

BANBRIDGE JUNCTION RAILWAY



The **"Banbridge Junction Railway"** was the original name of the 6½ mile branch line from Banbridge in County Down to Scarva, where it joined the main line from Belfast to Dublin. The branch was always noted as being a particularly attractive and interesting section of line, where the steam locomotives had to work hard to climb the steep gradients as well as run through pleasing riverside scenery along the valley of the River Bann. In common with many other minor railways, the branch became a victim of competition from road transport, and was closed in 1955.

The Railway Preservation Society of Ireland now intends to promote the re-opening of this line, using preserved steam trains which would operate on Saturdays during the summer and at holiday periods. This leaflet explains the background to the proposal.

About the Railway Preservation Society

The Society, which has 600 members, was formed in 1964 when the last steam trains were disappearing from the railways of Ireland. The object of the Society is to preserve and operate a varied selection of historic locomotives, carriages and other railway equipment. Over the past 18 years, 11 locomotives and 20 carriages have been preserved, and restoration of these to working order is taking place, mainly by voluntary effort. The Society has its base at Whitehead in Co. Antrim, where it has provided the necessary workshop facilities and storage sidings. During the summer, Whitehead Excursion Station is open to the public and short steam train rides are operated. The Society's main activity is the operation of about ten steam excursion trains each year on the main lines, by courtesy of Northern Ireland Railways. The best known of these are the "Portrush Flyer" from Belfast to Portrush, and the "Steam Enterprise" from Belfast to Dublin.

Why Re-open a Branch Line?

Although operation of steam trains on the main lines has proved to be very popular and successful, a number of problems are becoming apparent as time goes on.

1. Modernisation of the main line railway system means that the traditional features associated with the steam railway are rapidly disappearing; signal boxes, semaphore signals, gated level crossings and traditional station buildings will soon be things of the past, unless active steps are taken to preserve them.
2. Modernisation also means that the railways are now designed for high speed diesel and electric trains, and features essential to the running of steam locomotives such as turntables and water tanks are no longer required. Inevitably, the engine drivers with steam experience are gradually retiring, and all this places uncertainty upon the long term future of the Society's main line trains.

3. At present, the public has only a limited opportunity to see a steam railway at work. Also, those who wish to take part in railway operation as volunteers must be content with the limited scope of the Whitehead train rides, or else take part only in the restoration and maintenance of the trains.

It would be a great loss to future generations of Ulster people if, as a result of the problems outlined, the steam trains which were for over a century a prominent feature of the landscape could no longer operate. The Society has therefore decided that the best way to tackle the problem is to set up a preserved branch line, which would be restored to a condition typical of the pre-war period, and would preserve in working order all the facilities necessary for the operation of steam trains.

Why Choose the Line from Banbridge to Scarva?

The Society examined a number of possible lines, and eventually chose the Banbridge to Scarva line for several reasons, the most important of which are:

1. It is a true branch line, that is to say it has a junction with the main line at Scarva and a terminus in the town of Banbridge. This means that the Society's wide range of historic locomotives and coaches, which are already maintained to operate on the main lines, can also run on the branch line and thus avoid the necessity for the costly provision of additional rolling stock. As well, rail traffic can operate to and from the branch, and there is ready access to railway workshops and equipment.
2. The Scarva-Banbridge line is unique in that it combines all the features which go to make a railway attractive and interesting both to travel on and to operate. In 6½ miles are found steep gradients, cuttings and embankments, road, river and canal bridges, attractive riverside and lakeside scenery, level crossings and intermediate stations.
3. The line is within easy travelling distance of the main centres of population in the Belfast and Craigavon areas, and also the holiday resort of Newcastle.
4. Although removal of some earthworks and bridge structures has taken place, this is nowhere so serious as to make re-instatement of the line impracticable. Other lines examined had suffered much more seriously.
5. The scheme would fit in well with other local projects, for example the proposed re-opening of the Newry Canal.

Requirements

In order for the scheme to proceed, the following are essential:

1. The goodwill and support of the local community.
2. A means to re-instate the railway which is acceptable to the owners of the land on which the line used to run and which does not interfere with residential areas, agriculture or business.
Immediate agreement would be required with the landowners to preserve intact the remaining railway earthworks and structures.
3. A private Act of Parliament authorising the re-opening of the line.
4. Volunteers prepared to help re-build and operate the railway.
5. Finance. The cost of rebuilding the railway will depend upon voluntary work and unemployment relief projects, and also to what extent good quality second-hand track and bridge materials are available. Rails and sleepers, for example, will cost in the region of £20,000 per mile. The railway will take a number of years to rebuild, and it is estimated that £50,000 would be required each year. It is hoped that the project would qualify for 75% grant aid, and this would leave the balance to be found by subscription, share issue and commercial activities. Because of the intermediate stations at Lawrencetown and Lenaderg, the line is very suitable for re-opening in stages as finance becomes available. The sums mentioned are formidable ones, but by no means out of line with similar projects.

Progress So Far

The Railway Preservation Society has set up a steering committee to further the project. The name "Banbridge Junction Railway Company" has been adopted. Negotiations have been initiated with all interested parties, in particular the land owners, the District Council, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland and the Department of Agriculture. A preliminary feasibility study has established the legal and engineering requirements.

Further Information

Enquiries regarding the project are welcomed and should be addressed to the Secretary, Banbridge Junction Railway Company.

Photograph

Ex Great Northern Railway (Ireland) locomotive No.171 with a special train near Antrim. This is an example of locomotives and carriages preserved by the RPSI which could be used on the Scarva-Banbridge line.

