



## Alton Downs/Ridgeland Branch

As Rod Milne indicates in his 1988 article:

In a state where unremunerative branch lines were once quite common, the Alton Downs Line, in the Rockhampton district, shines like a beacon for sustained unprofitability. Built for all the wrong reasons in the wrong place at the wrong time, this 28.2 km branch line carried meagre loadings for almost its entire life, and was worked largely by railmotors after 1942.

The line was authorised in 1914 but construction didn't commence until October 1915, well after the start of WWI and as a drought was threatening in the Fitzroy basin. With sand as ballast and only four bridges of any size construction was easy and the line was opened in October 1916.

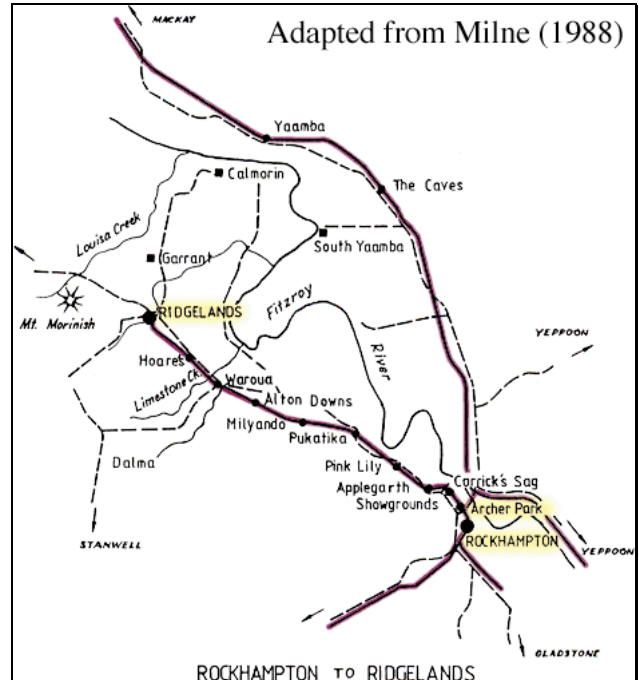
There had been agitation for the line for many years, particularly from the sugar farmers of the Alton Downs area, who wanted a central mill. Milne again:

The Alton Downs Line was probably an attempt to capitalise on the agricultural potential of the Fitzroy Valley, for it was anticipated that expansion of farming would occur with the impetus of improved transport. In time, these hopes proved groundless, as farmers slowly moved away from unprofitable maize and cotton growing to concentrate on dairying and light grazing.

An ongoing financial disaster, even a proposal to extend it a further 10.5 km to better serve the pastoral (cattle) interests did not get approval.

Involving a haul of some 321.8 km by rail to the nearest mill at Bundaberg for crushing, a sugar industry centred on the proposed rail head at Louisa Creek would scarcely be viable, even in those days of relatively low costs.

Stations and sidings on the line were minimal. Waroula and Alton Downs had station buildings, but otherwise only Ridgeland had much more than a single loop siding and a bank or ramp for loading. Showgrounds had stock races, for Show events; Ridgeland was laid out on a curve and included a canopy roofed station building, railway house, cream and goods sheds, cattle races and a fork line for reversing.



Railmotors were introduced in 1931 to cut costs and began to replace train services so that in 1942 most regular engine hauled services had been discontinued. Railmotor services could be replaced with trains when graziers had cattle to ship but were gradually discontinued as road transport became more popular. By 1955 and closure there were only four trips per week on the line, although some shunting of Showgrounds and Carrick's siding from Archer Park continued until 1968.

That the Alton Downs line continued for as long as it did is surely a miracle. Lingered merely to carry cream, a few parcels, and some 3000 head of cattle yearly from Ridgeland the Branch was never a success... Its retention for so many years was very much an act of benevolent neglect.

### Acknowledgements

Milne, Rod (1988). The Alton Downs Branch, *ARHS Bulletin*, 604: February, pp 28-34.

This article includes station and siding layouts, operational details, etc.