

THE WEST LANCASHIRE LIGHT RAILWAY

A Short Note on the Preserved Narrow Gauge Railway at Station Road, Hesketh Bank

Narrow gauge railways (that is railways with a distance between the rails of less than the standard gauge of 4' 8½" (1435mm)) have been used since the earliest phase of the industrial revolution in the 18th century in conjunction with mining and quarrying. Even though most countries built their main railway networks to standard gauge, narrow gauge railways continued to find a role in a wide range of applications through the 19th and 20th centuries and throughout the world.

Narrow gauge railways were used extensively for the carriage of passengers and goods on secondary lines in a number of overseas countries and to a more limited extent in the British Isles.

Some of the applications that narrow gauge railways were employed in are listed below:

- Manufacturing industry (such as brickworks, chemicals, tanning, electric cables, engineering workshops).
- Mining (coal and other minerals).
- Quarrying (stone, clay, sand and gravel).
- Construction (tunnels, dams, roads).
- Municipal (such as waterworks, sewage works, land reclamation).
- Agriculture (such as potato growing, sugar beet, sugar cane, sisal).
- Military (in depots and in supplying battlefields).
- Estates (for transporting coal and other supplies and for general maintenance work)
- Public passenger and goods (lines such as the Ffestiniog Railway, Ashover Railway and Lynton & Barnstaple Railway).
- Leisure (either private, 'garden' lines or public passenger carrying lines such as seaside miniature railways and pier tramways).

The use of narrow gauge railways in Britain declined with the introduction of more motorised road vehicles after World War 1 and then significantly after World War 2 with the increasing costs of labour and with the modernisation of industries.

In 1967 a group of six school boys from Southport (mostly from King George V Grammar School) who had visited preserved and still operational narrow gauge lines such as the Ffestiniog Railway and the Isle of Man Railway decided to try and establish a narrow gauge railway in the Southport/West Lancashire area to preserve items of equipment from local industrial railways which were then being abandoned. They were offered the use of a piece of land on an informal basis by Alty's Brickworks, Hesketh Bank where the father of one of the boys was a director and laid out a line about 400 metres in length using track materials salvaged from the former narrow gauge railway that Alty's had, from other local brickworks and from Southport sewage works. Being located close to the original West Lancashire Railway (the former Southport – Preston Railway and branch from Hesketh Bank to Tarleton), it

was logical that the new venture took a name that retained something of the local railway heritage. Early in 1968 the group bought their first locomotive for £25; a Ruston & Hornsby diesel from the Burscough Brick & Tile Works. Later that year, a small passenger carriage was built and the line was opened to the public on Sundays and Bank Holidays.

The aims of the founders were to establish a working narrow gauge railway museum which would include an ability to operate passenger carrying trains and also provide display and interpretation opportunities for the more historic equipment together with something of the former context within which it operated. It was also seen appropriate to provide interpretation of local industrial heritage and of the former West Lancashire Railway if this became possible at some future date.

The expectation of some people was that a small group of enthusiasts working on a voluntary basis would find the task too demanding and 'the novelty would wear off'. However, the undertaking has thrived and over the years the number of people actively involved has grown, together with the number of visitors. Narrow gauge railway equipment, including several steam locomotives, has been acquired not just from the North West, but from elsewhere in Britain and from other countries. By way of examples, the collection includes representation from railways used in leisure, brickworks, waterworks, construction, mining, quarrying, military activities and steam, petrol, diesel and electric locomotives. The steam locomotives have come from England, Wales, Poland, Spain, France and Mozambique. Much of this equipment has historical significance, some being over 100 years old, some made by manufacturers which are no longer in existence or representing industries which have all but disappeared.

Similar narrow gauge railways and museums have also been established elsewhere within the UK, often on former quarry or industrial sites. Since the West Lancashire Light Railway is unique within the North West, it is effectively the narrow gauge, industrial museum for the region. Whilst many of the goals of the founders have been achieved, it is recognised that further enhancement would create both a better quality visitor facility and ensure that venture will be self-sustaining in terms of future voluntary membership. The core elements that are seen as critical to creating a better visitor facility (more of a 'whole day' visit rather than a hour's visit) and securing the other objectives are set out below:

- A longer and more interesting operating line (in terms of balancing the visitor experience and the resources to operate and maintain a line, it is felt that a distance of between 1 and 3 kilometres is optimal – this has also been the experience of similar operations elsewhere in the Country).
- A museum/interpretation building (where historic narrow gauge railway items which are currently stored can be displayed and interpreted together with other aspects of local heritage).
- Enhanced visitor facilities (car park, toilets and eating and refreshment).

Whilst the above may be achieved on a 'free-standing' basis, it is felt that a stronger context would be one linked to complimentary visitor facilities such as those concerned with country walks, cycling, heritage and wildlife.

The Railway is now owned and managed by a charitable trust and has over 100 members. It is soundly managed by a competent board and operates within a regime of external regulation so far as rail safety is concerned. All passenger trains are pulled by steam locomotives and the whole of the operating railway has been relaid with heavier rail to suit operation with these locomotives. The undertaking has also been fortunate to obtain a substantial stock of similar rail for possible extension of the line.

Everything that has been achieved by the Railway to date has been done solely from the resources of the members and from income generated by the Railway from visitors. It is an interesting fact that this venture has now been in existence 44 years whereas some of Britain's public narrow gauge railways which closed in the 1930s had lives of less than this.

The initiative to create the Tarleton & Hesketh Bank Linear Park is seen by the Railway Trust as highly positive. It is seen something which the Railway can benefit from and very much as something to which the Railway can bring benefits; these in terms of identity, its links to the community and its volunteering culture.

The Railway has a website: www.westlancs.org

NOTE: The use of the word 'Light' in the title of the West Lancashire Light Railway is to distinguish the venture from the original West Lancashire Railway (the former Southport – Preston Railway and branch from Hesketh Bank to Tarleton) and to indicate that it is a narrow gauge line. Whilst a light railway may be a lightly constructed standard gauge railway the term has historically also been extensively used by public narrow gauge railways.

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