



Chris Jericho and Robbie Osborne, with Cobdogla Steam Friends members John Reed, Damien Osborne, and Eric Wolverson. PHOTO: Lachlan Dand

Cobdogla's Big Hook steamer shines at Queensland machinery event

SEBASTIAN CALDERON

COBDOGLA Steam Friends Society have returned home after taking part in a major national event celebrating Australia's engineering heritage.

The Big Hook steam engine, transported from the Cobdogla Irrigation and Steam Museum to Queensland for the National Rally & Steaming Under The Southern Cross 2025, was one of the standout attractions, proudly representing the Riverland and its rich mechanical history.

The event, held from August 23 to August 31, invited the Cobdogla team to attend with their very unique traction engine — Australia's only Crane Traction Engine.

To the best of their knowledge, it is the only Fowler B6 Stump Puller fitted with a crane in the world.

As the sun settled on the final day, the Big Hook was packed and ready for its journey home, following a weekend filled with nostalgia, steam and teamwork.

Event organisers and attendees extended heart-felt thanks to those who made the trip possible, including Bill Ives, Nick Geraghty, Warren Buckley and Shelly Burns from the National Historical Machinery Association (NHMA) for their support and sponsorship.

Special recognition was also given to truck driver and owner Chris Jericho, who was praised for his dedication and generosity.

"Without you, mate, this would not have been possible — you went out of your way to get us there and back safely. You have a heart of gold," a Facebook post said.

The group expressed appreciation to everyone who helped with loading, unloading, cooking, cleaning and running the engine throughout the event.

"What an absolute perfect adventure was had by all," they said.

"We had a blast — thank you to everyone involved for making it possible. Welcome home, Big Hook."



The new Twentyfirst Street bridge, pictured last month. PHOTO: Grant Schwartzkopff

Working together

BOOKMARK Creek played a significant role in establishing the Renmark irrigation community from the 1880s to the 1980s (previously discussed in the Murray Pioneer, October 8). This article explores the restoration efforts undertaken from the 1990s to the present, highlighting the significant contribution of community organisations, groups and government agencies in reviving Bookmark Creek's natural environment.

Before European settlement, Bookmark Creek existed as a natural anabranch carrying water around the town of Renmark, especially during high river flows. By the end of the 1980s, its course had been altered due to channeling along the original waterway to provide fresh water to the irrigation community. The modifications resulted in a partly natural and partly man-made water flow pathway.

Dudley Fowleraker, interviewed in 1999, described this transformation:

"The channel followed the route of the creek, at times passing underneath it, then travelling along the land, under the creek again, and finally continuing along the opposite side, eventually reaching the Crescent. That man-made channel is now generally regarded as 'The creek'. It's not. It's the old channel."

This interview formed a valuable part of an oral history project organised by the Renmark to the Border Local Action Planning Committee (LAP). The initiative, backed by financial support from the Natural Heritage Trust from 1997, was designed to capture recollections related to Bookmark Creek and the environmental history of Renmark and its creeks and floodplains. The project emphasised the importance of archiving community stories and environmental experiences for future generations.

The funding of that project signaled a turning point, ushering in a period of increased government financial support and participation in local efforts to protect and restore the natural environment of Renmark.

Humphrey Howie, current presiding member of Renmark Irrigation Trust (RIT), and an active member of both the LAP and the

Bookmark Creek Action Group (BCAG), recalled

"From around 1998 to 2005 there were a lot of groundwater monitoring projects managed by the LAP. Funding came from the Natural Heritage Trust. Several projects were related to restoring Bookmark Creek. There were also ideas for projects to vegetate and rehabilitate the wetlands near to the town."

Established in late 1997 under the LAP's guidance, the BCAG remains active today. Although the LAP no longer exists, BCAG continues to conduct surveys of fish, frogs, and birds, plus surface water and photo point monitoring with support from Murraylands and Riverland Landscape Board staff. In the early 2000s, in conjunction with Renmark Paringa Council (RPC), BCAG established a revegetation project adjacent to Bookmark Creek. This was followed by a walking trail alongside the creek, in 2004. Importantly, BCAG has served as a local voice for various initiatives aimed at improving creek flow and creating favourable conditions for native fish populations.

During this period, the SA government stepped up its activity to restore Bookmark Creek. A report commissioned by the South Australian Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources (DEWNR), in 2012, emphasised the importance of removing flow constraints to rehabilitate aquatic habitats, and provide fish passages, supporting native species like the Murray cod and golden perch. It became clear that restoring only the surrounding creek environment was not enough, other conditions needed to be re-created for native fish and other aquatic life to flourish.

A key author of that report, Dr Martin Mullen-Cooper, recently reflected on the past and the future for Bookmark Creek:

"The River Murray, prior to the lock and weirs, was a visibly flowing river, even at very-low flows. The loss of flowing water habitat has led to declines in native fish, and lots of other aquatic animals like mussels and snails. The Bookmark Creek project is turning that decline around by recreating

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The aftermath of the Millennium Drought, and the Basin States agreement to the Basin Plan in 2012, added impetus for the community to work together. In 2013, RPC, RIT, NRM (now the Landscape Board), Destination Riverland and Regional Development Australia developed a common vision for the Renmark area. 'SEE Renmark 2024 - A community's integrated vision for a vibrant future', focused on social, economic and environmental outcomes, including restoring the natural environment around Renmark.

However, the floodplains and off-river waterways needed water for restoration. Spurred on by the local Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder officer, and in response to an increasing volume of recovered water under the Basin Plan, RIT began planning how it could utilise its infrastructure to support that vision. Rosalie Auricht, CEO of RIT, recalls:

"Soon after I joined the Trust, Humphrey Howie and David Flint, the technical officer, were observed in the boardroom, studying maps of the water delivery network. Six months later, the Trust signed a partnership agreement with the Commonwealth

Environment Water Holder to deliver water for the environment. That was followed by a whirlwind of activity to deliver the first Commonwealth water for the environment in July 2017.

"The arrangement was a first for an irrigation entity in the Basin and continues to deliver a win/win outcome. It funded permanent infrastructure to help flush our pipes, it provides us with another customer, and it supports our natural environment and community wellbeing. Though management of that massive project and ongoing activity was not mentioned when being employed."

In April 2016 the signing ceremony was held on Trust land, at Nelwart Street, on Bookmark Creek. That site was chosen as it had already demonstrated water from the RIT flushing outlet was making a difference to the adjacent vegetation. The Trust then established and facilitated the Renmark Environmental Watering Committee to ensure that community and governments continued working together to maximise the benefit of the Commonwealth water for the environment. There was early agreement that removal of all constraints on Bookmark Creek remained a key goal.

In 2018, the removal of Pitts Crossing, a dirt track crossing the creek with pipes underneath, by the Landscapes Board was a

major achievement. However, the high cost of addressing other constraints - the Nelwart Street crossing and the Jane Eliza regulator - was well beyond the Landscape Board's funding.

The Australian Government's announcement of \$37.6m to the SA Government for Sustaining Riverland Environments (SRE), in September 2020, was celebrated by the Renmark community. \$10m was allocated for Bookmark Creek, which was sufficient to address the remaining constraints. The community again worked together, and with government. People who had supported the vision to restore the creek for many years were encouraged to be part of the project's consultations. However, the 2022 flood delayed progress on removing the constraints on Bookmark Creek. In April 2025, a new bridge was completed at Nelwart Street on RIT land, removing another constraint of a dirt track with pipes underneath.

The flood highlighted another issue. The Twentyfirst Street bridge, which straddles Bookmark Creek, struggled to cope with the large water volume, restricting the flow and movement of the water. This increased the risk of localised flooding.

In response, RPC sought funding for a new bridge. In May 2025, RPC officially opened the new Twentyfirst Street bridge with funding provided jointly by the council, the State Government's Local Government Disaster Recovery Assistance Arrangements, and the Department of Environment and Water's Constraints Measures Program. Additional support was also sought through the Bridges Renewal Program to ease the financial impact on ratepayers. Construction was carried out by BMD Group, which partnered with six local contractors, injecting approximately \$830,000 into the regional economy.

The new bridge is a major infrastructure upgrade enhancing both flood resilience and transport safety for the community. The open structure has improved clearance and waterway capacity, promoting efficient water flow through the Bookmark Creek area, particularly during flood conditions. The bridge

The impacts of the 2022/23 flood event on the Twentyfirst Street bridge.

PHOTO: Grant Schwartzkopf

now has the capacity to endure 120GL flows. It can either remain accessible or be quickly reopened after inundation, providing more reliable access during extreme weather events.

As part of the broader vision, the area surrounding the bridge was made more pedestrian and cyclist friendly, creating an accessible and connected link into the township. The completed bridge now stands as a safer, more resilient, and environmentally responsive piece of infrastructure for the community.

The final constraint - the Jane Eliza regulator on Gregory Way - will be formally opened on October 23, at 10.30am, completing a long journey to restore Bookmark Creek.

Conclusion

From the 1990s through to today, the story of Bookmark Creek's restoration has been one of community vision and collaboration. Local residents, community groups, RPC, RIT, governments and government agencies have all played their part. Together, they have helped ensure the creek is no longer known as a reservoir or a salt drain, but a living environment that supports native fish, attracts birdlife, and provides spaces for people to connect with nature.

Ms Auricht summarises:

"Bookmark Creek's restoration journey shows what can be achieved when a community works side by side with landholders, governments and environmental groups. It is proof that caring for our waterways is also about creating a healthier, more vibrant future for local communities. On behalf of the Renmark irrigation community, thank you to all the people who have contributed along the way".



The Nelwart Street bridge, opened in April 2025. PHOTO: RIT

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