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# OLD BEECH FOREST ROAD OVERHEAD BRIDGE

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## Location

655 OLD BEECH FOREST ROAD GELLIBRAND, COLAC OTWAY SHIRE

## Municipality

COLAC OTWAY SHIRE

## Level of significance

Heritage Inventory Site

## Heritage Inventory (HI) Number

H7621-0031

## Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Inventory

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### Interpretation of Site

Site is part of the former Colac-Beech Forest-Crowes railway line, with the mile stone indicating the distance from Melbourne. Closure of the line during the 1960s led to the abandonment of the line and the removal of the railway and associated infrastructure. The bridges were built to a standard VR narrow gauge design and were constructed from Northern Victorian and Gippsland timber. Although originally built from local timber, this was eventually found to be too soft and other timber was employed. The use of timber bridges was confined to the wettest areas, the steepest gullies and more substantial watercourses where earth fill was a liability. The bridge was constructed to allow the property owner access to entire parcel of land that was divided with the construction of the railway.

### Archaeological Significance

Low -medium potential to contain archaeological deposits. Unsure as to what remains at top of embankment (private landowner- no access).

Historical Significance      The remains of the overhead timber bridge is of historic importance through its association with the Colac-Beech Forest- Crowes railway line that contributed to the settlement of the Otway region.

Hermes Number      194688

Property Number

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## History

### Promoting settlement in the Otway Ranges

A series of land acts were passed in the 1860s in an attempt to create *small* farm holdings, whilst at the same time recognising the pioneering efforts of the squatters.

Under the first land act, the 1860 Land Sales Act, three million acres were surveyed into allotments of between 80 to 640 acres. No person could select more than 640 acres annually, and the land had to be paid for outright, or half paid and half leased.

Subsequently more land was made available for selection under the Land Act (J 862) and the 1865 Amendment Act. Then in 1869, most land - including unsurveyed land - became available for selection under the Land Act. (Sheehan, 2003: 19)

The Otway Ranges, in south west Victoria, were first opened to agricultural selection in 1884, under the *La" d Act* 1884, when allotments were selected from pre survey maps prepared by the Lands Department (Minchinton 2011:2). Within ten years more than 200 allotments had been taken up (Houghton 2005: 1).

Yet it wasn't until the arrival of the railway, during the 1870s, that Victoria's isolated south western region was considered penetrable. Until this time, the Otway Ranges were virtually impassable and as such, were of little economic value. The introduction of the railway provided the first all weather, fast and reliable transport service into the area, which as Houghton noted was 'characterised by dense timber and high rainfall' (Houghton 2003:5).

### Narrow gauge railways

The role of the Colonial government in surveying the area in 1884 and 1889 was instrumental in the change from the design of a broad gauge to a narrow gauge railway, with the resulting decrease in cost. Although initially against the policy of

the Victorian Railways, narrow gauge railways were eventually recommended for sparsely settled districts including Beech Forest (J 902), Gembrook (I 900) and Whitfield (1899) and Walhalla (J 910), were eventually built as narrow gauge lines. The fourth line, initially recommended as narrow gauge was built as a broad gauge line at Warburton. The Beech Forest line, is therefore not the earliest nor the latest, but constructed at the peak of construction in the sparsely settled areas.

During the 1890s pressure rose to find the means to construct cheap railways to the underdeveloped parts of Victoria, as the government realised that the cost of providing communications to the outlying communities by means of railways was excessive for the small populations served. In 1894 the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Railways considered the use of narrow gauge railways. The idea was opposed by the Victorian Railways (VR) in that it would introduce a non-standard operating regime, which would without doubt incur extra costs, especially when stock had to be transferred between the two gauges.

In 1895 the Committee recommended that narrow gauge lines be only introduced in sparsely settled areas. The first of the four narrow gauge lines, between Wangaratta and Whitfield opened in March 1899. It was followed by the Upper Ferntree Gully to Gembrook line in December 1900, the Colac to Beech Forest line in March 1902 and the Moe to Walhalla in May 1910. The Colac to Beech Forest line was extended to Crowes in June 1911 (see Houghton 2003:6 and Thompson 2004:2).

An initial broad gauge line from Colac to the top of the Otway Ridge had been constructed in 1884 but it was abandoned due to the high cost in laying the broad gauge, especially in such difficult terrain. The construction of the narrow gauge railway was delayed until 1900 when the initial section between Colac to Beech Forest was developed. It was completed by March 1902. by which time some 44.7km of line had been laid. The line was extended to Crowes, some 22.5km west of Beech Forest from 1909-1911. Not only did the narrow gauge railways open up these isolated communities, they too provided a vital service for pioneer settlers, allowing food produce and people to travel into and out of the region. The Colac-Beech Forest-Crowes railway was an immediate success providing access to the

Context Site Number 013. Remains over overhead bridge. part of former Colac-Beech Forest-Crowes railway line

forests. With [his. timber could be harvested and sent out as ' palings. mining props and laths. charcoal. sleepers. posts. piles. barrel staves. furniture and carriage timbers and sawn timber for building purposes' (Houghton 2012:21).

Yet despite the use of these lines and the communities they served. the narrow gauge lines generally suffered heavy financial losses throughout their lifetimes and were closed as soon as conveniently possible (see Anchen 2012:3).

#### Linking the Otway's by rail

The formation was used as an important transport corridor for the people and industries of the West Otway Ranges at a time when road transport was primitive. The railway served the area economically for sixty years. carting freight in and out. particularly as outwards loading of bulk commodities that provided the bulk of the revenue derived from the line. The function of the railway was also to act as a transport conduit for the wider region with railheads connecting with road transport to the coast on the other side of the Otway Ranges.

Construction took place in two periods of activity with the initial 48 kilometres from Colac to Beech Forest between 1900 and 1902. followed by a further 22.5 kilometres to Crowes between 1909-1911 . The railway was an immediate stimulus to the development of the region through providing fast. convenient and all weather access to the region. Fifteen bridges were constructed along the entire length of the Colac-Beech Forest-Crowes line. Houghton notes that earth filled embankments were preferred on economic and maintenance grounds. with timber bridges being only used in wet areas and over the more 'substantial watercourses and very steep gullies' (Houghton 2012: 14).

The bridges were built to a standard VR narrow gauge design and were constructed from Northern Victorian and Gippsland timber. Although originally built from local timber, this was eventually found to be too soft and other timber was employed. The use of timber bridges was confined to the wettest areas, the steepest gullies and more substantial watercourses where earth fill was a liability. Bridges were constructed of timber from northern Victoria, the local hardwood proving to be too soft in comparison. Bridges were built to a standard Victorian Railways design for narrow gauge lines.

The line has, throughout its life had numerous changes brought about through floods, bushfires, washaways and earth-slips. Natural disasters have taken their toll

on the infrastructure. Curtings and embankments have had to be cut back or modified in response to damage, and buildings, stations and sidings needed constant maintenance and some replacement. Generally the modifications were carried out with similar materials and methods to the original construction.

*This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.*

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