

THE WEST LANCASHIRE RAILWAY THE RAIL LINK FROM SOUTHPORT TO PRESTON AND BLACKBURN.



In the late 1860s the business community of the fast growing town of Southport began to become increasingly concerned by the quality of the rail services provided by the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway (L&Y) and by the fact that this company had a monopoly position in relation to visitors who were the lifeblood of the town.

These feelings manifested themselves in definite proposals for a new railway system to serve the town. This was called the West Lancashire Railway (WLR) and the vision saw a system extending from Southport north to Preston and Blackburn and south to Liverpool. The aim was also to forge alliances with other major railway companies elsewhere in the country to break the wider power that the L&Y had.

The WLR was promoted in stages and the first Act of Parliament for the construction of the section from Southport to Preston received Royal Assent in 1871. Raising capital for the construction work was to prove a perpetual problem for the WLR and it was April 1873 before the first sod was cut at Little London, St. Luke's in Southport.

Construction work proceeded well until funds ran out later that year and it was 1876 before the project could restart. At this point a gentleman called Edward Holden joined the board. Edward was from a famous family and was the second son of Sir Isaac Holden who had made a fortune from woollen mills in

Bradford and Northern France. The Holdens were staunch Methodists and very active in the Liberal Party, Sir Isaac being an MP for many years. Edward had just moved to Southport, having married Maria Wood, the daughter of the first Mayor of Southport.

The input of capital from the Holdens enabled the WLR to be opened to the public in February 1878 from Hesketh Park in Southport to Hesketh Bank. Although the line traversed relatively flat countryside it was still an expensive line to build, needing a lot of bridges and crossing very soft ground. The WLR was designed by two of the most famous engineers of this period. Sir James Brunlees (engineer for Southport Pier and viaducts across the estuaries of Southern Lakeland as well as railway projects overseas) was nearing the end of his career, worked with the young Charles Douglas Fox who was later destined to be responsible for numerous major projects in Britain and abroad.

For the opening, the WLR bought some of the best equipment of the day, including three steam locomotives from Sharp Stewart & Company and elegant carriages from Ashbury Carriage & Wagon Company, both of Manchester. This was a clear statement to differentiate the WLR from the L&Y which had a reputation for old and dirty carriages.

Unfortunately capital ran out again and it was to be March 1882 before the next section from Hesketh Bank to Longton was opened. This section was one of the most difficult on the line and involved a deep cutting in hard boulder clay, a swing bridge over the River Douglas and a substantial embankment over the flood plain down to Hoole. The digging of the cutting was one of the first occasions that a mechanical excavator had been used on civil engineering work in Britain and was undertaken by a large, steam excavator made by Ruston & Dunbar in the USA.

In the meantime, in order to try and improve the financial performance of the Company, the WLR had opened a station and wharf on the western bank of the River Douglas and a branch line along the riverbank from Hesketh Bank to Tarleton basin on the Leeds & Liverpool Canal. This venture, the purchase of the paddle steamer *Virginia* and a fleet of canal barges is covered in the note on Shipping in the River Douglas.

By this stage, practically all of the capital was coming from the Holdens and this enabled the line to reach Preston and be opened in September 1882, just in time for the Guild celebrations. This section of line was completed by the construction of a connection from Penwortham to link to Blackburn and by elegant station buildings at Southport Central and Preston Fishergate. The stations were the work of the well-known Lancashire firm of architects Maxwell & Tuke.

Ambitions were still high amongst the promoters, even though the operation of the WLR was showing some financial weakness partially due to the Country entering a period of recession, and a start was made on the link to Liverpool. It had been hoped to create a link line beneath the Promenade at Southport between the WLR and another, newly built railway: the Southport & Cheshire Lines Extension Railway (S&CLER) which has its terminal at the southern end

of the Promenade and Lord Street. This Railway was largely promoted by an alliance of three major railway companies: the Midland, the Great Northern and the Great Central. It gave Southport a second route to Manchester and Liverpool and access to the networks of these three companies. Unfortunately, Southport Corporation opposed the tunnel beneath the Promenade and this meant that another expensive railway had to be promoted from a junction at Meols Cop in the east of Southport across very sparsely populated countryside to meet the S&CLER at Altcar.

This line was promoted through a separate company called the Liverpool, Southport & Preston Junction Railway (LSPJR); the name clearly indicating the intent to take traffic from Liverpool to Southport and Preston via the WLR.

This was also a very expensive line to build and it was only paid for by the Holdens using more of their personal wealth. It was opened on 2nd September 1887. This was one day later than scheduled as the contractor, who had not received all the money due to him, removed rails at each end of the line on the scheduled opening day!

By this stage both the WLR and its sibling the LS&PJR were in receivership to Edward Holden and whilst the WLR was holding its own financially the LS&PJR was a financial disaster with income only covering a third of the operating costs. This situation was exacerbated by the Great Central Railway choosing to use its capital and efforts to build a new link to London rather than expand its empire in the North West where it had promoted a new line from the WLR at Preston to Blackpool. This was destined never to be built.

All of this left the WLR and LS&PJR as a relatively small local line, with less than 20 locomotives. Some of these were rather antiquated having been purchased second hand from the London Brighton and South Coast Railway and even the newer ones were also becoming worn out. As a small line, it was a minor irritant rather than serious competition for the L&Y. In 1897, the L&Y offered to purchase the WLR and LS&PJR and the Holdens, as receivers and major shareholders, accepted the offer.

The WLR was refurbished by the L&Y and settled down to a role of providing a useful link between Southport and Preston and East Lancashire, with some trains running through as far as Burnley and Todmorden. The WLR's own stations at Southport and Preston were both closed and passenger trains run instead into the main L&Y stations in both towns. Through the link at the main station in Preston a significant holiday trade between Scotland and Southport was established.

The whole of the LS&PJR was still loss making at this stage and the L&Y tried to reduce costs by operating passenger services by one carriage steam railmotors instead of ordinary trains. The railmotor service on this line rejoiced in the nickname 'Altcar Bob'. The Tarleton Branch had never had passenger services at all and in 1912 the L&Y tried a railmotor on the line, working through to Southport. This trial showed that there was not enough traffic and the service was withdrawn after one year.

Prior to this, in 1903, the L&Y had become the first major railway in the Country to electrify one of its lines, that between Southport and Liverpool. The L&Y also extended this electrification to Crossens as a suburban service for Southport and as a precursor to electrification of the former WLR right through to Preston.



This would probably have seen a small coal fired power station being built by the L&Y adjacent to the River Douglas at Hesketh Bank. World War 1 however interfered with these plans and it was not long afterwards (in 1923) that the railways of Britain were grouped by the Government into four big companies, with the L&Y becoming part of the London Midland & Scottish Railway (LMS). In common with many other parts of the railway network in the North West, the former WLR saw little investment. The situation was worse on the former LS&PJR section which lost its passenger services in 1936.

After World War 2, Britain's railways were in a very run down condition and were nationalised in 1948, becoming British Railways (BR). The LS&PJR lost its goods services and closed down in 1952 but nationalisation did not affect the former WLR greatly which carried on as before, offering the public a frequent service of steam hauled trains between Southport and Preston and Southport and East Lancashire. This was a double track line on which all of the stations were still fully staffed with station masters and porters and there were numerous, old fashioned signal boxes and manually operated level crossings. All of this provided employment for probably over 200 railway men but contributed to a situation where operating costs were higher than the income generated. Despite many stations still being lit by oil lamps and the

trains being hauled by steam locomotives, the railway could (and did on a daily basis) carry people between Southport and Preston in 27 minutes, a fact which is now almost beyond belief.



The early 1960s saw Doctor Beeching appointed by the Government to 'reshape Britain's railways'. This reshaping took the form of amputating large parts of the network. Some lines clearly had little potential for a turn around in their economic performance but the Southport to Preston line was one that should have had a closer look at its economics to see if efficiencies could be made in its operation rather than going for wholesale closure. However, this was not to be and on 7th September 1964 the line closed to all traffic. This was the era of motorway building and a belief that the future of transport lay with the car. At that time the main road between Southport and Preston was seen as being one of the best in the Country and, with low traffic volumes and few speed restrictions, one could then drive between the two towns in a little over half an hour.



In order to ensure that debate about the future of newly closed railways was not encouraged, the tracks were removed from all of them immediately after

closure. This included the Southport to Hesketh Bank section and the removal of all bridges which carried the line over watercourses, together with that over the River Douglas. This was followed by a process of selling off the track-bed piecemeal and it is unfortunate that in this case the local authorities did not buy the track-bed and bridges at that time to secure them for a future cycleway or merely to preserve the route. The main reason for this was that local authorities only usually bought old railway track-beds at that time where they might have some use in connection with road improvements rather than potential cycle links.

One of the railway tracks was left in place for a few years on the section of line from Preston to the northern bank of the River Douglas as it was proposed to build a nuclear power station adjacent to the old railway and the River, on the eastern bank. The railway line would have been used to move nuclear fuel to and from the power station. Fortunately for the locality, this proposal was dropped but this meant that the remaining track-bed east of the Douglas could then also be sold off.

In 1968 the West Lancashire Light Railway (WLLR) was founded by a group of enthusiasts with the aim of preserving and operating narrow gauge railway equipment. Its site at Hesketh Bank is close to the original West Lancashire Railway and the WLLR are keen to realise an ambition to extend their line onto part of the former WLR track-bed. The WLLR is now configured as trust and aims to create a museum at Hesketh Bank that can tell the stories of: narrow gauge railways and the industries they served, the former Southport to Preston railway (WLR) and other aspects of local heritage. The WLLR has a collection of photographs and other memorabilia from the former Southport to Preston railway and these are in store pending the building of suitable exhibition facilities.

Today the main roads of the area are congested and all of the villages between Southport and Preston have grown very significantly, largely on the basis of commuting to Southport and Preston. One could see that had the railway between Southport and Preston survived as a more efficiently run community line, it could now have a very useful role. Equally, had the railway not survived but the track-bed and especially the bridge over the Douglas passed into local authority ownership, this could have reduced some of the challenges in creating a long distance cycle route between Southport and Preston.

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