

THE HOSTAGES OF MANGAWEKA HILL



In 1990, New Zealand's sesquicentennial year, the Institution of Professional Engineers also celebrated 150 years of engineering. We selected a number of projects built over the years, put up signs and bronze plaques, and generally recorded the achievements with some pride.

One such project was the electrification of the central sector of the North Island Main Trunk Railway. This, the largest engineering job undertaken since the early days of railway construction, had a huge impact on the freight-carrying capacity of rail. So to celebrate this milestone, a special excursion train, filled with Institution members, and many of the crowned heads of New Zealand Rail, made a trip from Paekakariki to Waiouru and back.

At Paekakariki the train was coupled to a great snorting leviathan, Ka Locomotive No 945, lovingly restored to full running condition by a steam enthusiasts' group. From Paekakariki, Ka 945 stoked up and charged to Palmerston North without turning a hair. Then we were taken over by one of the brand-new heavy-duty electric locomotives for the trip to Waiouru and back. On the way back, somewhere near Mangaweka on a late Sunday afternoon, the locomotive stopped and refused to go any further.

So for some hours, as the sun set, and the mid-winter frost set in, a trainload of engineers sat incarcerated in the unlit and unheated carriages until a relief locomotive could be found to take us back to Palmerston North. Thereupon our faithful old Ka 945 hooked up and took us home without batting an eyelid.

So I was moved to record this at the time with this sonnet, which was broadcast over the train's P/A system as we trundled home.

The Hostages of Mangaweka Hill

(Dedicated to a trainload of engineers and their friends, with fire in their bellies, songs in their hearts, and no power in their puller.)

Oh lack-a-day! Thus do the gods conspire
To wreak disaster on a noble cause,
For now our poor old loco's lost its fire –
This hardly ranks a chorus of applause!

They say this is the second day of spring,
But as the sunshine dies, 'tis winter's chill
Which will assail each commoner and king
As they sit stuck on Mangaweka Hill.

The pundits say: "Electric traction's in" –
So now a trainload of wise engineers
Are hostages of their own vice and sin,
As they're lock'd in with all their hopes and fears.

What moral can there be to end this rhyme?
Take modern transport if you have the time!