

The Great Emigration - Starting from Colwall Station, 15th March 1865 – Andy Ball

The 1850s and 1860s witnessed much railway building, not only in Great Britain, but also worldwide. This is an account of how local people from Colwall, and the surrounding towns and villages, departed from Colwall railway station in 1865 travelling across the world to Australia in one such venture. In doing so they joined the railway engineer Robert Ballard, a relative of Stephen Ballard the railway engineer responsible for building the railway line and station that they were leaving from.

An article from the Hereford Times from March 1865 reported that “On Wednesday morning the railway station was crowded with between 300 and 400 persons anxiously awaiting the arrival of the 9.16 train which was due to transmit the emigrants in readiness for their departure tomorrow to Queensland. All appeared in high spirits considering they were about to abandon their homes to which they were bound by the strongest ties of recollection and habit, to seek an unknown fortune in a land of strangers.”¹¹

During 1864 the Queensland government raised loans on the London market which allowed it to fund a lavish public works programme. Contracts were arranged for the construction of roads, railways, bridges and waterworks.



Included in these was the requirement for provision of a transport link between the inland sheep stations of the Darling Downs and the ports of Brisbane and Ipswich. Improved transport was a necessity due to the need to export wool and import supplies to the sheep stations. The residents of the Darling Downs needed an outlet to the sea and the Brisbane River, with its headwaters at Ipswich, provided this outlet. Following the opening up of the Moreton Bay district, with Brisbane at its centre, for settlement in the 1840s there had been fierce competition between Brisbane, on the coast, and Ipswich, to the West, inland. Brisbane became the capital city but Ipswich won the battle for the port terminus of the proposed new railway to the interior.

A bill was passed through the Queensland Parliament and tenders were sought for the construction of a new railway – the Southern and Western railway - originally from Ipswich

to Toowoomba to the West. The English firm of Peto, Brassey and Betts won the contract despite submitting the highest tender. They were successful since they were an experienced and reputable company.

The railway was a project of considerable difficulty and magnitude and there was a need for a large number of skilled and unskilled workers. The Queensland Government arranged for advertising in both Great Britain and Germany for workers who were offered free passage to Queensland on the Black Ball shipping line. Henry Jordan, the Queensland government's special immigration agent in London, was tasked with sending out as free immigrants "...all the navvies offered him by the agents of Peto, Brassey and Betts..."

The arrangements entered into by Jordan with the owners of the Black Ball shipping line provided that

- emigrants approved by the Queensland Office in London were to be conveyed to the Colony in such ships as were required by the Queensland Immigration regulations
- that for the carriage of free and assisted passengers the shipowners were to receive for each passenger carried an £18 land order and, in addition, a cash payment of £2.17.0 for passengers despatched to Moreton Bay
- that each year three ships were to sail from Glasgow and Liverpool
- that half of the whole emigration was to go direct to northern ports
- that at least three ships a year sailing from London were to call at Plymouth for passengers.ⁱⁱ

There are thought to have been around 150 emigrantsⁱⁱⁱ from the gathering on Colwall railway station and amongst them was George Kedward, born around 1839 at Ullingswick, Herefordshire. In the 1861 census he was recorded as being a resident of Mathon, married to Harriet (born c.1839). He was a house carpenter by trade.

Another emigrant was Henry Willis a labourer, born circa 1846, in Colwall. At the time of the 1861 census, he was living at The Stone, Colwall with his mother and four brothers.

Travelling by train from Colwall to London the emigrants joined the Black Ball line ship "Commodore Perry". She was a medium clipper ship built in North America in 1854 by Donald McKay, East Boston. Her dimensions were 202' x 42'1" x 28'5" and she had a tonnage of 1,964 tons.^{iv}



“Commodore Perry”. Image Source:

<https://freepages.rootsweb.com/~carrick/genealogy/Carrick/CommodorePerry.html>

The “Commodore Perry” departed from Gravesend for Moreton Bay (Brisbane) on 18th March 1865. The passenger lists for the voyage are unavailable (likely to have been destroyed) but from the Brisbane Courier dated 18th July 1865, reporting on the arrival of the “Commodore Perry” in Queensland, we know that there were “80 saloon passengers, about 56 in the second cabin, and 545 in the steerage. Among the latter were a number of navvies and other workmen from the railway.”^v

Conditions on the Black Ball Line ships taking assisted immigrants to Queensland were notoriously poor with cramped accommodation, wet bunks, shortages of food and water and mental hardship. Sanitary conditions were often primitive. With strong gales commonly endured in the Roaring Forties causing the necessity to batten down hatches, passengers were contained for days on end in dark, humid, stifling conditions. Under such conditions diseases could be rampant including measles and scarlatina, and the dreaded disease of sailing ships - typhoid.

Through the letters of Francis John Bushby, an English emigrant to Queensland, who was on the same passage on the “Commodore Perry” we get an idea of the conditions involved.^{vi} He and nine others were allocated a 9 foot square deck house and he was considered to be fortunate as this accommodation had some of the best lighting and ventilation on board.^{vii}

The number of immigrants arriving in Queensland at the time that the group left from Colwall, was sizeable with around 21,000 being brought to Queensland by the Black Ball Line in 1865 and 1866.^{viii} In order to make the voyages profitable on the return trip the bulk of cargoes carried from Moreton Bay to England by the Black Ball ships included wool, tallow, cotton, cedar, hides, skin and bones.^{ix}

The “Commodore Perry” was sighted off the coast of Queensland in Moreton Bay on Tuesday 27th June 1865 but due to the unfavourable weather conditions she was unable to reach the usual anchorage off the Brisbane River until 2nd July. She was one of the largest ships seen to-date at that location. Her journey from Gravesend to Moreton Bay had taken exactly one hundred days when counted from pilot to pilot.

A health-officer had visited the ship on 1st July. There had been seven deaths during the voyage from London and five births. Of the deaths named in the Brisbane Courier dated 18 July 1865 tragically George Kedward had died of Consumption on April 16th aged 26. Despite a Hereford Times article of 2nd September 1865 favourably reporting that of the emigrants who left Colwall on 15th March, only one (George Kedward) had died on the voyage to Queensland there was, in likely reality, more bad news. Two of George and his wife Harriet Kedward’s children passed away during the voyage. Alice Kedward, aged just one year and nine months, died of marasmus on May 23rd and Laura Kedward, infant, died of atrophy on May 11th.^x



Robert Ballard. Image Source: <http://ehwa.wikidot.com/people:ballard-robert>

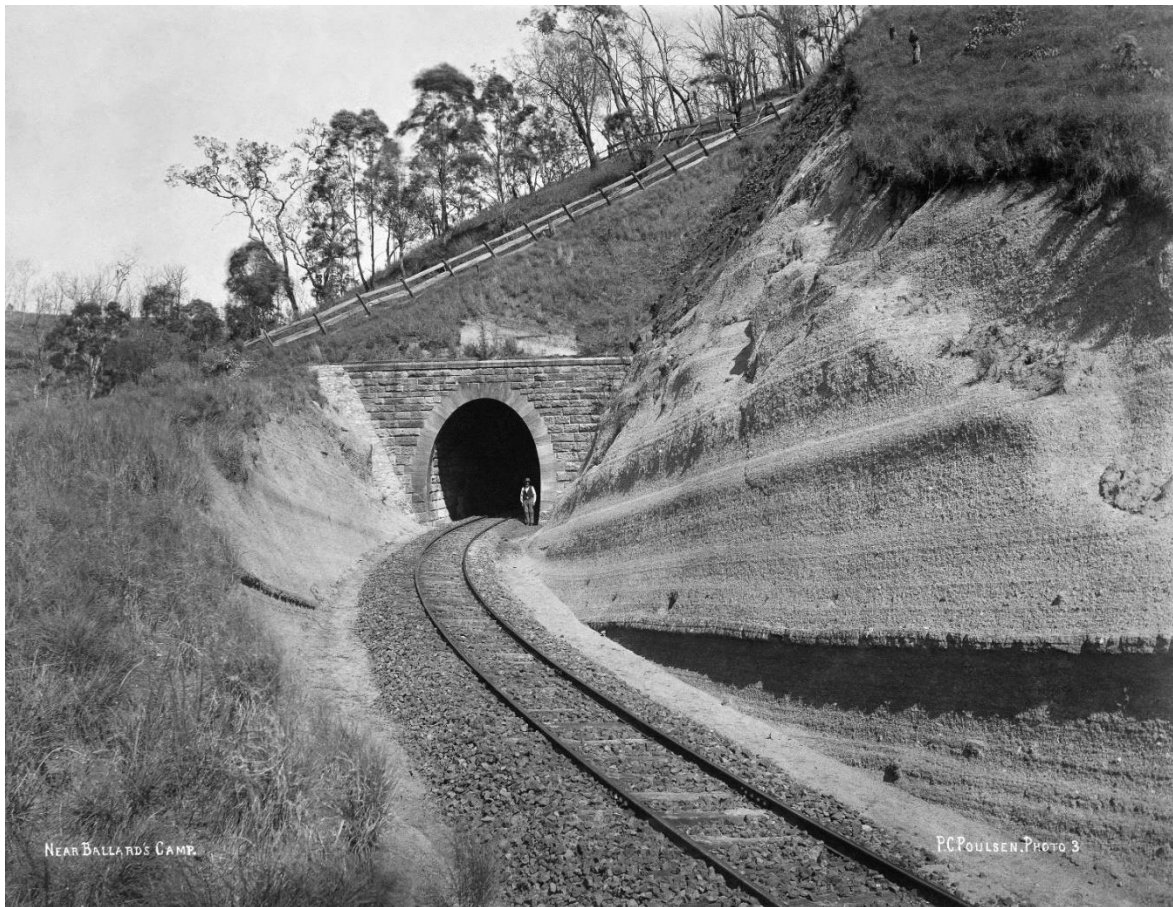
Robert Ballard (1839 – 1912), son of Robert Ballard and his wife Catherine Maria, and nephew to Stephen Ballard of Colwall had originally been sent by Thomas Brassey of Peto, Brassey and Betts – railways contractors – to Australia in 1859. He had been born in Ledbury and trained by Stephen Ballard so would have had good local connections to Colwall.

He had helped construct the railway in Australia from Maitland to Singleton and subsequently worked for the government superintending the rail extension from Picton to Goulborn. In 1865, once again working for Peto, Brassey and Betts he was tasked, as resident Engineer, with building Queensland’s first railway between Murphys Creek near Ipswich and Harlaxton on the outskirts of Toowoomba – The Main Range section of the Southern and Western Railway.

No doubt local associations with the Ballard family made the new railway project an attractive proposition to many local men and their families from Herefordshire so they were drawn to Queensland to work with Robert Ballard.

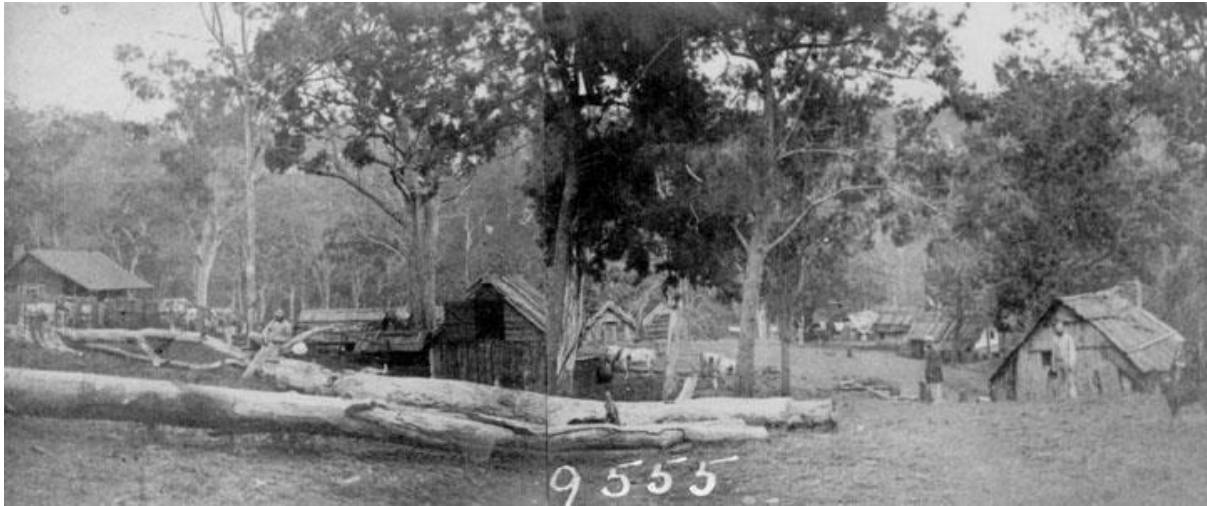
The construction of the Main Range section of the railway was divided into 5 sections and Robert Ballard was appointed Engineer-In-Charge. For section 5 during April 1866 a total of 1009 workmen were employed.^{xi} Robert Ballard was noted as being an innovative and

popular engineer who produced good quality railways at a keen price. He had a reputation for dealing with challenging engineering works, especially tunnelling.



Toowoomba Range near Ballard's Camp circa 1894. Image Source: <https://digitalcollections.qut.edu.au/2101/>

The railway was built using 3 feet six inch gauge track on the basis of cheaper cost. The Main Range rising 1400 feet above sea level, involved 9 tunnels, 45.5 chains in total length, 126 curves, 49 of which were five chains in radius, 47 bridges one mile in total length with eight bridges within the space of three-quarters of a mile, the longest bridge being 535 feet and the greatest height 73 feet and two thirds of the whole length of 16 miles being cuttings. The steepest gradient was one in fifty, the average being one in seventy.^{xii}



Ballard Camp during the construction of the Ipswich to Toowoomba railway, 1865. Image Source: Queensland State Archives.

The navvies and contractors lived in camps along the line. Ballard's Camp (pictured in 1865) was one of the most substantial and had a prefabricated church and a population of about 500 in 1865.^{xiii} Working and living conditions were harsh and although many workers were single men, around one third were accompanied by their families. Infant mortalities were high, and the makeshift nature of the camps led to diseases associated with inadequate sanitation such as diphtheria and typhoid.



Railway workers building The Southern and Western Railway. Image Source: ABC/Queensland Rail

The line took just over two years to complete and opened officially on 30 April 1867. Its construction had been beset with contractual issues and problems with the workforce.

The reports on Robert Ballard's work were uniformly good, particularly when comparing them with reports on the quality of workmanship elsewhere on the line.^{xiv}

The Colwall emigrants, arriving midway through 1865, may have been lucky enough to secure work. The experience of their fellow passenger – Francis John Bushby - on the “Commodore Perry” was less good.^{xv} After disembarkation he had travelled to Ipswich and he was placed in a gang of 8 workers for the railway company. Eventually his gang of 8 workers was sent “up country” towards Toowoomba, but upon arrival there was no work to be had with the contractor. It appears that they were thus relieved of any legal obligation to the railway company so from then on, he was on his own.

Robert Ballard continued with railway work in Australia and also became involved with engineering works in the gold mining industry. Many of the navvies involved with building Australian railways were similarly lured away from railway construction work into the gold mining industry.

Of the emigrants from Colwall it was previously understood that only one – a Mr Gardiner - returned to England. permanently^{xvi}

However, it's highly probable that George Kedward's widow, Harriet, was also on the “Commodore Perry” and that she too, subsequently returned to England. In the 1871 census for Colwall there is record of Harriet Kedward(s) listed as a 30-year-old Warden. She tragically died at the very young age of 32 in September 1873 and is buried in the churchyard of St James the Great, Colwall.

From an article titled ‘A Railway Pioneer’ in the Leominster News, dated Friday August 7th 1908, we get a good insight into the fate of Henry Willis the labourer from Colwall.^{xvii}

He worked with Robert Ballard for three years on the Ipswich to Toowoomba line. The party of emigrants from Colwall had quickly become scattered and eight died during the first three, hard years in Queensland.

He then worked from about 1868 until 1895 on the railway connecting Queensland to Sydney in New South Wales, before journeying to Tasmania.

Henry Willis had kept in touch with his mother in Colwall and returned back in England to see her on May 5th 1908, only to discover that she had died the previous March. The newspaper article concluded with his plans to return there in September 1908.

For him, and so many others who had emigrated from Colwall in 1865, Australia had obviously become their new, adopted home.

ⁱ Ballard, S (1999) ‘Colwall Collection’. Malvern: Cora Weaver.

ⁱⁱ Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland, 1864, p.938

ⁱⁱⁱ F.B. (1908) ‘A Railway Pioneer – Last Survivor of a Colwall Party’, *The Leominster News*, Friday August 7th 1908, p.2.

^{iv} Lars Bruzelius (1998) Sailing Ships: “Commodore Perry (1854)”. Available at [https://http://www.bruzelius.info/Nautica/Ships/Clippers/Commodore_Perry\(1854\).html](https://http://www.bruzelius.info/Nautica/Ships/Clippers/Commodore_Perry(1854).html) (Accessed: 28 November 2022)

^v (1865) 'The Commodore Perry, *The Brisbane Courier*, 18 July 1865, p.2

^{vi} Reece R. H. (1965) "The immigrant mechanic in Queensland, 1865-1866", *Archives & Manuscripts*, 3(1), pp. 21-27. Available at: <https://publications.archivists.org.au/index.php/asa/article/view/5849> (Accessed: 7 January 2023).

^{vii} Reece R. H. (1965) "The immigrant mechanic in Queensland, 1865-1866", *Archives & Manuscripts*, 3(1), pp. 21-27. Available at: <https://publications.archivists.org.au/index.php/asa/article/view/5849> (Accessed: 7 January 2023).

^{viii} Foote, W (1978) 'Queensland Immigration and The Black Ball Line', *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, Volume 10, issue 3, pp. 21-49

^{ix} Foote, W (1978) 'Queensland Immigration and The Black Ball Line', *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, Volume 10, issue 3, pp. 21-49

^x (1865) 'The Commodore Perry, *The Brisbane Courier*, 18 July 1865, p.2

^{xi} Wikipedia (2022). Main Range Railway – History. Available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Range_Railway (accessed 17 November 2022)

^{xii} V. & P., 1866, p.1495

^{xiii} Wikipedia (2022). Main Range Railway – History. Available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Range_Railway (accessed 17 November 2022)

^{xiv} Bell, J (1969), 'Robert Ballard – An early Queensland Railway Engineer', *Queensland Heritage Volume 1, issue 10*, pp. 3-9.

^{xv} Reece R. H. (1965) "The immigrant mechanic in Queensland, 1865-1866", *Archives & Manuscripts*, 3(1), pp. 21-27. Available at: <https://publications.archivists.org.au/index.php/asa/article/view/5849> (Accessed: 7 January 2023).

^{xvi} Ballard, S (1999) 'Colwall Collection'. Malvern: Cora Weaver.

^{xvii} F.B. (1908) 'A Railway Pioneer – Last Survivor of a Colwall Party', *The Leominster News*, Friday August 7th 1908, p.2.