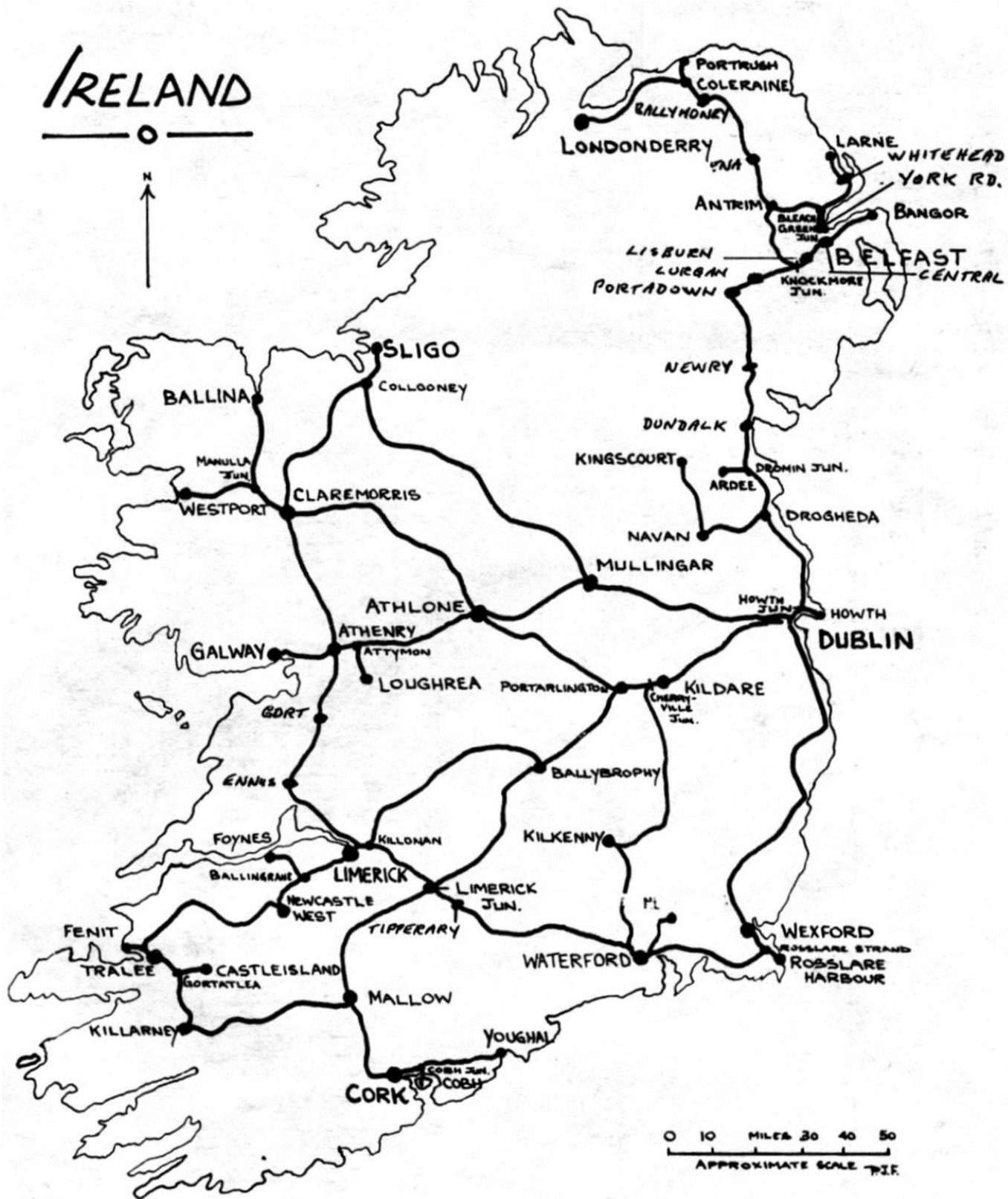

R.P.S.I. International Raitour

Northern Section

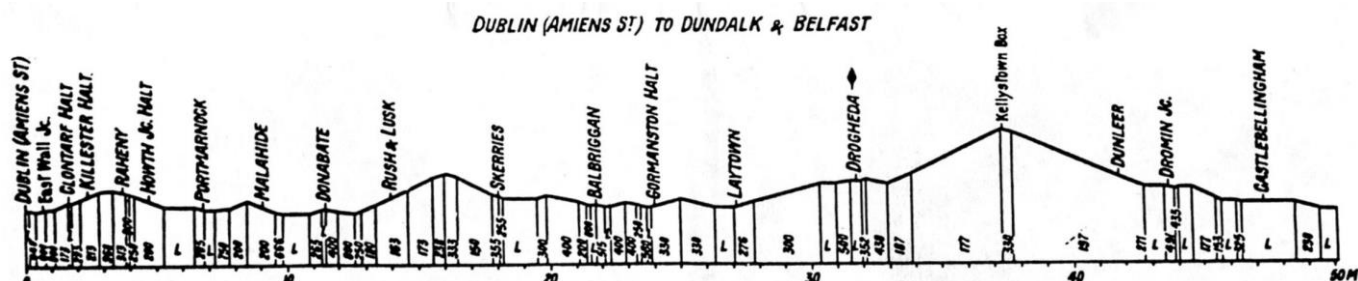


IRELAND



RPSI INTERNATIONAL RAILTOUR - SUPPLEMENT

Today we head northwards over the 112 mile former GNR(I) main line to Belfast. The GNR was formed in 1876 by the amalgamation of its constituent companies and at its height in the 20th century had some 560 miles of route. The partition of Ireland in 1922 made it an international railway and endowed it with the difficulties arising from such an operation. Eventually in 1958 those parts of it in Northern Ireland were taken over by the Ulster Transport Authority and the remainder by CIÉ - assets, including rolling stock, being divided between the two. In the North, by 1965 only the main line, the Antrim Branch and the Belfast Central Railway remained. During the 1970s the latter line was revived by NIR to restore the link with the Bangor line via the new Central station on the site of Maysfields sidings, the Great Victoria Street terminus being demolished and the line from Central Junction lifted. There is now talk of Great Victoria Street being partially resurrected in order to give better access to the city centre. In the South similar pruning has taken place, the principal appendages remaining being the recently electrified Howth Branch and the freight-only Branch from Drogheda to Kingscourt via Navan. Throughout the course of the main line mileposts are on the Down side, zero being Dublin Connolly.



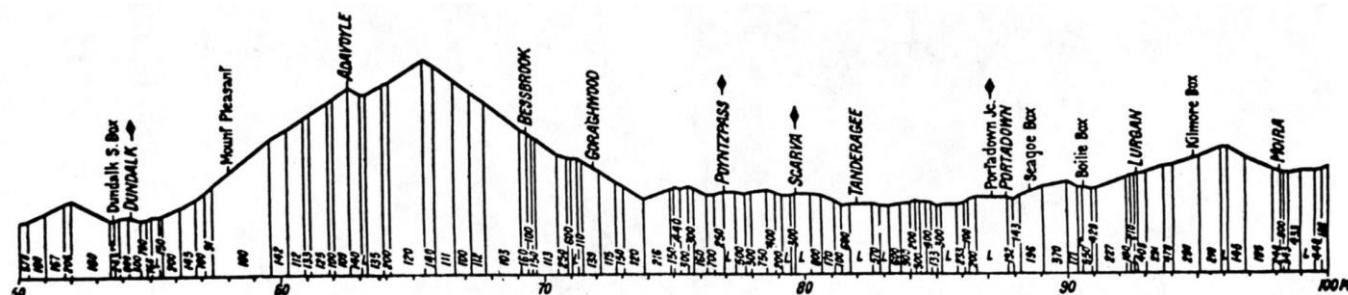
On leaving Connolly Station we see the GNR engine shed on the Up side and then pass over the lines by which the former GS&WR and MGWR are connected to the goods yards at North Wall Docks. The GNR's docks connection diverges from the Up main line a little further on at East Wall Junction. The line climbs at a maximum of 1/173 for 3 miles before falling again through Howth Junction, passing en route several suburban stations recently refurbished in connection with the Dart electrification. At Howth Junction the electrified lines diverge to the right to complete the 3½ miles to Howth. Passing through Portmarnock Halt, we come to Malahide, a very well maintained station and former block post. Before crossing a long causeway over a tidal inlet we may glimpse the remains of two former Belfast Harbour Commissioner steam tugs - the amount visible depending on the state of the tide! Between here and Drogheda the line is seldom far from the shore of the Irish Sea. After passing through Donabate we climb the 3½ miles of the Rush Bank, passing the halt of Rush & Lusk (not convenient to either village) and then descend again at 1/150 to the seaside resort of Skerries. The gradients are more gentle for the next 24 miles and at Balbriggan one may catch sight, on the Down side, of the premises of a manufacturer of prize-winning hosiery. Such competitions appear to have died out in the early part of this century!

Further on we pass Gormanston with its military air base and then the more recently constructed (1948) halt of Mosney which serves the former Butlins Holiday Camp by a loop off the Down line.

Continuing through Laytown we approach Drogheda, the first major station and junction for the Kingscourt Branch which diverges from the Down line, the modern signal cabin being situated between the two lines. The station has two platforms on a tight curve with a line usually occupied by wagons in between and a bay at the Dublin end of the Up platform. Also behind this platform are the engine shed and turntable, along with some sidings which trail into the Up line further out at the Dublin end. On the Down side at the Belfast end are sidings with loading

banks and the now closed North cabin, also a water column which is of value to the RPSI. On leaving Drogheda the line crosses the Boyne Viaduct high above the waterway of such significance in Irish history. The track over the viaduct is interlaced and about ½ mile further on the long curving Cement Siding joins the up line. Drogheda's cement output is now concentrated at Platin, served by the Kingscourt Branch and the siding appears to be little used nowadays. From here it is a 5 mile climb at 1/177 to Kellystown. The summit of this section used to be marked by the smallest signal box (4 levers) on the GNR. The northern side of the Kellystown bank is slightly less steep and the line falls through Dunleer, now used as a ballast loading point, to Dromin Junction at which the 5 mile Ardee Branch diverged from the Down line. Although disconnected, the line is still in situ. From here through Castlebellingham the line is mostly level, with a slight hump before reaching Dundalk, the next main station and former home of the GNR workshops, part of which, although no longer railway owned, still stands on the Down side.

On the Up side the Barrack Street goods line diverges, formerly connecting with the Dundalk, Newry and Greenore Railway, an Irish offshoot of the L&NWR, closed in 1951. On the Down side are platforms which formed part of two former stations and here the remains of the Irish North Western Railway trail in. Also in this area was a square crossing where a line joining the INWR to the Barrack Street Branch crossed the main line. The station name board in the present Dundalk Station still shows several destinations which could be reached over the INWR. The station has a long island platform with a bay at either side at the Dublin end where the water column is situated. There are also sidings on both sides of the running lines, those on the Up side serving the Harp Brewery there.



On leaving Dundalk the line enters its most difficult section - in more ways than one - with a climb of about 11 miles at a maximum of 1/100 to the summit near MP 66. The frontier with Northern Ireland is crossed near MP 59½ and 3 miles further on is the derelict station of Adavoyle.

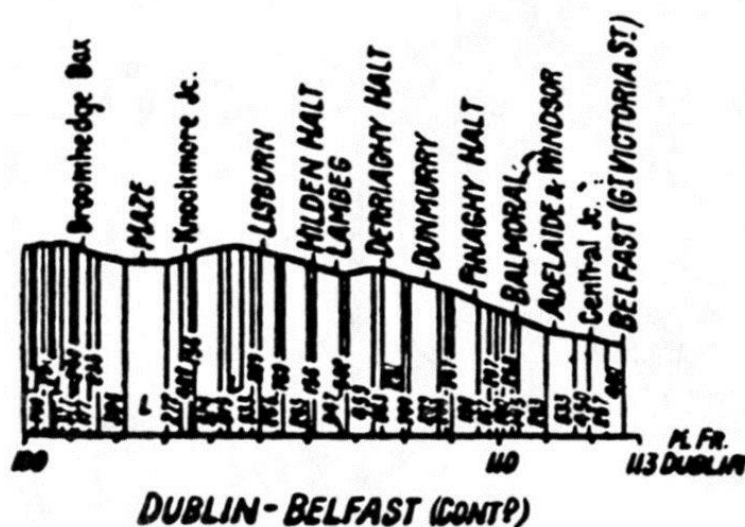
Next comes the welcome relief of the dip at Meigh before the final 3 miles to the summit through a wild landscape with Slieve Gullion looming on our left. The line then falls over similar gradients for the next 8 miles. About halfway down the bank is Newry Station where the present UK Customs Post is situated. This station was formerly known as Bessbrook and lay derelict for several years before being renovated and renamed in 1984.

Immediately after leaving Newry the line crosses the 18-arch Craigmore Viaduct, under which passed the 3ft gauge Bessbrook and Newry Electric Tramway (closed in 1948), and 2½ miles further down the bank we run through Goraghwood - something which very few trains used to do. In addition to being the Northern Ireland Customs examination point Goraghwood was the junction for the Branch to Warrenpoint via Newry and the line to Armagh via Markethill, the latter (closed in 1955) was a continuation of the Warrenpoint line which was closed 10 years later. Traces of both can still be seen on the Up side, first the Warrenpoint line climbing up from the valley and then the Armagh line continuing and crossing the main line by an overbridge. The former GNR ballast quarry on the Down side was reached by passing through the Up platform which had a movable

timber section for this purpose. Knockarney, MP 73½, marks the bottom of the Wellington Bank and for the next 15 miles to Portadown the line is fairly level, passing through Poyntzpass, Scarva and Tandragee. Scarva was the junction for Banbridge. This line, closed in 1955, was at one stage considered for re-opening by the RPSI but this proved to be not a feasible project.

Portadown in its hey-day was a major junction. Where there is now a road overbridge near the Dublin end of the present station, the Armagh line (closed in 1957) and the 'Derry Road' (closed in 1965) trailed in on the Down side with the roundhouse shed being situated between these and the main line. The original station, demolished to accommodate a road scheme, was ½ mile further on but nothing now remains except a siding on the Down side used for PW purposes. The present much less impressive station is situated just north of the former junction.

Crossing the River Bann immediately on leaving Portadown the line climbs gradually for the next 5 miles, passing a halt built in the early 1970s to serve the now closed Goodyear Factory, before reaching Lurgan. This station's goods store and sidings have vanished, leaving only the running lines and its principal distinction now is its awkward level crossing, on one of the town's main thoroughfares. After a further 3 miles the line begins its gradual descent to Belfast. Moira (98 miles) is the subject of a preservation scheme, the signal box having been moved to the Up platform from its site beside the level crossing and here may be seen traces of the railway's predecessor, the Lagan Canal.



After MP 103 is the site of Knockmore Junction where the Antrim Branch trailed in on the Down side and the Banbridge Branch on the other. The latter was closed in 1956, a small stump remaining as a siding until 1962. The single-line Antrim Branch, now elevated to the status of main line, has a small platform at Knockmore serving Antrim trains but no longer joins here, a third line running alongside the Down main line to Lisburn. This alteration made Knockmore signal cabin redundant and it has since been demolished. At Lisburn the yellow brick station building on the Up platform is one of the few structures remaining on the northern section of the line to be still clearly identifiable as GNR. The Up platform is connected by a footbridge at the Belfast end to the Down island, at the Dublin end of which is the signal cabin which, it is hoped, will soon make its way to the RPSI Station at Whitehead. The goods store and sidings on the Down side are still reasonably intact.

From Lisburn the line takes on an increasingly suburban appearance, with several halts over the final 8 miles. At Adelaide no trace of the engine shed (closed in

1966) and accompanying installation remains but the area has been redeveloped as an industrial site with sidings accommodating cement, containers and beer. From Central Junction, MP 112, the line used to run straight for the last ½ mile to the terminus at Great Victoria Street but now follows the tortuous course of the former Belfast Central Railway, passing a halt opened in 1987 to serve the City Hospital and the less recent Botanic Station on its way to Belfast Central.

Central Station was opened in 1976 on the site of the GNR's extensive sidings at Maysfields which were connected to the NCC and B&CDR via lines through the docks on each side of the River Lagan. The B&CDR connection was restored with the opening of Central Station but the docks lines have all gone. Across the Lagan the station building at the B&CDR's Queen's Quay terminus has been demolished but most of the rest of the site is still in use as NIR's Central Service Depot.

Inasmuch as the station serves the railway's extremities at Bangor, Londonderry and Dublin - in addition to housing its hierarchy - the term Central is accurate, but from the passengers' point of view it is less so. The old Great Victoria Street terminus would now be even more convenient to the city centre since recent redevelopments there while York Road, never particularly well situated, is now out on a limb and serves only the Larne line. However, plans for a new bridge over the Lagan are in hand and the cross-city NCC connection may yet be restored.

LISBURN - ANTRIM

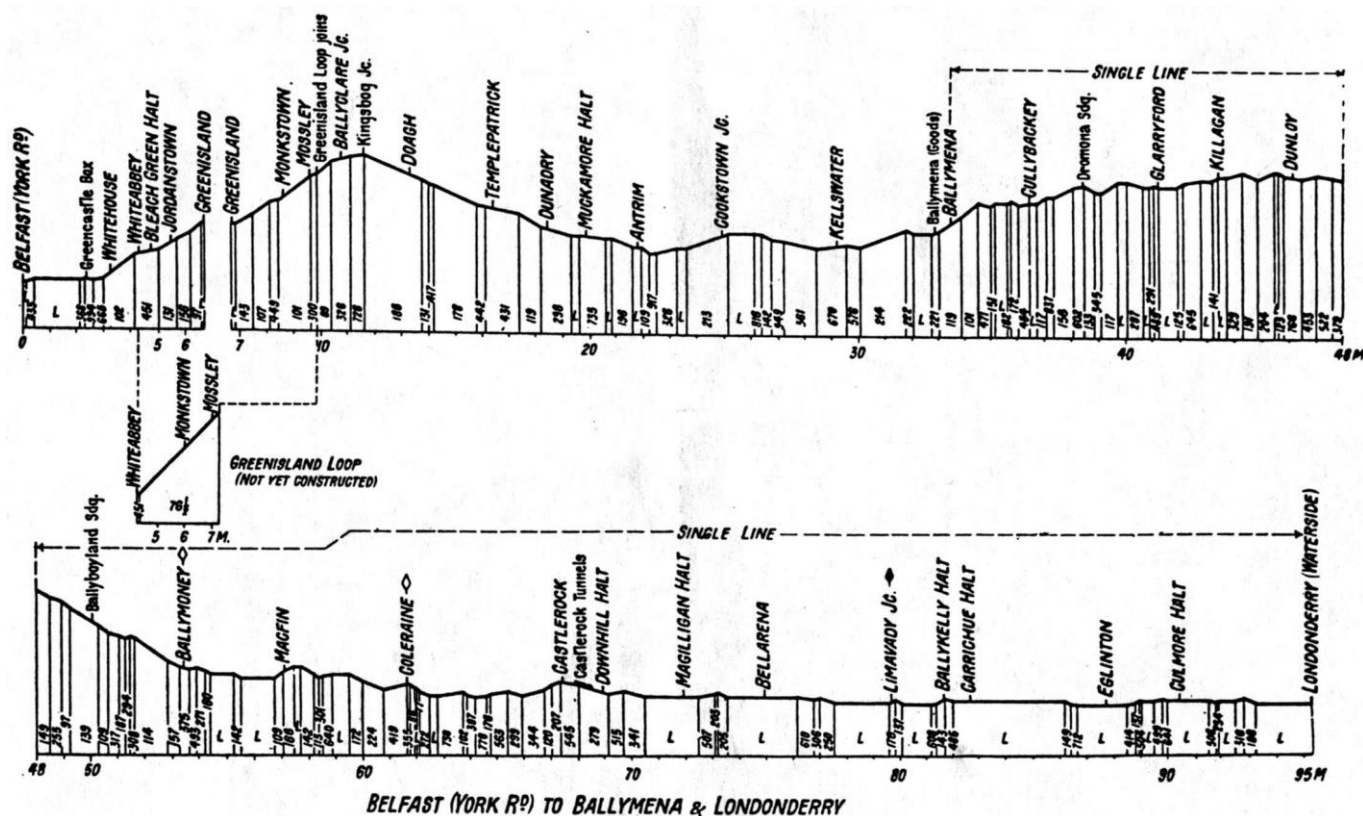
Some 15 years after being closed to passenger traffic in 1960 this 18 mile branch was upgraded as described elsewhere. It is single line with passing loops at Ballinderry, Glenavy and Crumlin, the only stations now in use. During and after the last war the then military airfield at Aldergrove provided considerable traffic. It has since been converted to civilian use and at one stage it was proposed that a spur be taken from the line to serve the airport. This was not proceeded with - perhaps wisely as the traffic carried on the airport bus seldom provides much company for the driver. The only significant gradient on the line is between Knockmore and Ballinderry and for a large part of its length the line is concealed by bushes. Mileposts, when they can be found, are on the right travelling towards Antrim.

BELFAST (YORK ROAD) - COLERAINE

Although the tour will not cover the line in this sequence it is more convenient to describe the former NCC main line starting at its Belfast York Road terminus. This station has declined in size and importance since the opening of Belfast Central Station and the upgrading of the Lisburn - Antrim Branch when NCC main line trains were re-routed from Antrim into Central, leaving York Road with only Larne line traffic. Apart from RPSI specials and occasional Derry line diversions the NCC line to Antrim now sees only engineering trains and movements of stock to and from York Road workshops. On the main line such mileposts as remain are on the Down side. Between Antrim and Coleraine the only stations now in use are Ballymena, Cullybackey and Ballymoney.

Anyone who last visited York Road twenty years ago would have difficulty in recognising it today. On the city side the dockland community has been razed, mainly by redevelopment, while to the north, running shed, goods yard and the sidings connecting with the docks have been obliterated by the M2 Motorway. The present diesel running shed is on the site of the original Platform 1 which handled Larne line departures. The last landmark to go was the signal cabin which was demolished in 1986 following the completion of the Larne line re-signalling. The York Road trackwork was rationalised at the same time.

On leaving York Road platform the first thing to be seen is the NIR workshops on the left, with turntable and traverser, and in that area will probably be seen one or two of the former CIÉ C-class diesel electric locos. Six of these were recently purchased by NIR for secondary duties, having become surplus to CIÉ's requirements, and were re-numbered 104 - 109. Some have been repainted in NIR's blue loco livery while at least two still bear the CIÉ numbers and livery. At present they appear to be under-employed but will no doubt become more active should a plan to take refuse by rail from Belfast for dumping at Magheramorne on the Larne line come to fruition. For most of the level section between York Road and the now vanished station at Whitehouse (3½ miles) the line used to run along the shore of Belfast Lough. This was where the remaining 2-6-4Ts ended their days, hauling spoil from the Magheramorne Quarry for the foundations of the motorway. The last survivors were Nos. 4, 51 and 53 which managed to complete the contract in May 1970 while their sisters collapsed around them, Nos. 51 and 53 being scrapped a few months later. Happily No.4, most widely travelled member of the class, was secured by the RPSI. Her exploits, before and since then, have done much to advance the argument that this was the most successful general purpose locomotive class ever to run on Irish railways.



In steam days main line trains were not noted for energetic starts from York Road as the first level miles were better spent in preparing for the work ahead on the six mile climb from Whitehouse to the line's summit near Ballyclare Junction.

Whiteabbey, a former block post, is still fairly intact although the station buildings, as at many other locations, are now closed. A short distance past Whiteabbey is Bleach Green Junction where the Larne line diverges to the left and passes underneath the main line which climbs on over the Bleach Green Viaduct, the gradient increasing to 1/76. When built in 1934 this was the largest reinforced concrete viaduct in the British Isles, being 630ft long and 70ft high. The reason for its construction was to enable main line trains to take a direct course instead of having to reverse at Greenisland before proceeding over what subsequently became known as the Back Line. Just before Monkstown the Back Line diverged from the Up main line. The triangle thus formed

was broken in 1965 when the points here were disconnected. The main line has also recently been singled over most of its length between the viaduct and Antrim. After passing Moseley the gradient eases to 1/89 and soon a concrete overbridge indicates the end of the climb and the site of the former Ballyclare Junction Station. This was neither a junction nor was it within several miles of Ballyclare. It was, however, the junction station for the Ballyclare Branch which actually diverged at Kingsbog Junction, a mile further on. It was also, prior to the demise of the Back Line, the station used for interchange of goods traffic to and from the Larne line and also for the division of the Larne Harbour boat train section from main line passenger trains. Now scarcely a trace remains.

Several level crossings lie between here and Antrim. If we are lucky these will be temporarily manned so that we may have a clear run down the ten miles of what was one of the fastest sections on the NCC. The first major crossing is at Kingsbog Junction where the signal cabin, on the Up side, is still in existence although inoperative. It is less easy to spot the remains of the Ballyclare Branch (closed in 1953) on the same side. Until about 1950 Ballyclare boasted two railways as narrow gauge trains from Larne Harbour passed through on their way to a paper mill nearby with coal and paper pulp. Passing rapidly, we hope, through Doagh (locals will assist with pronunciation!) and Templepatrick we cross the main airport road at Kilmakee, one of NIR's first automatic barriers, then on through Dunadry and Muckamore before slowing for the approach to Antrim, made tortuous by recent track alterations.

Here we see the former GNR Branch, now part of the Belfast Central - Londonderry main line, joining on the Down side. At the Belfast end of the Down platform is a disused and unsightly signal cabin which has been replaced by a more handsome one at the opposite end of the platform, beside the level crossing. Behind this platform is the bay formerly used by GNR branch trains. The Up platform is also out of use as the present service can be accommodated by one platform. Behind the Up platform is a siding with a ballast loading ramp at which may be seen some of the wagons purchased by NIR in the 1960s for use on the motorway spoil contract and still in use to some extent on ballast workings.

After Antrim we return to double line working and the departure of a Down train is assisted by a convenient dip before another dozen rather undulating miles through agricultural land to Ballymena, passing two more closed stations, Drumsough and Kellswater, both having automatic barrier crossings with the now standard warning sirens which are the bane of those who wish to make lineside video recordings. The former station was also known as Cookstown Junction. Needless to say, it was nowhere near Cookstown but the branch to that town diverged on the Down side. Between the branch and the main line was an engine shed, in its latter years used for storage of engines out of use, one of which was No.30, the B&CDR 4-4-2T now preserved in Belfast Transport Museum. After the closure of the B&CDR main line several of these engines saw 2 or 3 years of service on Larne and Ballymena local trains before becoming surplus to requirements there also.

Ballymena remains one of the major stations on the NIR system and is vital to the RPSI as one of the few locations still possessing functioning water columns - in fact it is blessed with one at each end. By present day standards the siding accommodation at the Down end of the station is quite extensive, its principal use being as a PW Depot. Until fairly recently the sidings also held withdrawn coaches, etc., but most of these have either been scrapped or converted to PW vehicles. The running shed, also in this area, was in use until the final years of steam, when it was mainly used for storage. Behind the Up platform was that used by the narrow gauge lines, the Ballymena and Larne and the Ballymena, Cushendall and Red Bay. Both of these had gone from Ballymena by

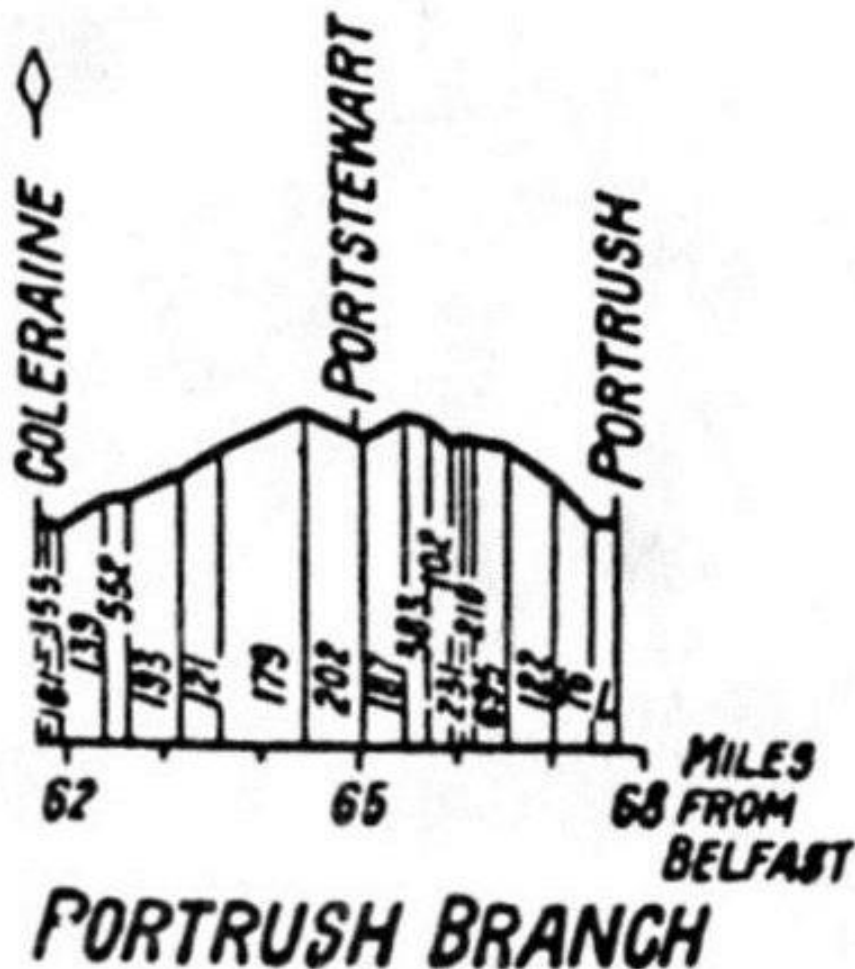
1940 leaving only the Larne to Ballyclare section, mentioned earlier, which lasted until 1950.

Beyond Ballymena the line is single and, unlike Antrim, the start for a Down train here involves a climb of a mile or so at around 1 in 100. The gradients become easier over the next few miles to Cullybackey, until quite recently a block post and possessing no less than three level crossings inside half a mile. After this the line climbs through a rather boggy area, passing Glarryford and Killagan and reaching a summit just before Dunloy. The descent from here to Ballymoney is much steeper and, in times past, could be something of an ordeal for goods trains in the opposite direction. On the way down the bank the derelict Ballyboyland signal box is on the Down side and on the opposite side is the quarry formerly operated by the railways to supply ballast.

Ballymoney is approached on a long curve and, nearing the station, vestiges of yet another narrow gauge railway may be seen on the Up side. This was the Ballymoney and Ballycastle which operated a passenger service until closure in 1950, using the same class of compound 2-4-2T as the Larne - Ballyclare line. Nothing remains of the once extensive trackwork at Ballymoney except for a crossing loop. The buildings on the two platforms have not been altered by modernisation; unfortunately they have been somewhat altered by the combined efforts of age and weather.

From Ballymoney to Coleraine the line falls gradually, apart from the hump at Macfin, former junction of the Derry Central section of the NCC, the remaining fragment of which from Kilrea was closed in 1950 - the year of doom for so many lines in Northern Ireland. Traces can still be seen of where the branch trailed in on the Down side.

The NCC 2-6-4Ts shared various features with all of their LMS counterparts from Fowler onwards but were not identical to any. Their true ancestors could be found at Coleraine in the form of the Fowler-designed 2-6-0s, built between 1933 and 1942, which ruled the NCC main line until their decline during the 1950s. Almost all which were not at York Road were allocated to Coleraine where the shed and coaling plant, etc., were on the Up side with the goods yard on the Down side. A few sidings remain in use but on the loco side everything has been obliterated. All is not in decline however as Coleraine now possesses a turntable installed as recently as 1986 and without which No.85 could not have been used on today's tour. Although GNR 4-4-0 No.171 had been used on Portrush Flyers with the forbearance of NIR and the fortitude of their drivers this was an unsatisfactory state of affairs and 60 miles tender-first in average Co Antrim weather is no joke. To remedy this situation the ex-Great Victoria Street turntable which had been stored by the RPSI since the early 1970s was renovated and lengthened at their Whitehead base and was officially commissioned in July 1986 by No.85 and various local dignitaries. Coleraine station itself is a place of substance - from all angles still looking every inch a railway station, with its buildings intact and two long stone-surfaced platforms, plus a bay at the Belfast end of the Down one. At the other end is a level crossing with the signal cabin across the road on the Up side. On the Down side here can be seen the remains of the Harbour Branch (closed in 1966) while on the opposite side the 6 mile Portrush Branch diverges. The main line continues for the final 30 miles over almost level track to Londonderry. The Portrush Branch is now the only remaining NCC Branch line to be operated as such. Since the establishment of the University at Coleraine, Portrush has become something of a dormitory town for students during term. It is rumoured that on account of this the Portrush line is unique among seaside branches in carrying more traffic in winter than in summer!



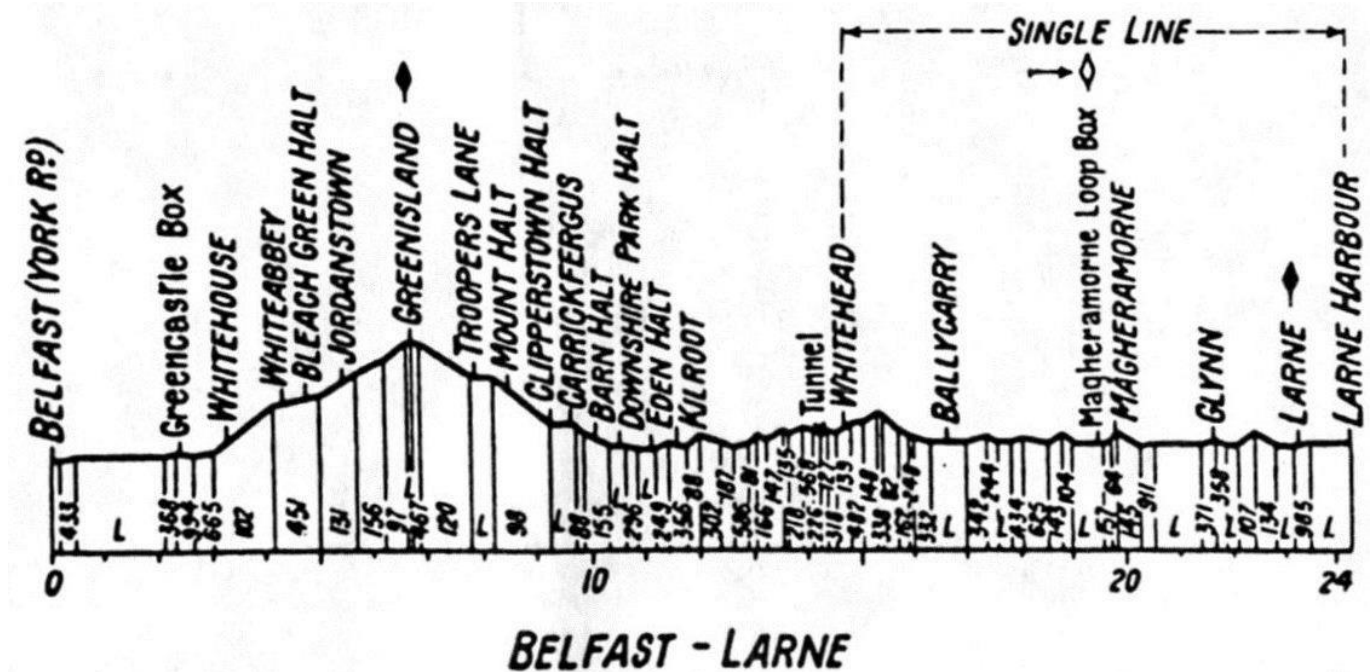
BELFAST (YORK ROAD) - WHITEHEAD

The 24 mile Belfast - Larne Harbour section of NIR is now controlled entirely from York Road since the 1986 re-signalling. This involved the closure of all signal boxes on the line and, unfortunately, the replacement of all its somersault semaphore signals and the unique Larne Harbour upper quadrants by the less attractive colour light type. Almost all stations remain open, although buildings and staff have been pruned. The line is double as far as Whitehead.

As described in the main line section, the Down Larne line drops away sharply at Bleach Green Junction, the Up line climbing similarly at the opposite side. Immediately after the junction are the two short concrete platforms of Bleach Green Halt, now closed, communication between which was via the roadway under the junction. This road used to be crossed by Henderson's siding which trailed from the Down line immediately after the Halt. After crossing the deep and wooded Valentine's Glen the lines converge before reaching Jordanstown. Here the original station buildings and manual crossing gates have been replaced by the more modern variety.

Greenisland is reached after a climb of just over a mile at around 1 in 100, the remains of the Back Line joining the Down line just before the station. This is the highest point on the Larne line and, had it not been for its position on the original main line to Ballymena, it is probable that Greenisland would have been reached by continuing on the more level route near the shore of Belfast Lough. However, a junction it became and, in the days before housing advanced and railway receded, was a very pleasant place indeed. Two island platforms were connected by a subway although only three of the platform faces could be used due to buildings on the rear of the Down island. After the Back Line was disconnected the Down island fell into disuse and the Up island served Larne

line trains. In 1986 the situation was partly reversed. The track layout was altered, the outer face of the Up island being disconnected and its inner face now serving Up trains while the Down island's buildings were partially renovated and the platform level raised to serve Down trains. Coincidentally, the booking office and other wooden buildings on the Up island were destroyed by a fire. At the Up end of the station the sidings latterly used for storing withdrawn locos and coaches have long been lifted and only a stub of the Back line remains in use as a sleeper depot.



The line then falls for two miles to Trooperslane, now denuded of its attractive station building, and then more steeply at 1/98 through the closed halt of Mount, levelling out at Clipperstown Halt, less than ½ mile before Carrickfergus.

Mount was brought into use to serve the nearby Courtaulds' plant in the 1950s and had no road access. Courtaulds' sidings trailed from the Up line and were controlled by Mount signal box. Courtaulds were one of the few operators of industrial locos in Ireland. Trains of coal and wood pulp from Belfast and Larne Harbour were shunted by two Peckett 0-4-0 STs which were withdrawn in 1966. Clipperstown used to have a short siding on the Down side to handle wagons of salt which was produced there.

Carrickfergus station, with an island platform on the Down side and the main buildings on the Up platform is similar to Whitehead in being largely intact but almost uninhabited. Little trace remains of the Harbour Branch (closed in 1957) and goods yard at the Belfast end. The engine shed here, in addition to its own allocation, during World War II also temporarily housed engines removed from Belfast to avoid air attack. It closed shortly after the war but continued to be used for storage and has a macabre claim to fame in being the place where NIR's last steam loco, 2-6-4T No.53, was cut up.

Leaving Carrickfergus, the line dips quite sharply in the short stretch to Barn Halt (closed) and continues through Downshire Park. This halt was rebuilt a few years ago whereupon the local youth showed their appreciation by smothering it in graffiti. The line is now just above the waves and the next 5 miles were among the most scenic and, surprisingly in view of the curves, fastest stretches of the line. Half a mile after Downshire are the tiny staggered platforms of Eden Halt, now closed, followed by Kilroot, also closed. Unhappily, this is also the point at which the scenery now deteriorates, being overshadowed by a new

power station, followed by a salt mine, while further along the coast are the oil jetty and storage tanks serving the power station. This section has always been liable to damage by landslips from the steep clay embankments beside the line. Nearing Whitehead we pass the White Harbour, a strange little place, long disused and with scant trace of habitation in its vicinity. The lines now diverge, only the Up line following the coastline while the Down line passes through Whitehead Tunnel, the only one on the Larne line. We will probably run through the NIR Up platform directly into our own at Whitehead Excursion Station, passing under the new King's Road Bridge.

Whitehead Excursion Station, now the home of the RPSI, was originally built by the railway company to handle outings from Belfast en route to the scenic delights of the Gobbins Cliffs in Islandmagee. By now it will come as no surprise to anyone to be told that Islandmagee is not an island but a peninsula enclosing Larne Lough. The 2-road engine shed had, like that at Carrickfergus, its own allocation until the war, thereafter being used for storage. The RPSI acquired the shed in 1964 and later extended it over a further 3 roads, a wheel-drop pit and wheel lathe being installed at the rear in 1978.

Future improvements are to include the ex-Lisburn signal box, a heavy lifting area and a much needed carriage shed when finance permits.

Although some hardy souls will be staying for Tuesday's events, Whitehead will mark the end of this tour for most and we would like to thank all those who have been with us over the past weekend for helping to make the tour such a successful annual event. We trust that your visit was enjoyable and that you will be back with us next year - or even this summer! Safe journey home, meantime.