

Rockhampton Railway Roundhouse



ENGINEERS
AUSTRALIA

Railways in Rockhampton

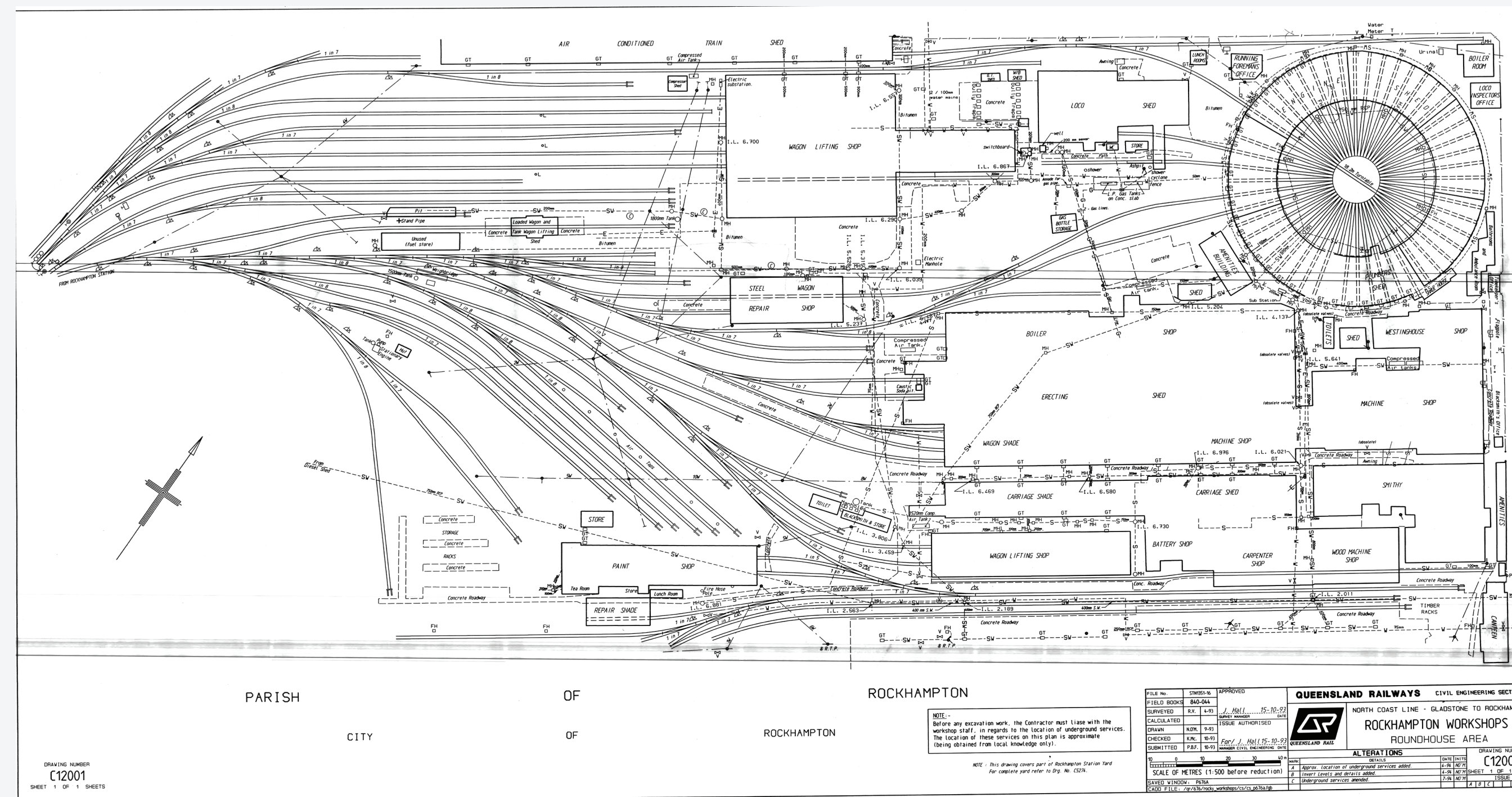
The Rockhampton Railway Roundhouse represents a continuum of significant engineering activity central to the development of railways in Queensland. Beginning in the late 19th century, railways were a catalyst for Rockhampton's growth as a port city, connecting the west, enabling faster communication, and facilitating the movement of primary production to market. Initially isolated from other Queensland railway systems, Rockhampton became the focal point for steam locomotive maintenance, necessitating the construction of this large circular roundhouse. As part of the city's fabric, the workshops and roundhouse were major employers and contributed significantly to the local economy.

Roundhouse design and function

The Roundhouse comprises 52 radial stalls arranged within seven segments of a complete circle, each segment containing seven or eight stalls. Built to store, service, and maintain up to 52 steam locomotives, the full capacity was never reached, with some bays utilised for storage or support facilities such as tinsmiths and coppersmiths. In later years, the facility also supported rail wagon maintenance. At its centre lies an 18.3m turntable, enabling locomotives to be "spotted" into stalls for servicing, boiler washouts, or repairs, while providing shelter for engines and workers. Each stall featured concrete floors with rails and pits for undercarriage access. Five entry and exit tracks ("roads") connected the turntable to depot yards, with the main road near the South Street gates.



Ten of the 52 service bays with locomotives undergoing maintenance



The workshops and Roundhouse as designed in early 1900's

Construction

Designed by the Chief Railway Engineer's Office, the Roundhouse was built under R. E. Sexton, Engineer in Charge of Construction, using day labour. Plans were drawn in 1911, construction began in 1913, and by November 1914 all 52 stalls were operational. The structure reflected contemporary engineering standards, accommodating increasingly powerful and heavy locomotives.

Physical Description

Each bay measures 19.5m deep, with a frontage of 3.7m widening to 5.8m at the rear. The overall circle has a radius of 55.5m, with the internal yard radius at 36m, covering nearly one hectare and 5,637m² under roof. Segments are divided by brick walls, with stalls supported by round timber poles approximately 300mm in diameter. Roof and wall construction used sawn timber, clad in corrugated galvanised steel, though the original roof was cement shingles. Materials were sourced locally: milled timber from North Ipswich Railway Workshops and bricks from Mount Morgan brickworks. The carpentry demonstrates exceptional craftsmanship, with scarf joints, birds-mouth notches, and bolted tie-downs designed to withstand cyclonic conditions.

Heritage Recognition

In May 2025, the Rockhampton Railway Roundhouse was awarded an **Engineering Heritage Marker** by Engineers Australia acknowledging its historical and technical significance.



Learn more



A locomotive approaching the turntable for spotting into one of the bays c1968

Engineering Heritage Significance

Roundhouses had been used for decades before Rockhampton's was commissioned. As locomotives grew larger and heavier, roundhouse designs evolved from semicircular to two-thirds circles, culminating in rare full-circle structures. While roundhouses represented best practice in locomotive maintenance, they were soon replaced by more space-efficient linear "running sheds." Consequently, few roundhouses were built after Rockhampton's, both in Australia and worldwide. The Rockhampton Roundhouse is the only full-circle example ever constructed in Queensland and one of only two surviving in Australia, alongside Junee in New South Wales. In 1969, the Roundhouse closed as a steam train depot in favour of diesel-electric trains. Until its closure in 2017, the railyards functioned as a train depot, workshops for wagon and boiler repair and maintenance, a blacksmith shop, and an administration building. As the last of its type in Queensland, it represents the pinnacle of roundhouse technology in the state.



Locomotive entering the turntable.
Photo - Weston Langford