

1. Bridge of Weir — The Railway

Brian Turner

Introduction:

It is quite apparent that the coming of the railway not only significantly enhanced the importance of Bridge of Weir, but also had a profound effect on the topography of the core of the village, as we shall see when we examine the construction work involved in creating it. Furthermore, in the present day and age, when railways over the whole of mainland Europe and the UK are undergoing a renaissance, being increasingly seen as the answer to excessive use of car transport and juggernaut long-distance haulage, it is noteworthy that the initiative for the first railway from Bridge of Weir came from within the community. This happened, of course, in the so-called 'age of railway mania', when railways were springing up all over the place connecting adjacent communities and ones farther apart.

Historical:

The earliest proposed scheme for a railway dates from 1845. The ambitious scheme was aimed at linking Johnstone, Houston, Bridge of Weir, and Port Glasgow; but it foundered through problems with finance and was abandoned. Not until 1861 did a group of local businessmen, landed gentry, and men of letters get together and successfully promulgate the idea of a railway to connect Bridge of Weir with the 'outside world'. At that time the gateway to the outside world was seen as Johnstone, from where trains could be taken to Glasgow (eastwards) and Carlyle. Even London could be reached (westwards via Dalry and Kilmarnock). So it was that the 'Bridge of Weir Railway Act' of 1862 was passed, with an arrangement for the G&SWR to work the line. Construction was immediately commenced and the line opened by mid 1864. Trains on the single-track line started from a short-lived station located within what was later to be the Goods Yard. The station buildings later became the 'Railway Cottages', along from what is now the Doctor's Surgery. Only after the line had commenced operation under the independent company were negotiations entered into with the G&SWR. They took over the following year under the 'Glasgow & South Western Railway (Amalgamations) Act of 1865.

Meanwhile a group of Greenock merchants, concerned about the future prosperity of their port, and a group of Kilmarnock colliery owners, anxious to find an outlet for exporting their coal, promoted the 'Greenock and Ayrshire Railway Bill', with the view of linking up the two areas. Though the G&AR was nominally independent, it is clear that the G&SWR was associated with the venture. A 'grand scheme' was devised whereby the G&AR would build a railway to Bridge of Weir to link up with the G&SWR's recently acquired line in an 'end on' junction at a new Bridge of Weir Station. The G&SWR's line would be upgraded as befitted a through line, and would incorporate the construction of an easterly link with the G&SWR's main line at Elderslie, thus allowing direct trains to Glasgow for the first time and providing a competitive alternative to the Caledonian Railway's existing route from Paisley to Greenock (the line we now know as the route to Greenock via Bishopton).

These developments took place over the period 1865-69, and necessitated the closure of the existing branch for a year whilst the upgrading took place, services being covered by the now common place 'replacement bus service' - presumably horse-drawn! The new 'continuous' railway through the village from Johnstone

(Thorn Junction) to Greenock (Albert Harbour, later known as Princes Pier) opened for goods traffic (coal from the Ayrshire field) in August 1869 and for passengers in December 1869. The spur to Elderslie, connecting with Glasgow (Bridge Street) was opened at the same time. The extension to Glasgow (St Enoch) came four years later.

Changes Brought About by the Building of the Railway:

During the G&SWR upgrading the face of Bridge of Weir in the vicinity of the railway was changed considerably, emerging much as it is today. For instance, the Johnstone Road into Bridge of Weir which had hitherto run in, near enough a straight line, from the east of the Episcopal Church to what is now the road outside the Doctor's Surgery was diverted to the left and raised, with the aid of walled abutments, to make room for a new double-track railway and station (the ruined remains of which exist today), with a right-angled dog-leg to cross the line and drop to the original alignment near what is now Lintwhite Crescent. Years later (1939) the road was widened giving an angled crossing over the line, much as it is today. Farther to the east, the doubling of the line necessitated the construction of a new Locher Viaduct. The remains of the old one can still be seen built into the abutments of the new. Likewise the building of the G&AR line to the west of Bridge of Weir Station changed the face of the village considerably, with houses being demolished and much excavation and infill required. The source of much of the fill was the Powburn Quarry. The original Torr Road, from its junction with Main Street to Damhead, had to be lowered and realigned as part of the approaches to the imposing five-span viaduct with its distinctive skew arches which now enjoys Grade B listing.

Changes Subsequent to the Arrival of the Railway:

Up until the coming of the 'through' railway, the village of Bridge of Weir was virtually confined to that area now definable as 'north of the trackbed'. The lands of Ranfurly, to the south of the railway remained virtually undeveloped. When the G&AR was formally taken over by the G&SWR in 1876 the latter company saw the advantage of marketing the village as a place for housing development, targeting the well-to-do merchant and business classes seeking a cleaner environment than the smoke and grime of Glasgow. Concession rate season tickets for would-be householders and their spouses were amongst the incentives offered. So it was that the distinguished villas on the slopes leading to Ranfurly Hill and Horsewood came to be. The Ranfurly Hotel in Castle Terrace was built by the Bonar family around this time. Housing developments, albeit of a more modest nature, continued throughout the early years of the Twentieth Century, up to the Second World War, attracted by the good first rail communications with Paisley and Glasgow.

The Decline of the Railway:

In the years that followed the end of the Second World War, the rising popularity of the motorcar was beginning to take effect. The run-down condition of the railways after the war and the failure, perhaps through no fault of their own, of the railways to adapt to the needs of the traveller meant that rail travel was losing out to the motorcar everywhere; but nowhere more than in this particular village.

In railway terms, the G&SWR route through Bridge of Weir had held its own against the rival Caledonian Railway route in the competition to capture Glasgow's 'doon the

watter' steamer traffic from Greenock to Argyll and Bute. They had countered the Caley's ambitious and highly successful project of extending their line to Gourrock and opening up Gourrock as a port (completed in 1889), by building an imposing waterside terminal at Greenock, Princes Pier (opened in 1894). The amalgamation of both companies within the LMS at 'grouping' in 1921 led, in time, to some rationalisation of services, but trains continued to run between Glasgow and Greenock using both routes. The reduction in traffic after the Second World War meant that there was surplus infrastructure capacity, and in this situation the rail operator, now BR, had a positive drive to eliminate route duplication. They tended to favour the former Caley route, the one with the easier gradients, to serve the Greenock area – hence the above average rate of decline in the use of the route through the village. The decline in both the Clyde steamer services and the export of coal led to a steady decline in the use of the line. Nevertheless, local services continued to use the whole length of the line from Greenock until 1959, with the occasional 'ocean liner' express boat trains continuing to run into the early 1960s.

The line to the west of Kilmacolm was closed to ordinary passenger traffic in 1959 and the remaining line through the village became, in effect, a branch-line commuter service. Freight services were withdrawn from both Kilmacohn and Bridge of Weir in 1965 and, despite the introduction of short diesel-multiple-unit trains and line-singling, the quality of service steadily declined. The line had a strong clientele of regular users, although passenger services had been cut back to the point where they were no longer attractive to many more potential users. Nevertheless, in keeping with the ruthless application of Beeching-style management ethos prevalent at the time, the line was closed to all traffic in January 1983, the track being lifted with indecent haste soon afterwards.

An 'interlink' service, connecting with trains at Johnstone Station had been tried out, in anticipation of closure, whilst the trains to the village were still running; but was presumably deemed unsuccessful, as it was not reinstated when closure actually took place. Instead, a subsidised replacement bus service, detouring to the railway station forecourt, was introduced for a limited period, being one of the conditions imposed when closure was authorised. The subsidy was subsequently withdrawn and fares rose accordingly, but buses continued to use the route up until July 2000, when the state of the road forced its abandonment.

The trackbed and ancillary areas were placed in the custody of Sustrans, the national charity charged with creating a nationwide network of recreational cycle tracks and rural walkways out of the disused railway system. Such a track now exists on the old trackbed through the village as part of the cycleway from Paisley to Greenock.

What of the Future?

Since the closure of the railway in 1983, travel fashions have changed markedly. Road congestion has increased significantly, and nowhere more so than on the commuter routes between Bridge of Weir, Paisley, and Glasgow. As a nation we have become very conscious of the existence of pollution from road traffic and to the extent that it seems to be affecting world climate conditions. Elsewhere, particularly on the continent of Europe, a positive response to the threat has been to encourage the use of public transport, as opposed to the private motorcar, and to this end there

have been tremendous innovations, too extensive to deal with here. Featuring prominently amongst these is a strong recognition of the part that railways can and must play in the resurgence of public transport. The UK has been slow to align itself with these views; but in the last few years there have been numerous innovations in the field. The Strathclyde Passenger Transport Authority (SPT) has itself drawn up ambitious plans for public transport throughout the region - though none so far that will directly benefit Bridge of Weir.

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