

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF THE LYMINGTON TO BROCKENHURST LINE



No. 59 January 2021

Dear Friends,

I am sure that no-one wanted the New Year to begin like this, but – as my mother used to say – we must count our blessings. The Committee hopes that you are well, as we are. But things are going to be like this for several months, one suspects, for those over 70 as most of us are... so we should plan a little way ahead.

The next event would have been the **Annual General Meeting** in early February. One possibility would have been to hold it on Zoom, but this would have excluded many members, either from lack of the right equipment or from other problems. In addition there is nothing to report or make a decision on. So your Committee has decided to **postpone the Annual General Meeting *sine die*** [which means in legalese ‘without naming a day’], and a Minute will be made to that effect, with the reason for that decision. This is **an official notification**. (The Charity Commission has sanctioned this solution to the problem, and anyway we are not a charity; but it is nice to do things properly...)

As you will remember, we normally have an **excursion** organised by our valued Committee member John Canavan in late May or early June. If the run-out of the Covid vaccine goes according to plan, we may well be able to offer this later on; but you will understand that that will have to wait. We will keep you all informed.

SWR has reminded us that there will be **no trains between Brockenhurst and Southampton Central on the following days:** Saturday 30th and Sunday 31st January, and a week from Saturday 13th to Friday 19th February, due to improvements for freight.

Meanwhile it is my pleasant duty on behalf of your committee to offer you all our very best wishes for

A SAfe And HAppy new yeAr

and particularly from

Robin and Georgina

HERITAGE RAILWAYS – THE VALE OF RHEIDOL NARROW-GAUGE RAILWAY

By David Mead, with contributions by Georgina Craufurd.

In my previous articles on UK heritage railways, I have concentrated on standard-gauge lines, but there are many narrow-gauge lines as well, mainly in Wales. Most of these lines originated from the need to extract the natural minerals that were abundant in the country, and the rugged surroundings and limited space meant that narrow gauge was the best option. Also, at the time of construction of many lines, there was no intention of providing a passenger service, other than “workmen’s trains”. However, there were exceptions, as we shall discover.

Today we are going to have a look at a favourite of mine – The Vale of Rheidol Railway (VoR). This is now a popular tourist line which operates between Aberystwyth (on the west coast) and Devil’s Bridge, some twelve miles to the east. Although I am part Welsh on my late mother’s side, I have never learnt the language, other than place names and some basic words. The name “Rheilffordd” is Welsh for railway and “Cwm” is the word to describe a steep sided hollow at the end of a valley, so “Rheilffordd Cwm Rheidol” translates into “The Vale of Rheidol Railway”. The Rheidol is the name of the river and doesn’t translate into English. The river rises on the north-west side of Plynlimon (a mountain range in mid-Wales) and flows through Devil’s Bridge and out in the sea at Aberystwyth. The railway follows the course of this river from base to Devil’s Bridge.



Loco No. 7 (Owain Glyndwr) at Devil’s Bridge receiving some oiling, in GWR green, on 4.6.2019
(photo David Mead)

Early history

The gauge chosen was 1ft. 11 ¾ in (603mm). The line was opened in 1902, a total length of 11 ¾ miles (18.9km). As with many Victorian railway proposals, various plans were drawn up but most were not to become a reality. One scheme in the late 19th century was to build a railway from Llanidloes in the south west to Devil’s Bridge, then on to Aberystwyth, but nothing came of it. It may have been backed by the then owner of the Hafod estate (of which more later), John Waddingham senior, who had bought back the Devil’s Bridge estate in 1886 and was interested in railways. This idea for a line stemmed from the fact that lumbering and lead ore mining were important in the area, and an easy way of transporting these products was required. The terrain was around 770 feet above sea level, and the steep Rheidol valley sides would be a challenge; the wooded mountainside was also against the builders. Following an Act of Parliament in 1887, and with the encouragement of the next owner of the Hafod estate, John Thomas Waddingham, authorisation was given to construct the narrow-gauge line, and after some financial difficulties construction commenced in 1901. A chief engineer was appointed – Sir James Szlumper, who was English! Szlumper had in fact started his career engineering parts of the London Underground. He later partnered another engineer, James Russell, who was working on other railway projects in Wales, and they were the two proposers for the construction of the line, although Russell resigned from the Vale of Rheidol project. Szlumper appointed his own contractors to build the line.

By the time the railway was ready to open in 1902, lead mining in Ceredigion was in steep decline. However, a significant growth in tourism was under way, and the carriage of passengers soon became

the principal traffic of the railway. It opened for mineral traffic in August 1902 and for passengers on 22 December 1902 using two 2-6-2T locomotives built by Davies & Metcalfe. The original stations were Aberystwyth (located on Park Avenue), Llanbadarn, Capel Bangor, Nantyrnen and Devil's Bridge (Pontarfynach). A short branch ran along the Rheidol's bank to the harbour at Aberystwyth. The final construction cost was approximately £60,000. The harbour branch, however, did not see as much traffic as originally envisaged. Also, Aberystwyth harbour had insufficient deep water to cater for steam- or diesel-powered cargo vessels of ever-increasing size. The branch closed in 1933.



The Piran Cascade in the Hafod estate, after the original by John 'Warwick' Smith, 1810.

The importance of tourism should not be under-estimated in this case. Ever since Thomas Johnes (1745-1816) had made of the **Hafod estate** a nationally renowned designed landscape with an extraordinary house, visitors had flocked to see it, to such an extent that the **Hafod Hotel** at Devil's bridge was built by Johnes in 1790 to cater for all the visitors. The hotel was transformed (and possibly enlarged) by the Duke of Newcastle, the successor owner, who gave it the effect of a Swiss chalet, which he must have felt was more suitable for the Swiss-style landscape. (See www.hafod.org .)



The three bridges at Devil's Bridge

The Vale of Rheidol Railway threatened to be a “white elephant”; the freight traffic became very limited, and the company began to look more at tourists to ride the line. The railway runs through an area of outstanding beauty. The Board of Trade allowed passenger traffic to mix with freight traffic and some open-sided passenger carriages were constructed. The views are always best seen on the left of the train on the upwards journey and also being up hill, the locomotives can be heard working hard

with plenty of exhaust and of course the obligatory smuts in the eye! The line was moderately successful as a tourist railway. A locomotive - "Palmerston" - was hired from the Ffestiniog Railway (same gauge) in 1912/13/14/21 and 1922. "Palmerston" was built in 1863 by George England & Co. and is still operational today on the Ffestiniog Railway.

In 1912, plans for the use of electric power from the river were considered, but were never likely to have taken place due to lack of capital, and were abandoned when the line was absorbed by the Cambrian Railways on 1 July 1913. The onset of war in 1914 closed the lead mine, and passenger services were reduced, which put the final nail in the coffin of any planned improvements. The reduction in passenger services and the need for timber for the war effort meant that freight became the principal revenue source for a short while. The line also served Army training camps in the valley. On 1 January 1922, as part of the Cambrian Railways, the line was grouped into the Great Western Railway. A new station opened next to the town's main standard-gauge station. The Great Western Railway invested quite significantly in its new asset, overhauling one of the two Davies & Metcalfe locomotives and building two new locomotives which arrived in 1923. New open carriages were built and in 1938 the closed carriages were entirely replaced by high quality modern replacements, all of which are still in service today. The GWR recognised that traffic outside its tourist operations would be limited. In 1932, the one remaining original locomotive was sent back to Swindon works and put up for sale. A buyer was not forthcoming, and so the locomotive was scrapped in 1935. Eventually the line became a summer-only service. The entire line was closed for the duration of World War II, though maintenance continued. After closure for over 6 years, the railway reopened in June 1946.



Aberystwyth main line railway station in the age of steam

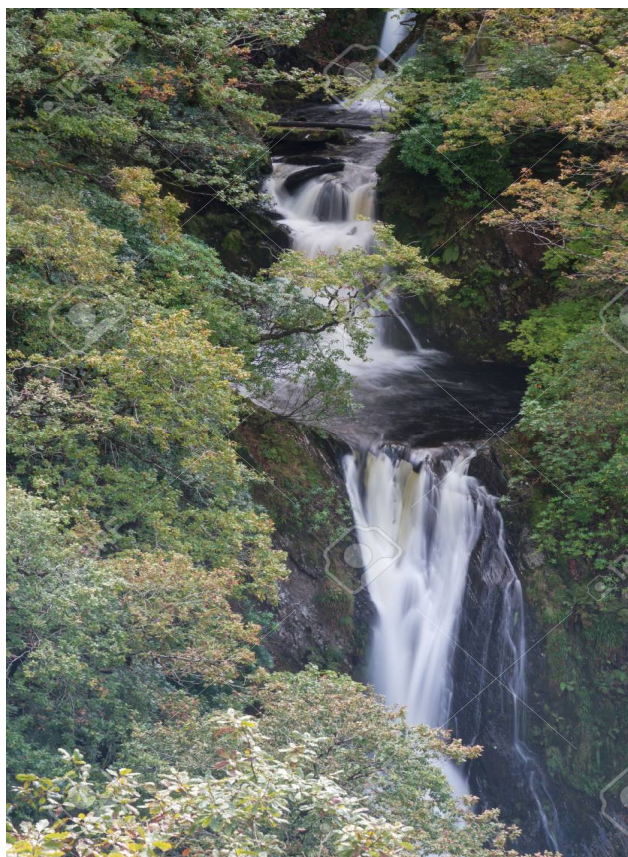
The mid-twentieth century

The Great Western Railway became part of the Western Region of British Railways on 1 January 1948 and the line continued to operate a tourist service. In the 1950s local managers ensured that the Vale of Rheidol line remained well looked after. The coaches carried British Rail's express livery. The locomotives acquired names in 1956 and fully lined express livery for the following season. In the 1960s, the ex-Cambrian network of Western Region was transferred to the London Midland Region. A question mark hung over the Vale of Rheidol's future for some time, until the Minister for Transport, Barbara Castle, confirmed that it would remain open and in British Rail's hands. In 1968, the line was rerouted in Aberystwyth to run into the former standard gauge Carmarthen line platforms of the main station, which had been abandoned in 1964. This allowed the services to have direct connections to the trains from Shrewsbury, which improved matters considerably, and through tickets were issued to any station on the VoR. In fact, Edmundson's printed ticket stock was used at both Aberystwyth and Devil's Bridge station booking offices. There was also printed stock for the intermediate stations on the line. A supporters' club was formed by British Railways (London Midland) and was run from an office in Stoke-on-Trent, the local HQ. I joined the club and received regular newsletters, a badge, discount travel and updates on the fortunes of the line.

The former standard-gauge locomotive shed was also refurbished and adapted for use by the VoR. In the late 1960s the line's locomotives and rolling stock were (somewhat controversially) painted in

British Rail's corporate blue livery with the famous 'coming or going' logo emblazoned on loco and coach sides. This was gradually improved in the 1970s with lining and other embellishments, until in the 1980s a return to historical liveries was countenanced. In 1989, the line was privatised and sold to Peter Rampton and Tony Hills (the former owner and General Manager of the Brecon Mountain Railway). In 1996, Rampton and Hills split their partnership, with Hills retaining control of the Brecon, and the Rheidol being sold to a Trust formed by Rampton, named the Phyllis Rampton Narrow Gauge Railway Trust. Unusually, the VoR operated completely without volunteers for approximately the first 20 years of its privatised operation.

Sadly, the interchange facility at Aberystwyth was closed in 2018 and the track lifted and platform abandoned. A new station is presently under construction nearby, but speaking personally as a user of public transport I see this as a retrograde step. Nowadays the tourist traffic is dominated by visitors arriving by car and coaches and on my last visit in 2019 I found it very difficult to walk (I have a walking disability) in the rain from the main railway station to the temporary station with no directional signs and a footpath closed due to a supermarket being built in the way. However, on a positive note, the new station will be sheltered and will be supplied with booking office, toilets, café and gift shop. Today end-to-end journeys are booked, although intermediate stations still remain open, mostly by request to the guard. During the peak running season with a **Day Rover** ticket it is possible to break one's journey, although there is no guarantee that there will be space available on the following train. However, in recent years, much work has been carried out to include waiting shelters and raised platforms at intermediate stations.



The Mynach Falls at Devil's Bridge

A visit today

At the top end of the line, Devil's Bridge Station, the locomotive is left posed for photographs before running round its train to return. There is a café and small gift shop at the station, and a car park. **The Hafod Hotel and the bridge** (400 metres from the station) are at a point where the River Mynach drops 90 metres (300 ft) in five steps down a steep and narrow ravine before it meets the River Rheidol. The set of stone steps, still open to tourists, leads down to the lowest bridge at the waterfall; it is known as Jacob's Ladder. There are also **five walking trails** (see www.rheidolrailway.co.uk/valley-walks/), and of course **the Hafod estate**. According to legend, the original bridge was built after an old woman

lost her cow and saw it grazing on the other side of the river. The Devil appeared and agreed to build a bridge in return for the soul of the first living thing to cross it. When the bridge was finished, the old woman threw a crust of bread over the river, which her dog crossed the bridge to retrieve, thus becoming the first living thing to cross it. The devil was left with only the soul of the dog.

The railway has three steam locomotives for use on passenger trains. All were built for the Vale of Rheidol line and have operated on the line ever since. The standard livery is Great Western Railway green and all three locomotives currently carry this livery. The locomotives were named by British Railways in 1956 and currently do not carry their nameplates. For the record these are No. 7 Owain Glyndwr, No. 8 Llewellyn (both built in 1923) and No. 9 Prince of Wales, built in 1924. The latter was numbered 1213 before becoming 9 in 1948. The current company intends to use this number from time to time. There are also some diesel locomotives used mainly for works trains and rescue. Prior to 1923, the line operated various smaller quarry-type locomotives.

Public transport access to the railway is via Aberystwyth Station. The bus station is alongside the main Cambrian station and the station today has been restored by Wetherspoons including open air dining on part of the former concourse. The trains which serve the station come from Birmingham International, Birmingham New Street, Wolverhampton, Shrewsbury and the Cambrian main line via Newtown, Machynlleth and Dovey Junction (for trains from Pwllheli and Barmouth) running approximately every two hours. (Service T2 operated by TrawsCymru). There are bus services approximately every hour from Bangor, Caernarfon, Dolgellau and in the South West from Carmarthen (service T1 operated by TrawsCymru), with a weekend-only service from Cardiff (service T1C). However National Express operates daily from Cardiff to Aberystwyth.

Maps of the line

