

“In the beginning” – The story of the foundation of the BM&NCMRF by Ray Beharrell

It all started quite some time ago when my friend Roger Dohnt and I became good friends. We and our wives were members of the same church in Penrith and one day Roger just happened to mention that he had a small model railway layout in his garage. Realising that we both had an interest in Model Railways we started to get together on occasion for a social meeting, and while the ladies chatted we would disappear into the garage to enjoy the layout. After a while it came to the ears of another member of the church, Ken Combes, that this was going on and he made it known that he also had an interest in model railways too so now we were three. Later Ken moved house and started to attend Warrimoo Baptist church as it was more convenient for him. Yes you guessed it, Ken met one or two men at his new church who were interested in model railways and our numbers started to grow, and so the word slowly spread around various Christian Churches. We had nowhere at the time to meet but we would occasionally get together at various homes for social and model enjoyment.

At that time I was the Model Railway manager at Valley Heights Locomotive Depot Heritage Museum in and we had a rather run down but working H0 gauge model railway there. I suggested to our Museum committee that we allow the Christian Group, the name we were referred to as, access to the model room to use it as a club room. Both groups agreed to this and we started, as a model group, to have occasional meetings at Valley Heights. Whilst using the layout to run our models we also took the time to improve the look of the layout and get it more organised to show the public on the Museum's open days. The layout was DC with three tracks so the running was restricted to three but thanks to the shunting yard at the back we could have other trains ready to go and give other members an opportunity to run their particular models. We certainly had a wide variety of international trains at the time and the public, on open days, were treated to a good show by various members.

We had also decided that, whilst we did not want to have a club with official membership and membership fees and a committee to run it all, we did have to have some form of association to let everyone know what was going on and when. The name of our group was formulated and we decided on the “Blue Mountains & Nepean Christian Model Railway Fellowship”. A number of us volunteered for various roles and with my computer skills I was able to design the news sheet you all get today advising everyone of what will happen over the year. The input for this news sheet was obtained by Ken Coombes and Kent Learned with Kent taking on the role of advising everyone by E-Mail of what was happening each month.

Later in our history Ken Coombes advised us that his Church had offered a large shed behind the church which would serve as our very own club room. It was in rather a mess at the time, having been used for storage of items, but the team got to work slowly tidying it all up ready for the installation of some layouts which had been donated to us. It was even given a name – “The Engine Shed”. Slowly the old shed was transformed into a great meeting place for us all, with the various layouts being used by members. Roger Dohnt donated his old garage layout and when the Model Shop at Blaxland, which we all had a close association with, closed down we were offered part of the layout from there and this now is the base of the HO & On30 layout we have today.

We still continue to meet occasionally at Valley Heights and these meetings are scheduled, as usual, throughout the year. As the year 2017 approached it was advertised that this was to be the centenary of the railways up the Blue Mountains and much celebration was planned by the

government. In connection with this the committee at Valley planned a number of events to coincide with this. One of the requests to us was, could our group build a scale model of the Depot as it was in steam days. A number of meetings were held and it was decided that the BM&NCMRF group could, in fact, build this model.

Now the group had a challenge, which was met by a dedicated group with much enthusiasm. The skills of various members were called upon. Roger had an engineering business so we obtained layout plans from the Railway Archives of the depot from the steam era which Roger was able to scale down to HO scale on his CAD machine. It was then just a simple matter to lay the sheets on a baseboard and transfer the positions to the wood. Ken Bristow had carpentry skills and he was instrumental in planning and purchasing the wood necessary for the base for the layout. Many members had already built their own layouts, Alan Burton, Roger Dohnt, Kent Learned to name a few and these skills came to the fore once we were actually ready to lay down track on the baseboard. Electrical skills were needed too as the installation of the DCC system was made, Alan and Kent came to the fore here.

One of the questions we had was what year would the layout represent as the Depot did change many times over its lifetime. Warren Bernard is a skilled model builder, having built many items for the film industry. Warren said he would like to scratch build the double deck signal box which was originally the box which controlled the Valley Heights precinct. We discovered that the signal box burned down in a bush fire shortly after 1950 and was never replaced with a double deck box but rather the single storey box which we see today, so the date was set at 1950.

There was only a small group of members who had volunteered to build the layout and this was done over the following months, the layout starting to take shape. A number of changes had to be made when it was discovered that certain parts of the Depot did not look the same as we thought during our planning. Slowly the whole layout took shape and we moved on to the scenic side once the tracks had been thoroughly proved. One of my own skills was scenery and much of the scenery was done by myself with help from other members. Rogers young granddaughter had been coming with him and we discovered she was very interested in scenics and, in fact, she laid the scenery for a large area in the front of the roundhouse. Michael Jessop did a wonderful job laying a scratch built fence along the perimeter of the Western Highway and the tracks, a very demanding job. Kent not only laid track but supervised the ballasting.

Time was catching up to us and the celebrations, with politicians and the NSW Governor to visit the Depot, were drawing near, so in the final weeks an all out effort was put in to get the job done. We did finally complete the job with a little time to spare. Well done everyone. The layout was originally only an end to end but it did serve it's purpose of showing the public what the depot looked like in steam days. Eventually a loop was requested by the committee round the back of the layout and this was built over a period of time. The original layout had to be moved and this was carefully done by getting all hands working at Valley on the day to lift it on the planned day. With the loop installed trains can now be moved in proper manner round the whole layout instead of having to reverse them down the hill as we did when it was end to end.

We continue to meet at Valley to run and do maintenance on the two layouts, but the groups main thrust is at the Loco Shed with layouts to finish and maintain. As Christians we continue

to have a short Christian devotional during our meetings and this is a great blessing to each of us. Each talk is linked in some way to the Railways but also with a good spiritual message. We also enjoy planned trips to other locations such as layouts, museums or model shops and this is an ongoing feature of our group.

We look forward to the future as we all worship our Great God and also enjoy our hobby together

Ray Beharrell