

HERITAGE FACT SHEET

NO: 1

Gangs Sheds on the Glenreagh-Dorrigo branch line

Glenreagh Mountain Railway Inc.
PO Box 5104
Glenreagh NSW 2450

Ray Love 29th July 2010

On Overview

In 1894, the Per-Way Engineer for the NSW Railways discussed the idea of providing structures adjacent to running lines where equipment, tools and materials, necessary for track maintenance could be stored. These structures were referred to as 'tool houses' and would replace local 'tool boxes', which in those days, were located at various work locations along the line.

Over the next 70 years, the original 'tool house' concept was improved in design, size and purpose. As a result of the changes in purpose, these structures were known variously as a 'Fettler's Tool House', 'Trolley Shed', 'Gang Shed', 'Per-Way Shed', 'Fettler's Shed' or a combination of similar terms. Probably the most common term and one which describes all, is the 'Gang Shed'.

Gang Sheds – General History

The basic 'standard' tool house, designed in 1926 (and later to be known as a Gang Shed), comprised a simple rectangular structure 12ft.1½in. wide, by 9 feet deep. Walls of the shed were second hand sleepers, placed vertically. The shed was fitted with a skillion roof, sheeted in galvanised corrugated steel and was divided into two sections, with a row of sleepers forming the dividing wall. One section of the shed was open at the front (running line side) and housed the 'trolley' (with run-in rails allowing the trolley to be taken from the running line and moved into the shed) while the other section was a lockable room containing the tools. Subsequent improvements to this basic shed included an increase in physical dimensions, provision of a sleeper floor within, and a sleeper apron out the front of the shed.

The 'ganger' was a track repair man, part of the Permanent Way Branch (Per-Way) who was responsible for maintenance and repair for a set 'length' of railway track. Depending on the location, the ganger was in charge of a 'gang' comprising a group of other men, referred to as 'fettlers'. The 'length' could be a couple of miles (depending on frequency of rail traffic) or substantially longer (20-30 miles) in remote country areas.

The ganger (and his gang) were equipped with the usual manual tools (picks, shovels) but frequently (depending on location) equipped with a rail vehicle allowing the ganger to inspect the 'length' or to transport men and tools to a work site. These vehicles could range from a manually-operated tricycle (usually suitable for transporting one man) through to powered tricycles, and powered quadricycles (four wheels). Often the gang was equipped with small four-wheel trailers, towed by the powered vehicles and suitable for carrying men and/or tools. In the designs of 'tool sheds', provision was made for these rail vehicles, which were commonly called 'trolleys'.

Over the next few years, new and larger sheds were designed, all as a result of the use of powered trolleys. Changes and improvements included timber framing (in lieu of old rails and sleepers), the use of galvanised corrugated sheet steel for walls, wider sections for trolleys and tools, provision of work benches and racks for tools. Further design changes (in the 1940s) included provision of concrete floors, and a separate 'poison store room' to house weed spraying chemicals at one end of the structure. Commonly, the final design of the gang shed comprised a poison store (usually the right-hand end of the structure when viewed from the track), then the tool shed (with benches, racks and equipment bins), with the trolley/tricycle sheds at the left-hand end. In the arrangement, one or two trolley sheds were usual, but variations occurred depending on the size of the gang and number of trolleys in use. It was usual for 'gangs' to be given a number and that number was prominently displayed on the high on the front wall of the trolley shed, facing the running line.

In the late 1960s, with the advent of mechanised track gangs using larger machines, large road vehicles for transport to work sites and more extensive track repairs, the traditional gang sheds (and their variations) were phased out. They were replaced by new and larger custom designed sheds, which were built from commercially available 'kits' incorporating steel sheeting (usually fluted), with appropriately placed doors and windows. These new sheds included accommodation for road vehicles, tools, showers, meal rooms and other essential facilities for the track gang.

With the increasing use of private track maintenance companies (such as Leighton's), the local track gangs have disappeared from the scene and their interesting 'Gang Sheds' are no longer in use.

Gang Sheds on the Glenreagh-Dorrigo Branch Line

By 1961, four gang sheds provided for men and machines employed on track maintenance and repairs on the 43-mile long Glenreagh-Dorrigo branch line. A gang shed was built at each of Glenreagh, Timber Top, Lowanna and Dorrigo.

Details of the gangs, length and equipment are shown in the table:

Location	Gang No.	Strength (men)	Length (miles)	Equipment
Glenreagh	52	4	8 miles	Fairmont Inspection Car
Timber Top	53	4	8 miles	Motor Quadricycle and Fairmont Inspection Car
Lowanna	54	4	13 miles	Motor Quadricycle and Fairmont Inspection Car
Dorrigo	55	4	15 miles	Motor Quadricycle and Fairmont Inspection Car

Two significant and historic gang sheds remain on the Glenreagh – Ulong section of the former Glenreagh-Dorrigo branch line. One gang shed is located at West Glenreagh in the GMR precinct. The other gang shed is located in the Lowanna station precinct.

Both are 1940s design incorporating a poison store at right-hand end, tool shed and two tricycle sheds at the left-hand end of the structure.

A 1960s-designed gang shed remains in situ at Glenreagh railway yard.

Gang Sheds on the Glenreagh-Dorrigo Branch Line – Condition, Significance and Rarity

All three gang sheds remaining on the Glenreagh-Dorrigo branch line, particularly those owned by the Glenreagh Mountain Railway group are in good condition.

All three are historically significant and are part of a relatively rare group of historic NSW railway structures. They are in prominent locations allowing interpretation by the general public. All efforts must be made to preserve these valuable exhibits.

References

A Desk-Top History of Gang Sheds of the NSW Government Railways. Jim Longworth. ARHS Bulletin. May 1999.

Per-Way Workshops at Parkes. NSW. A Comparative History. Ray Love. 20 November 2002. Report and Historical Assessment of Per-Way Workshops in NSW, prepared for Rail Infrastructure Corporation (RIC).
