-to-five desk job, but when you actually get out here and do it, you realise it's in you. You get physically stronger, you get used to the tools, you get used to the work. They say there's a lot of opportunity in rail, so it's pretty exciting for me right now," she says.

But the story of program trainer, Dallas Crowe, takes the cake. As the great grandson of a Queensland Rail worker, Dallas has knocked up six generations, and says the history of the railway has some valuable lessons to teach this new generation of workers.

"In its day, Queensland Rail employed 17,000 people. Biggest employer in the state, it was. If you looked at any of the towns further out from the city, they were real rail towns. Those towns couldn't have survived if they didn't have the rail, because the roads were pretty average in those days. A lot of the blokes back in those days, they left school when they were twelve or thirteen, they had to get jobs to support their families," Dallas says.

“As long as they could swing a pick and do a day’s work, the rail had a job for them. If you showed aptitude in the field, they’d look after you. They’d educate you, they’d teach you, they taught you how to read and write and how to do things. And a lot of the blokes you look at now where they are, working in higher management and so on, they really started out like these guys learning on the job here today, not knowing much, some of them not knowing how to read or write, but they worked their way up.”

“I tell these guys here, all of them here, there’s always someone watching what you’re doing. And if you show initiative and keep working and look after your team, people take note of that, and they’ll keep you on board. There’s nothing more important that I try to instil in them than teamwork. Nobody who’s at the top of their game in anything ever got to where they are on their own. They get there because other good people have had their backs.”

“And these guys are already there. They’re a good crew, honestly, I cannot say that enough. They rally around each other, work hard, and look after each other’s backs.”



Participants in Intake 2 of MT03431 Career Start Rail Skills – Ipswich along the QPSR tracks, 2 April 2019