

4. A Tour of Renfrewshire's Forgotten Railways

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Ginger Biscuits, Hen's Eggs and Puddle Jumping

On 13th March 2004 Gordon McCrae led a "Renfrewshire's forgotten railways" trip. His enthusiasm, and his packet of ginger biscuits, were as usual to the fore. A good day was had by all, and as an aside, we also discovered some of Renfrewshire's prime "winching" sites. Thanks to Gordon for sharing his enthusiasm for the byeways and backwaters. This article is dedicated to his memory - Brian Skillen.

The Poultry Line

Renfrewshire's railways once had a unique flavour, not least the planned but never completed Abbey Gate to Glasgow atmospheric railway of 1846. More real but only in the sense of its eccentric existence was the Renfrew Railway. A curious line, built to the "Scotch" gauge of four feet six inches that had begun operating trains even before its official opening date of 3rd April 1837. The narrow gauge may have been chosen for Presbyterian righteousness of sitting up straight and discouraging familiarity between the sexes. Whatever was the case the coaches were akin to box pews. The railway was driven more by the needs of the grain trade than passengers and the first trains were grain waggons hauled by horses. It was also unique in its operations as they depended on river steamer times more than a fixed timetable. How dedicated the crew might be to getting away on time also, as we shall see, depended on the egg laying time of a large white hen.

It was scattered grain that had first attracted the Renfrew village hens and the grain train special. Its first load off an Irish boat on 3rd April 1837 was rather more important than the passenger special to mark the opening day. The first freight of any size hints at the aims of the little railway to provide a fast feeder between Renfrew wharfs and Paisley in competition with the Cart Navigation.

Even the first steam locomotives came via Renfrew wharf on board a boat from Glasgow. The engine managed to fall off the new line, even before it got to Paisley, but willing hands levered it on again. It was this enthusiasm that led to the line carrying 2,459 people and 600 bolls of grain as well as 30 tons of bark and birch, inside its first week.

The passengers travelled for curiosity though and trains to the tidewater were all very well but the steamers were far from keen to dock at Renfrew and generally loaded or unloaded mid stream enroute along the Clyde. The unwillingness to dock at Renfrew seems to have reflected the animosity of some boat captains to the railway which they saw as competition for the Cart Navigation. Embarkation or dropping off passengers to Renfrew was therefore by small boat and as a result users sometimes fell into the Clyde. Clyde connections probably became more formalised once "The Paisley", a Murdoch, Aitken & Company locomotive, came down river from Glasgow in June 1837. It was man-handled onto the line at Renfrew where it then toddled off up to Paisley, getting there in about 20 minutes.

It was not just the Clyde steamer captains who impacted the new railway but also the customs and for sometime they limited the line's shipping trade between Glasgow and Cloch Light, but negotiation of terms allowed this problem to be overcome.

The railway was controlled by a board of management; running operations were by

contractors and this brought its own problems. Barr and Brown, when they had the contract, often used the locomotives like a taxi and would jump off where they wanted. This worked well in theory but in Autumn 1837 Brown fell under the train at Fulbar Lane as he jumped off.

The biggest impact on services came with the opening of Woodrow's Inn at Renfrew wharf, hoping to cash in on the passenger traffic. It was also a place where people could dry off after falling into the Clyde. Woodrow established quite a little business and kept hens in the modern parlance 'free range'. Their range included the train yard and the line to Paisley from the evidence of the large white hen which took a fancy to riding the train and paid her way with eggs. The eggs were taken by the train crews when Woodrow wasn't watching and a train might be delayed at Fulbar Lane during the check for freshly laid eggs.

At Renfrew wharf, trains sat for a very different reason, sometimes until hens were got clear of the track, but more often for late running steamers and Woodrow's customers. Timetables were a total joke by 1841 and the independent little line could no longer be trusted to deliver any reasonable service. It was like back to the days of the interurban stage coach, when crews took time out to fish or hunt the lassies.

A line like this had no place in the industrialisation of the Paisley and Renfrew areas. Services were certainly eclipsed as Paisley began to enjoy main line services. But even when taken over on 24th July 1847 by the Glasgow, Paisley, Kilmarnock & Ayr Railway, the little line did as it pleased. Though by then the engines were laid up and horses hauled the line once more.

When taken over by the Glasgow & South Western Railway the "Scotch" gauge of four feet six inches was at last standardised and in 1866 the line became part of the greater Scottish system. Until closure on 5th June 1967 the railway provided a brief passenger service then mostly works and freight services. A great deal of railway infrastructure remained into the 1970s including old fashioned tank waggons at Renfrew. In some form or another this remarkable little line lasted 130 or more years out of sight and out of mind to most people.

Renfrew to Paisley was a very old part of the travel route from Glasgow to Paisley, and the line was part of an attempt to speed up the process. The railway, like all early railways, was open to all sorts of influences and was never an independent success. It was too dependent on riverside connections. It was also irrelevant for the most part to local industrialisation whose crowds of workers were so much better handled by trams and independent bus operators. Two centuries after its conception and in the post modern, post industrial world, it is just as difficult to travel from Glasgow to Paisley via Renfrew, and it is still a byeway.

Even more out of the way was another local line, a bog railway, which oddly had strong connections also to the Clyde, not least in its sleepers, being mainly cut down ships' timbers from ship breaking, when the line was built.

Dogs Only in Covered Compartments

A two-road corrugated iron shed and rails about the boggy braes of Duchal Moor are the remains of a once interesting little railway (Figure 6). It was built in 1922 for Sir James Lithgow of Port Glasgow's Lithgow shipbuilders and its purpose was to carry shooting parties to the butts across the bog lands in shooting season. Who actually

built the railway is not quite clear as it has been credited to both the Glasgow & South Western Railway and Lithgow's own men. It is likely that Lithgow used his men thus to keep them employed during a downturn in the ship building industry. Technical help probably came from the Glasgow & South Western who also may have transported the rails which were attributed to an old colliery source.

Infrastructure on the line was basic, probably to keep costs down as building the line eventually worked out to about £1,000 per mile. Why? The line had to be stabilised across the bog and was probably built in part on cut timber rafts as well as carefully built up embankments and a few bridges, including a viaduct of sorts. The gauge was a nominal 0.61 metres and the total length of the line 8 kms. There were three branches, sharp bends and crazy gradients to contend with, giving a roller coaster ride. Much of the timber cut for the railway's construction was wood from old warships broken up on the Clyde. Thus it became a very Heath Robinson little line and yet there was substantial and good work. Exploring the track conditions near the sheds in 2004 showed that it was still in reasonable nick, but dead points revealed how the line had deteriorated and a short distance out on the bog the track deteriorated very quickly. The presence of rounded timber sleepers probably originated from old ship timbers and these could still be found in 2004. But also present were substantial 'new' wooden sleepers as well as some concrete sleepers. Certificate of maintenance was retained well into the 1980s and this accounted for the still presentable line. However plans for a tourist line across the bog area were thwarted by more general neglect and vandalism

In its final days the little railway suffered continual attack. Waggon's were sometimes taken out along the line and then raced down severe gradients until they were wrecked. It was even the case that 182 metres of track were removed one night by "scrapers".

The locomotives and rolling stock were basic but effective. All three engines were Motor Rail and Tram Car Company Ltd., products. Both the works Nos. 2097 and 2171 were new to the line and were petrol mechanical tractors of 20 hp. coming to Duchal Moor direct via Langbank. Very similar tractors of the type were used during the wars and large numbers survive in preservation. Although excellent engines, they did behave like aggravated clockwork toys when running along poor track. The third engine was ex-J. Arnold & Sons Ltd., Leighton Buzzard and had a Dorman 2DWD 20/28hp. diesel engine. A weighty standard universal coupler was found from one of the Motor Rails in the shed in 2004 and most likely originated from the third machine. Chains, couplers and pins also lay about as if operations might start again.

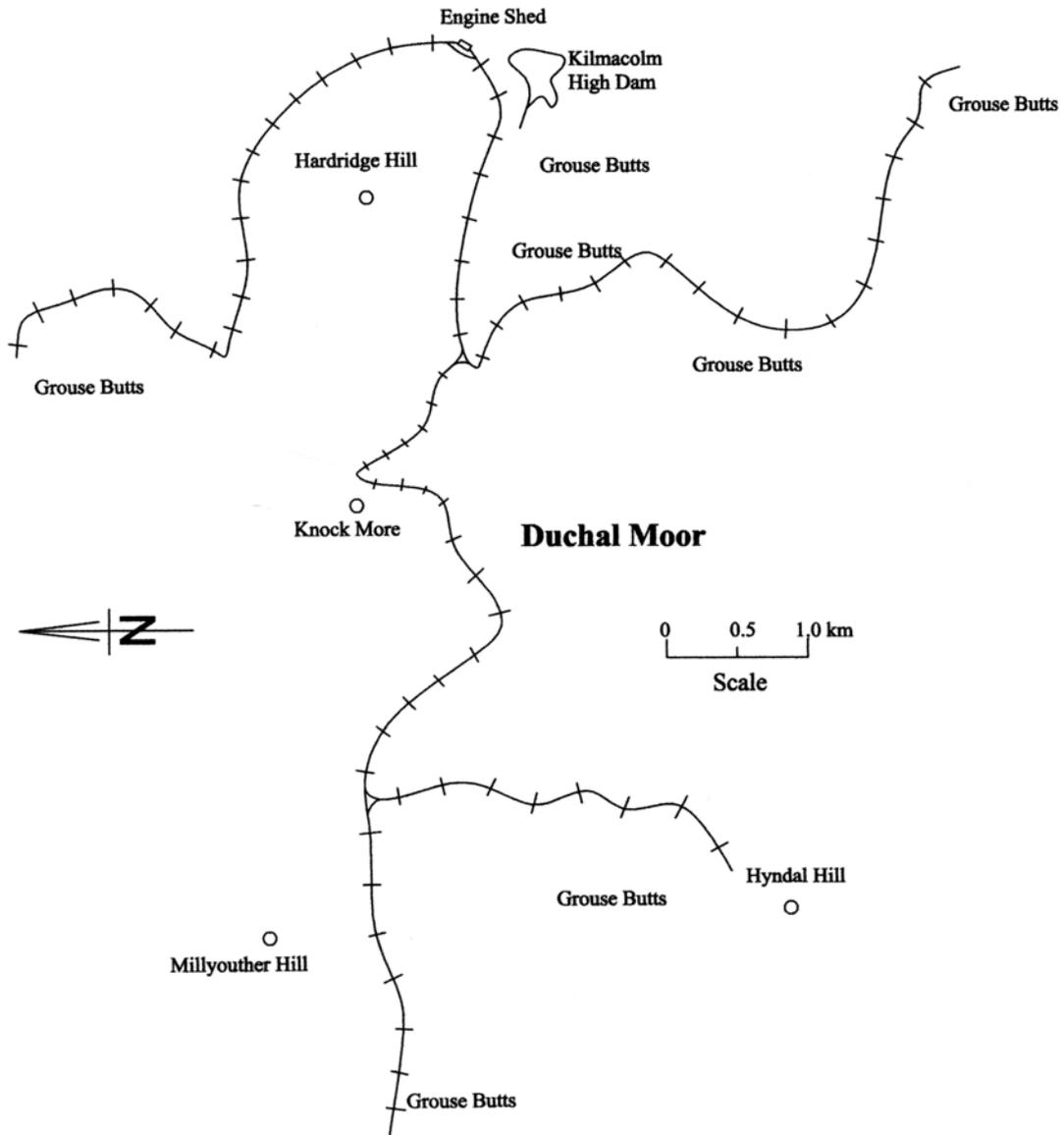
Rolling stock included gun and dog waggon's, the latter's bogland journey must have shaken the beasts to bits. But it was dogs only in covered compartments as the passenger cars were of the most basic type, "four wheel opens" with guard rails and "tram type" reversible back seats.

The mechanical infrastructure survived the closure of the line to a greater or lesser extent. The Duchal Moor Railway, or as it was also known, the Hardridge Grouse Railway, would have been a great boon to open up access to the moorland development as a heritage site.

Conclusion

Both the Duchal and Renfrew lines were widely divergent in experience and history.

Yet each in their own way was connected to the Clyde, was a historical backwater and was largely ignored. It was in this aspect of local history that Gordon played such an important part, as too few turn their attention away from stock heritage themes. The byeways of Renfrewshire history are full of interest and Gordon McCrae and a very few other like-minded researchers had begun to open up research along the byeways and backwaters to others, and methodical fieldwork must carry on in his honour.



Duchal Railway: Sketch Plan

Figure 6