

LAST CANE TRAIN AT MORETON SUGAR MILL

by Brian Webber

Moreton Mill was the most southerly with a railway system still operating. It had been purchased from local interests by Howard Smith in 1976. Bundaberg Sugar acquired it in 1988 and in 1991 sold out to an English sugar company Tate & Lyle. In 2000, they in turn sold their Australian milling interests to Belgian company FinaSucre, who have sugar properties in several countries including in Africa. As at several other mills, investment in the rail system was in recent years reduced to the minimum. Moreton Mill had a very interesting fleet of older locomotives where each was different from any other. Unusually only one, COOLUM (EM Baldwin 5565.1 10.74), was a bogie locomotive.

Not something one would expect to see in this regulated industrial world was the street running between Howard Street yard at the east end of the town and the mill. Loaded trains were worked up the hill with a loco on each end to protect against a runaway by unbraked rolling stock. To see COOLUM dash from Howard Street yard to catch up with the departing train was a reminder of an earlier era. Photographing a train crossing the ancient lifting bridge over the Maroochy River was probably the aim of every enthusiast who visited the mill. There were two major river crossings, the somewhat primitive lifting span on the line to Coolum or Valdora and the road-rail David Low bridge on the major coastal road route, on the Punt line.

It turned out that Wednesday 3 December was to be the last day for the 2003 crushing season with all four locomotives that had operated regularly that season running on the final day. Before dark, the loco crews lined up the fleet for photographers, including Com-Eng 0-6-0DH JAMAICA (B1112 of 1956) and DUNETHIN (A1922 of 1958) the two locomotives that had not generally been used in 2003. The final run was to be special with two large signs attached to the last bin.

To enable the crews of all four locomotives to be part of the final run, they assembled at Howard Street, in the dark with headlights and amber flashing warning lights on, providing an emotive scene in the drizzling rain falling that night.

For a last time, just before 9.45pm, EM Baldwin 0-6-0DH BLI-BLI (6/1257.1 7.65 of 1965) led a loaded cane rake into Howard Street with COOLUM banking and Clyde 0-6-0DH MORETON (63-289 of 1963) and EM Baldwin 0-6-0DH PETRIE (2300.1 6.68 of 1968) just metres behind. The locomotive horns were blown continuously so no one in Nambour was in any doubt that an era ended as the train entered the mill yard. Special thanks to the mill staff who allowed enthusiasts to record a day that was sad for them and their workplace.

Clockwise from top: On Wednesday 3 December 2003, the final day of cane haulage, Clyde 0-6-0DH MORETON (63-289 of 1963) is at the head of the last loaded cane train to cross the Maroochy River Bridge. The assistant waits on the landing to wind up the bridge's lift span after the train has crossed. Photo: Terry Olsson • On the same day, loco crews pose in the mill yard, flanked by 0-6-0DH BLI BLI (EM Baldwin 6/1257.1 7.65 of 1965), B-B DH COOLUM (EM Baldwin 5565.1 10.74) and 4wDM JOE (Malcolm Moore 811 of 1942). Photo: Brian Webber • That evening, just before 10pm, the last bin of the last loaded cane train travels up Howard Street, Nambour, banked by COOLUM. Photo: Terry Olsson • On 25 September 2003, ten weeks before closure, EM Baldwin 0-6-0DH PETRIE (2300.1 6.68 of 1968) rolls a train of empties headed for the Punt line off the road-rail David Low Bridge at Bli Bli. Photo: Brad Peadon