

The Langholm Railway



“Leave the world and enter Langholm”

An occasional paper produced by Bruce McCartney
for Langholm Archive Group

At the start of the nineteenth century the effects of the Industrial Revolution were being felt throughout Britain, not least by the introduction of the railways into areas that had, like Langholm, been relatively isolated. But a railway linking Langholm to the outside world was complicated by the machinations of rival railway companies, and the presence of coal at Canonbie and at Plashetts, in the North Tyne valley.

Hawick, some 20 miles to the north of Langholm, was the terminus of a branch line of the North British Railway from Edinburgh. The opening of the Hawick railway on 1st November 1849 was somewhat muted as the town was in the grip of a cholera epidemic. (The local Langholm paper pointed out that the cholera epidemic did not affect Langholm due to effective action of Commissioners of Police and Committee of Parochial Board.) An extension of the Edinburgh and Hawick railway to the south and England seemed obvious. However, it was to be a further thirteen years before the Waverley Route from Edinburgh was completed between Hawick and Carlisle.

In 1845, the North British Railway obtained powers to build the Hawick branch and in the following session they applied to Parliament for further powers to extend the line through Langholm to Carlisle. The Caledonian Railway opposed this extension, and in due course the Government Committee threw out the North British Company's plans. Matters dragged slowly on with meetings in Hawick of many of the manufacturers who felt the need for a railway to the south, but no substantial progress was made until 1856 when a survey was made of the Liddesdale route. The Caledonian Railway also had plans for a station in the Lower Haugh in Hawick with a railway through Teviotdale and Langholm to Carlisle. (Over 1,500 women who used the Lower Haugh as a washing-green objected to this scheme.) To the astonishment of many Hawick inhabitants, the claims of the Caledonian Railway Company's Langholm line were approved and those of the North British Railway's Liddesdale scheme rejected. So indignant were the supporters of the Liddesdale railway, that a meeting outside the Town Hall in Hawick attracted some sixteen hundred people expressing the view that the decision was totally against the wishes of the people of the south of Scotland. An appeal was taken to the House of Lords, which resulted in the Langholm Bill being

thrown out. In 1859 the railway battle raged again before Parliament but on Tuesday, 22nd March, it was announced that the Liddesdale scheme had triumphed. One factor had been the inferior quality of the coal at Canonbie compared with that of the North Tyne coal from Plashetts.

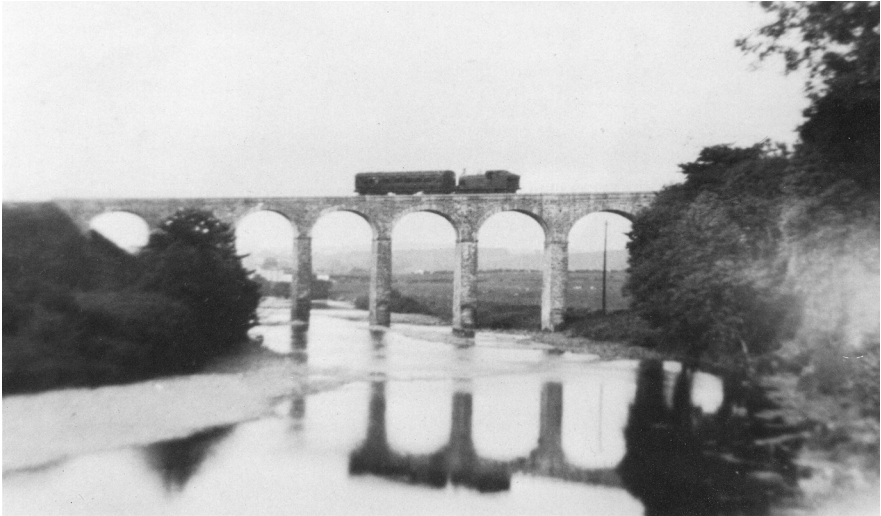


Looking over Riddings Viaduct towards Langholm.

Langholm had come close to having a through line to Hawick, worked by the Caledonian Railway Company, who would have built another station in Hawick away from the existing North British one.

In many ways, Langholmites felt cheated. However, with the benefit of hindsight, perhaps a Caledonian Railway branch through Langholm to Hawick would not have served the town as well as inhabitants would have wished. Kelso had a station shared by the North British and the North Eastern, who although nominally friendly railway companies, did not always run trains with through connections from St Boswells to Berwick. Both the Caledonian and North British Railway companies (who were arch rivals) had separate stations in Peebles but little effort was made to allow traffic to interconnect between the stations. Situated on a Caledonian branch line, perhaps Langholm people would have experienced great difficulty in making a day trip to Edinburgh via Hawick. They might

have found themselves, and the goods manufactured in the town, routed to the south to Carlisle by the Caledonian Railway and then north by that company's main line via Beattock to Edinburgh – with all the revenue going to the Caledonian Railway. Via Hawick, of course, the revenue would have been shared with the North British Railway Company.



Reflected in the river Liddel is a 1930s afternoon train from Langholm.

Thus Langholm, its inhabitants, and its blossoming industries, had to be content with a seven-mile single-track branch line, although a main-line through the town, with direct connections to the north and south, worked by the same railway company from Edinburgh to Carlisle would have been the ideal situation.

However, as a consolation to the people of Langholm, the train fare north to Hawick and beyond was calculated by the North British Railway as if the branch line ran directly north to Hawick via MossPaul and not south to Riddings before going north again. This led to the strange situation – still in force some 100 years later – that the fare from Langholm to Edinburgh was cheaper than the fare from Canonbie to the capital, although Canonbie was some six railway miles nearer Edinburgh.

The last mail coach from Hawick ran on Monday, 30th June 1862, via Langholm to Canonbie as the main line from Carlisle to Edinburgh was opened to regular traffic the following day.

The first train arrived in Langholm on Tuesday, 29th March 1864, carrying the turntable to be installed in the yard. The line was officially inspected the following Monday. The local paper records that passenger and goods traffic started on Monday, 11th April.

Less than a month had gone since the opening of the Langholm branch line, before apprehension was expressed by a number of “self-elected inspectors” at the state of Byreburn viaduct (where one of the piers went as far below the surface of the burn as it was above). Subsidence caused by a slippage into the old coal workings had resulted in the collapse of a portion of the crown of the third arch from the Canonbie end of the viaduct. Trains were halted at each side of the viaduct, and passengers



had to walk across the unsafe portion! In early May 1864 the Langholm to Canonbie train service was temporarily discontinued and the horse-drawn omnibus reinstated.

Feelings ran high in the town. It was felt that, having obtained the monopoly of train services, the North British Railway Company was being tardy in its efforts to resume the service. Mr H Dobie, the acting

Chief Magistrate, stated that the line should have been kept open as it had been in the week following the slippage. It resolved that a statement would be laid before the railway directors and if necessary, the whole matter would be brought before the Board of Trade. In due course the railway re-opened on Monday, 2nd November 1864, with six passenger trains running on weekdays and two on Sundays.



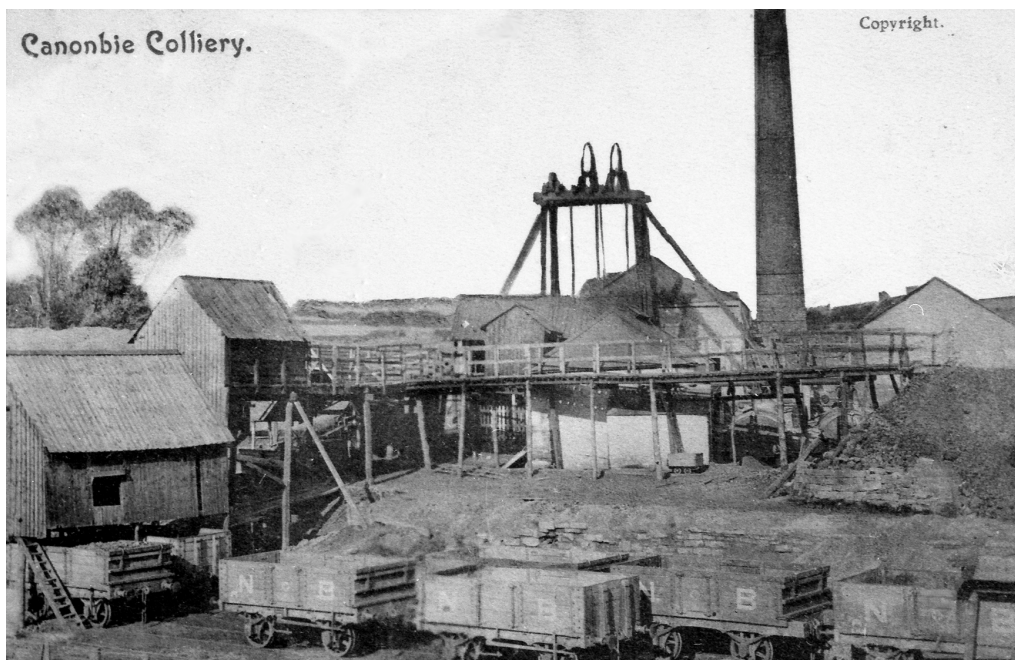
Canonbie – the first station from Riddings.

A letter in the “*Eskdale and Liddesdale Advertiser*” in December complained about the “unholy” Sabbath trains. The Sunday trains were discontinued in February 1865, the reason being given that they did not pay. The local paper commented, “The Sabbath rest will be a great boon to the employees along the branch, who, we understand, outnumber the passengers travelling from Langholm on the Sabbath-day.” No more Sunday trains ran in the next hundred years, except for the occasional excursion.

The branch line on crossing Liddel Viaduct at Riddings Junction entered England. But how many passengers knew that just south of Riddings the Waverley Route, through a quirk of ancient boundaries, crossed back into Scotland for 7 chains, then returned finally to England? A day visit to Carlisle from Langholm involved crossing the Anglo-Scottish Border six times ~ surely some sort of record?

Ironically, the very last passenger train, an enthusiasts' special from Glasgow, ran on Sunday, 29th March 1967, almost three years after the line had been closed to regular passenger traffic. The Sabbath-breaking locomotive had difficulty running round its five-coach train, catching the last coach and removing splinters from its side.

The branch line and the successive railway companies, the North British, the London and North Eastern Railway and finally British Railways served the town well during times of peace and times of strife. Everyday traffic included textiles, coal, newspapers, post, whisky (until the distillery closed), general merchandise and parcels.



Canonbie Colliery – closed 1926 – a siding ran to here from Canonbie Station.

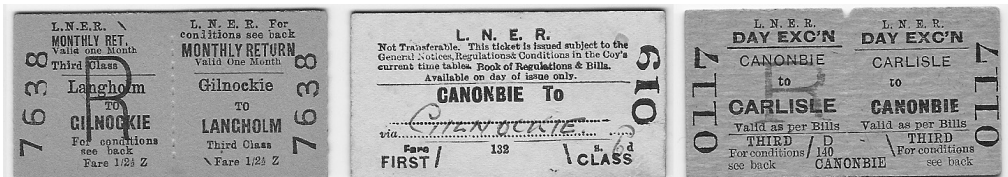
Unusual traffic included specials to the new munitions factory at Gretna during WWI and, in WWII, double headed trains drawing tanks to and from the Camp on the Castleholm. On occasions the Cornet's horse came by rail. In the early days, the station at Langholm had an overall roof, an engine shed and a turntable for the small branch locomotive, often NBR 4-4-0 "Langholm" or "Gretna". After the engine shed closed,

in the 1930s single-coach steam rail-cars, usually “Nettle” or “Protector” were introduced on some services between the wars.



Posed for this 1938 photograph are the smiling train crew and shed foreman at Canal shed in Carlisle with LNER steam railcar “Nettle” – destination Langholm.

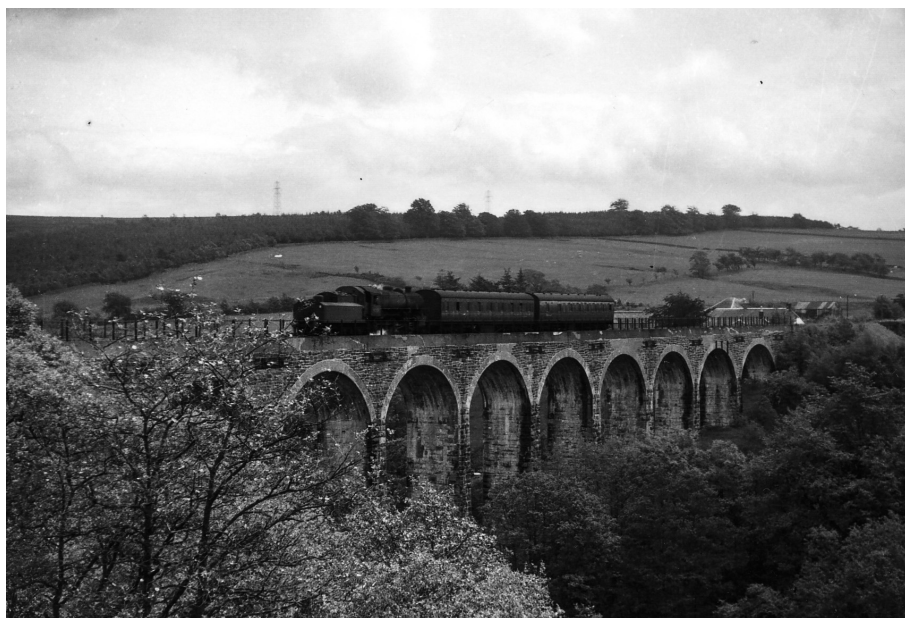
Excursion traffic was a feature of the branch line. There were many Rugby Specials run to Murrayfield and Sunday School trips to Sillioth. But excursion traffic was not always out of Langholm. The town had, especially at the turn of the nineteenth century, “mill outings” from south of the border. The local paper records a number of occasions when upwards of some 400 visitors descended on the town, often welcomed by the town brass band. On occasions, the load and the gradient between Riddings and Canonbie proved too much for the locomotive and the excursion train had to be split into two sections.



A selection of LNER tickets. The Canonbie to Gilnockie one was issued in BR days in 1957.



Gilnockie - the second station from Riddings – much admired for the floral displays produced by Mr Maynard who was stationmaster in the 1930s.



On 13th June 1964 a train crosses the 100 foot high Tarras viaduct. Deemed unsafe, two attempts had to be made to blow up this viaduct in 1987!

However, after WWII, private transport increased and in common with rural branches all over Britain the number of passengers using the Langholm branch decreased to the extent that the passenger service became uneconomic.



A family on the last day of passenger trains about their final journey.

When the Beeching plans were announced in 1962, the Langholm Branch and the Waverley Route were proposed for closure. A public meeting was held in the Buccleuch Hall in Langholm on 18th October 1963, when representatives of Langholm Town Council and other objectors were able to put forward their cases of hardship to members of the Transport Users' Consultative Committee. Both oral and written objections were considered by the Committee, their unanimous conclusion being that, although the closure would be inconvenient to some, and might even be a hardship to a few, the closure of the branch would go ahead. The Beeching Axe, which meant that the sound of a train would never be heard again in many rural valleys, fell in Eskdale on 15th June 1964, with the last passenger trains leaving Langholm for Carlisle on Saturday 13th June. Many locals and train enthusiasts made a last-day trip over the seven-mile branch line.



The special – with Restaurant Car – breaking the Sabbath Day in March 1967.

The layout at Langholm station which would serve only freight traffic in future was simplified with the removal of the track beside the platform. The freight service lasted until 17th September 1967. Soon afterwards the lines were lifted and the Railway to Langholm became just a memory.

Of course, had the North British Railway been able to construct a through line via Langholm to Edinburgh as had been planned in 1845, then the situation would have been much different: Langholm would have been on a through main line. One might even speculate that this route might just have survived era of the Beeching cuts long enough, as did the Settle and Carlisle line, to be in existence today, bringing trade and tourists to the town.

Almost all that remains in the town is a cairn on the site of the station at Townfoot.

But where else in the world would a Flute Band arrive at a railway station, which doesn't exist, to meet exiles – passengers on a Thursday evening train which hadn't run since the mid-1950s – and parade them back to the town in time for the Common Riding on the last Friday in July?

The signalman at Riddings Junction was probably right when he said “Leave the world and enter Langholm” to a family moving to the Eskdale town!



One of the tablets for the single line from Riddings Junction to Langholm.

Possession of the tablet gave permission to the engine-driver to proceed to Langholm.

(This one was originally for the section from Canonbie Colliery to Langholm but was modified when the signalling was simplified in 1922 with the closure of Canonbie signalbox.)

In the preparation of this booklet, I would like to thank the volunteers of the Langholm Archive Group for the use of photographs from their collection to supplement my own.

The driving force in the creation of the Langholm Archive Group was the need to preserve the large collection of photographs and information amassed by the late George Irving of Langholm. The photographs have now been scanned in and sorted and the information with them has been recorded. The results of this are now available to view online. Other local people with collections of photographs have also made them available to the Archive Group and, as time goes on, these are added to the online collection. The database currently containing some 3000 photographs may be searched by date, subject matter, category and individual names.

The Group is also compiling an index to the “*Eskdale and Liddesdale Advertiser*”. This index is completely searchable online and currently extends from the first edition in 1848 to 1873 (as at June 2009). You can search it for individual names, births, deaths and marriages, for any particular period of time or for references to articles about local events and for local advertisements.

The searchable database of the Archive Group can be found online at www.langholmarchive.com which contains both the photographic and newspaper indexes as well as a number of other items of interest to those curious about the history of Langholm and the surrounding areas.

The money from the sale of this booklet will go to support the work of the Archive Group.