

Keeping a track record of Bentham's railway station – read this interesting article by Gerald Townson and John Bearpark, that featured in the Craven Herald – click [here](#) to download the article.

Origins

The line had been built by the North Western Railway Company (always known as the “Little North Western” to distinguish it from the much bigger and grander London and North Western Railway). The Leeds & Bradford Railway had been extended from Shipley to Colne, and from a junction at Skipton the North Western line curved away to the north. However, it didn't take the direction originally planned. The Little North Western was conceived as an integral part of a trunk route linking the Midlands and West Riding to Scotland.

Beyond Gargrave the line traversed the Aire Gap to enter Ribblesdale and then climbed steeply over the watershed to the south of Ingleborough and into the valley of the Wenning. From Clapham a branch was planned to Lancaster; the main line was to head north to Kirkby Lonsdale and then follow the River Lune to join the Lancaster & Carlisle Railway at Low Gill, south of Tebay.

A New Direction

However, as construction proceeded a national recession led to a shortage of capital. Work was stopped at Ingleton, and, on the advice of George Stephenson, efforts were concentrated instead on completing the line from Clapham through Bentham to Lancaster. Here it made an end-on junction with a line promoted by the Morecambe Harbour & Railway Company – the two companies amalgamated before construction began. A branch was built from Green Ayre to the Castle Station of the Lancaster & Carlisle Railway.

“Morecambe” was then the name of the bay where the new harbour was to be built, close to the fishing village of Poulton. It was not until 1889 that the new port and growing resort created by the coming of the railway added to itself the nearby villages of Bare and Torrisholme and officially took the bay's name for its own.

The Little North Western had made the right decision. The new harbour attracted plenty of freight, but many more passengers than expected. They came for sailings to Ireland, and also to enjoy a sail around the bay, or across to Grange or Arnside (the main pier still stands, as the popular “stone jetty”). People were pouring in on excursion trains within months of the opening. In 1852 the expanding Midland Railway took over the running of the Little North Western, though full amalgamation did not take place until 1871.

And so the “branch” became the main line. The route between Wennington and Morecambe was much more direct than the one followed today. It ran alongside the River Lune all the way from Hornby to Green Ayre, and then crossed the river on the curved Greyhound Bridge before heading for the coast.

Eventually it was the London and North Western Railway that built the link from Ingleton to Low Gill, which opened in 1861. The Midland began forwarding traffic for Carlisle and Scotland via Clapham and Low Gill. It was continued dissatisfaction with the way its Anglo-Scottish traffic was handled (or obstructed) by the LNWR that led the Midland to build its own route to Carlisle. Opened in 1876, this left the Morecambe line at Settle Junction to head north through the heart of the Pennines. The original Settle Station was renamed Giggleswick.

The Furness Link

In the meantime, another junction had been created, at Wennington. From here the Midland and Furness Railways jointly built a line to Carnforth, linking with the Furness's own line along the north shore of Morecambe Bay. This provided a direct route for freight to the growing port of Barrow and for iron ore to Yorkshire.

Passengers could reach Piel Pier – the gradual silting up of the bay saw Irish sailings move across to Barrow, at the expense of Morecambe. Carnforth offered connections to the Lake District as well as to stations along the coast to Barrow. The new line opened in 1867, and for just under a century a number of trains each day divided and joined up at Wennington, as trains to and from Leeds served both Morecambe and Carnforth. By now the LNWR had its own branch to Morecambe, leaving the main west coast line at Hest Bank.

At first it was connected to the north only; the southern curve was added in 1889 (it is along this that trains from Leeds now approach Morecambe).

Bradford-by-the-Sea

Although the opportunities for sailing had declined, the resort was quickly rivalling Blackpool with its range of entertainment and recreation. People flocked to Morecambe from the West Riding, on day trips and for holidays. But passengers were travelling in the opposite direction too, as businessmen based in Leeds or Bradford found they could conveniently make their home by the sea. And so the “Leeds, Bradford & Morecambe Residential Express” became an

institution, speeding the movers and shakers in the woollen industry to their offices in the morning and back home in the evening (lunch-time on Saturdays). "Bradford-by-the Sea" was born.

Heysham Harbour

Towards the end of the 19th Century the Midland Railway decided to build its own deep-sea harbour at Heysham to overcome the limitations of the pier at Morecambe and to save the long distance (via another company's metals) to Barrow. A branch to the new harbour was opened in 1904. The Midland decided to use the Lancaster-Morecambe-Heysham line for an experiment with electrification, including the branch up to the LNWR's Castle Station in Lancaster. The new electric trains started running in 1908. In addition, there were boat trains from Leeds and elsewhere for sailings to Ireland and the Isle of Man.

City-Country-Coast

For around a hundred years the Leeds-Morecambe line flourished, with a comprehensive service of express and stopping trains, and numerous excursions at holiday times and weekends. The communities along the line could reach the cities of Yorkshire and Lancashire, and at Leeds and Lancaster they had connections to all parts of the country. Late trains on Saturday nights brought people home from dances in the Central Pier ballroom. In summer Irish labourers crossed to Heysham and travelled by train on to Bentham for the annual "hiring day". Bell Busk station was the gateway for thousands of visitors to the delights of Malhamdale. From Clapham the more energetic could head off up Ingleborough, perhaps returning via Ingleton. There was plenty of freight too, and each station had its goods yard and cattle dock.

Changing Times

In the late 1950s the scene began to change. Freight and passengers alike were drifting increasingly to the roads, and people started to look farther afield for their holidays. The railways were now nationalised, and losing money. There had been high hopes in 1955, when the ambitious Modernisation Plan promised substantial investment, intended to create a profitable railway system.

Now the government looked instead for economies to make the books balance, and line and station closures were accelerated. The Ingleton branch had already lost its passenger service, in 1954. Among the new casualties was the direct line from Wennington to Lancaster and Morecambe. From 1966 all trains took the Carnforth line and then reached Morecambe via the west coast main line and Hest Bank north junction. Passengers for Lancaster had to change at Carnforth. At the time there was still enough freight moving between Yorkshire and the Furness line for this to seem a reasonable compromise, but the freight soon dried up.

It became increasingly clear that a mistake had been made. Leeds trains were frequently delayed waiting for main line trains, even more in later years when they began to travel via Lancaster on their way to and from Morecambe. This detour also further extended the end-to end journey time. (In the meantime, the trackbed of the old line between Caton and Morecambe had become a very popular footpath and cycleway, which is described in another part of this website – the River Lune Millennium Park.) The stations between Skipton and Wennington remained open, though now unstaffed (Bell Busk had closed in 1959; between Wennington and Carnforth the stations of Melling, Arkholme and Borwick closed in 1960). A weekday pattern of seven trains a day was established. For a time in the 1980s some of these ran through to and from Hull.

A New Role?

When the run-down of the Settle-Carlisle began in 1982, BR proposed to run both through and connecting services from Leeds to the north via Carnforth and Lancaster (they had lifted the track on the Clapham-Low Gill line, the natural alternative to the S&C, in 1967). Extra car parking space and a telephone were installed at Giggleswick, which was again to become Settle Station. When the S&C was reprieved the semi-fast trains they had introduced were no more. Still looking for savings, in 1990 BR cut services from seven to four a day. The reason given was not that passenger numbers were low, but that they were short of train units and the urban areas had to have priority. Among the trains discontinued were the best-used of the day, the mid morning arrival in Leeds, and the evening service from Leeds.

Recovery

LASRUG – the Lancaster & Skipton Rail Users Group – was founded in 1991 to campaign for a speedy improvement of the service. The Lancashire and North Yorkshire County Councils with others set up a Joint Action Group, and Regional Railways North East showed its commitment by sponsoring a Development Group and a Promotions Group for the line. (These are now merged with those for the Settle-Carlisle.) In 1995 the weekday timetable was re-cast, with one additional train each way. For half the year there were still only two Sunday trains each way, both in the afternoon/evening. This timetable was inherited by the first private operator, MTL, and is the one still operated by Arriva Trains Northern. The Development Group agreed to prepare an application for funding for three additional Monday-to Saturday trains each way, under the new Rail Passenger Partnership scheme. Consultants produced an encouraging

report, and the bid was submitted in 1999. Unfortunately we are still waiting for the extra trains. The new Northern Rail Franchise commenced on 12 December 2004 and we hope that the new franchisee (Serco-Ned Railways) will seek to develop the line's services in accordance with our aspirations.

Up to the difficulties of 2002, passenger numbers had been growing steadily. The Promotions Group, in conjunction with the Settle-Carlisle Railway Development Company, publishes a colourful timetable and line guide twice each year, and with the Train Operating Company sponsors the Dales Railcard, which has encouraged many people in the rural areas to use the trains. The Leeds-Morecambe/Settle-Carlisle Partnership has succeeded the Development Group, and brings together representatives of local authorities, tourism agencies, the Train Operator, Network Rail, user groups and others. Many people are working hard to promote the line and to improve its services. We look forward to a prosperous and encouraging future for the line which is steeped in history and which has served our area well for the past 150 years.

The Line to the Sea. On 1st June 1850 the first train ran from Leeds through to the new harbour at Poulton-le-Sands, on the south side of Morecambe Bay. Alongside the port a new holiday resort was created, and a seaside home for wealthy industrialists.