

# Thematic interpretation and the West Coast Wilderness Railway: a case study on the use of themes

*with thanks to WCWR General Manager, Andrew Bridger*

## The need for a visitor experience focus

The restored West Coast Wilderness Railway began operating in November 2000, with a short trip from Queenstown to Lynchford marking the start of passenger services that by December 2002 had been extended to the full route to Strahan.

In July 2002, Federal Hotels & Resorts announced it had secured ownership of the railway. Until then, the huge challenges of a three-year restoration program had meant that the focus for the railway had been on operational matters and little development of the railway visitor experience had occurred.

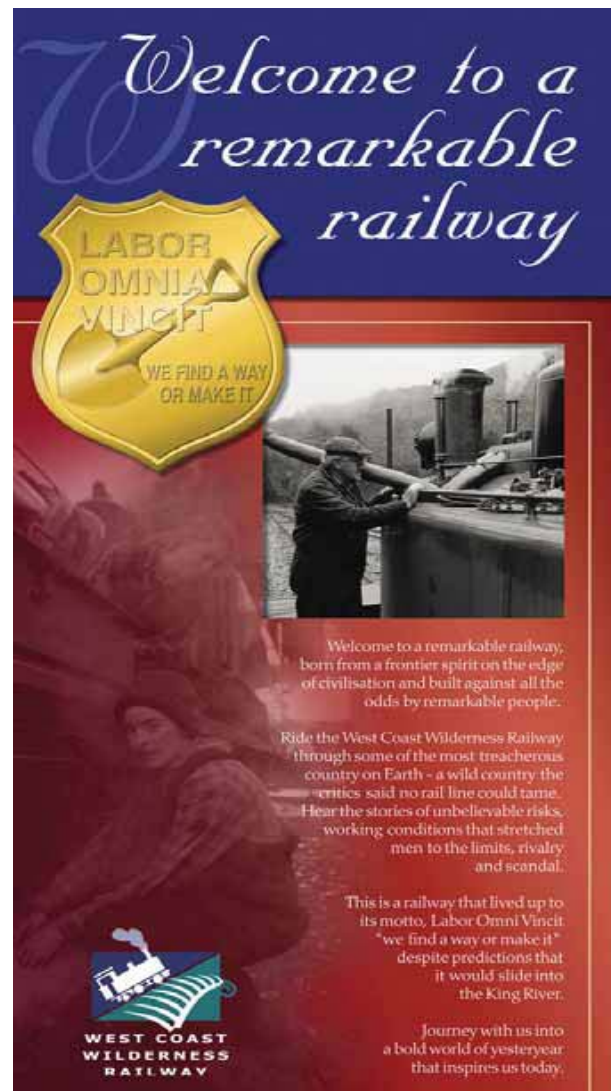
Without a clear understanding of the strength of the visitor experience that could be provided by the railway, it was difficult to make decisions on the interpretation program, to develop strategies for product development, and to determine the key messages for marketing and communications.

In November 2002, the West Coast Wilderness Railway engaged a consultancy group to develop a strategic interpretation plan, assisted by Tourism Tasmania. The group, Inspiring Place Pty Ltd principals John Hepper and Jerry de Gryse, with freelance communications practitioner Anna Housego, adopted thematic interpretation as the framework for preparing the plan.

Thematic interpretation is regarded as world's best practice in interpretation and was developed by University of Idaho's Prof. Sam Ham. He was technical adviser to the planning process.

## Developing themes

The initial brief provided a number of ideas indicating what the WCWR experience might be. These ideas were disparate and included: forestry, mining and mining practices, railway heritage and the Abt locomotives, local lifestyle (isolated communities, way of life etc.); Huon Pine; existing use of the railway to transport beehives/link to leatherwood honey; and wilderness.



This posed a challenge – how to develop these ideas into an integrated and powerful visitor experience?

The first step was a theme development workshop – *Apt Minds for the Abt Railway* – held at Strahan. Workshop participants were a diverse group of individuals, who either had a strong connection to the WCWR or the capacity to make a creative contribution. They brought a wide range of perspectives to the table and included an historian, poet, social historian and theatre producer, local residents who worked in the tourism industry, representatives of Tourism Tasmania, WCWR staff, and a Federal Company Director.

The group brainstormed topics then from those topics, developed ideas for themes.

By the end of the workshop, it was apparent from the list of ideas that the most powerful story for creating a memorable visitor experience revolved around the human endeavour and drama in getting the railway built in the first place.

The main theme was subsequently identified as:

*The West Coast Wilderness Railway was born against the odds at the far edge of civilization – it is a story that inspires us today.*

*[Guides are free to interpret what this inspiration may be e.g. “by proving that all things are possible if you have a vision”.]*

Because the train journey is four hours, it was decided to adopt three sub-themes to support the main theme and add further depth and richness to interpretation:

- *The people that made the railway possible risked it all, gambling money and lives to “find a way or make it”.*

- *Life at the wild frontier was a far cry from what we know today but can teach us about dealing with challenges and change.*
- *The railway survived not only once but twice, with its restoration truly making it a railway that refused to die.*

It is interesting to note that within the ‘storylines’ captured in the themes, aspects of the original set of topics can still be covered but – through the lens of the themes – with a clear focus.

The WCWR Interpretation Plan acknowledges that a topic is the subject matter to be discussed while the theme is the principal message about that topic or subject matter that you wish to impart. When using a topic as the basis for interpretation, it is difficult to achieve a focus or to discern what information will be included or excluded. When using thematic interpretation, the theme brings a focus that enables easy decision-making about what information is relevant to convey – and how to convey it.

### **The planning process**

With themes now prepared, work began on developing an interpretation plan, based on the interpretation needs and specific features of the WCWR. Steps included the following:

- the audience profile was examined;
- each station and site along the railway route was assessed for its relative strengths in delivering the theme and sub-themes and specific locations at each site were identified;
- site sheets were prepared for each location, providing background information on the history, the setting, safety and amenity, interpretation constraints, interpretive opportunities and potential links to the themes;

- initial and longer-term interpretive products were identified;
- interpretation media were identified; and
- an action plan was developed.

Due to the immediacy of the need for interpretation, the plan also included key deliverables such as text for an interpretive brochure for passengers; a series of guide script modules and a notional theatrical script.



### **Putting themes to work**

The WCWR theme and sub-themes now provided definition for the passenger experience, which would be one of connecting with the incredible human endeavour and risk of getting the railway through such remote and wild country.

#### *Interpretation Products*

It is interesting to note that adoption of the above theme and sub-themes has created an experience that is far broader than the actual train trip.

In this approach, the train itself – particularly the original Abt steam locomotives and the unusual section of rack and pinion rail from Halls Creek to Dubbil Barril – become an integral part of the toolkit for conveying the ‘take-home’ messages but are not the main focus of themselves.

The themes were introduced into all passenger interpretation. This included:

- a preliminary interpretation brochure provided at the point of ticket purchase: the brochure included text spelling out the themes as well as images that worked visually to reinforce themes;
- guide script modules providing a wide range of relevant stories, historical and current information that guides could select to support delivery of the themes as well as suggestions for delivering the themes;
- guides are encouraged to share their local stories about family connections to the original railway as a means of providing passenger connections to the early way of life;
- food in the catering carriage was selected with an eye to bringing to life the daily routine of men who worked on the line e.g. food packaged in a lunchbox that echoes the fettle’s lunch package; research indicated that Cornish pasties were regular lunch fare and these are stocked in the carriage;

- a series of 25 all-weather interpretive panels were developed for stations, each one designed and written to communicate the themes or particular aspects of them. A generic panel setting the scene for the main theme and sub-themes was installed at Queenstown and Strahan Stations.

Panels emphasise the impossibility of the original railway project, the remoteness, the risks involved, the way the company and construction workers rose to the challenge, the way of life along the route, and the second feat of bringing restoration to reality.

A sub-series of six panels highlights the people factor – one for each major stop – profiling a key personality and drawing on those aspects of the personal story that most strongly support the themes;

- The panels have proven so popular with passengers that WCWR is currently in the process of having the artwork printed as a series of postcards that will be part of the merchandise range in the Queenstown Station shop;
- Commercial interpretation products also include a high-quality, full-colour Guidebook that retails for \$9 and delivers the themes with a greater level of detail than is possible during the journey. As with all WCWR interpretation, it reinforces the themes with a blend of personal stories, historic photos featuring people of the day and a focus on the way of life now gone.

The themes have determined the style, tone and content of all interpretive text, as well as the selection of contemporary and historic images. In the Guidebook, for example, a device was developed based on a composite historic ‘navy’ character, whose story unfolded throughout the publication until he transforms into a modern-day fettler for the purposes of the restoration component.

In sourcing and selecting historic images, priority was given to those images that included workers in remote or difficult conditions or highlighted the engineering challenges or the sense of a lifestyle distant from civilisation. Contemporary images included people, where possible.

#### *Other customer communication*

The WCWR recognised that its themes were now driving the passenger experience and as a result, made a number of changes to ensure consistent communication and reinforcement of the themes across the business. For example, contemporary advertising was removed from the Queenstown Station; and workshops have ensured that all staff, not just those directly responsible for delivering interpretation, are familiar with themes and understand their significance.

Themes are currently being integrated beyond the interpretation program into Federal Hotels & Resort’s marketing and communications strategies (e.g. marketing collateral, website, recent series of advertisements in the *Mercury* bicentennial magazine series etc).

## Knowing the story makes a difference

Knowing the themes – the essence of the story – has enabled WCWR to provide greater focus, depth and substance to its visitor experience.

And while the themes provide strong 'umbrella' messages for interpretation, they also provide a flexible framework for interpretation. In practice, this means that railway guides can now

discern what to focus on and what to leave out, while having the creative room to work with their own passions and the audience they have on the train that particular day.

They have the framework and they know what they are aiming to achieve, which provides the freedom to do their commentary in a way that works with their own style and with the content that they find most fascinating.

