

LONGPAVEMENT AND THE LINE TO THE WEST

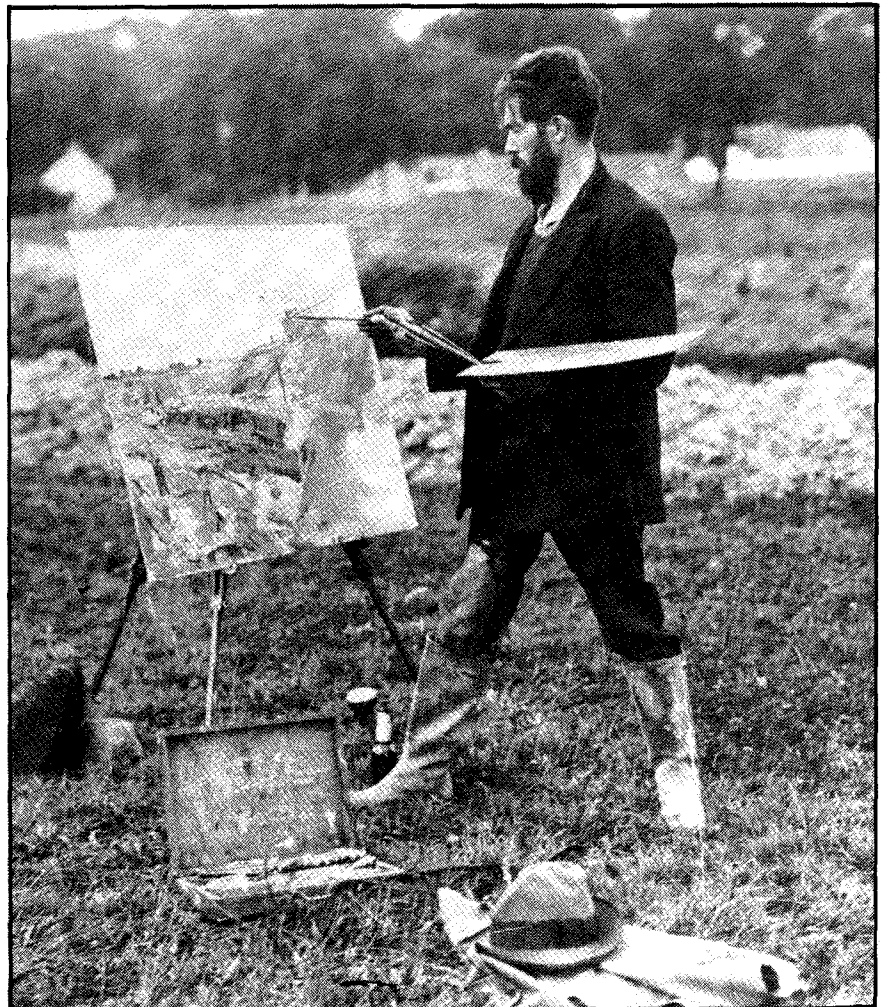
BY PADDY CLEAR

Longpavement Railway Station, which closed in 1963, was situated four miles from the Limerick Terminus on the Ennis and the West of Ireland line. Despite being in the middle of a rather unprepossessing swamp, the station had a certain character about it. In this article I would like to put on record some of the most enjoyable and interesting experiences of my younger days spent in close proximity to the Longpavement Station and travelling on the railway itself. This was during what railway historians now call the 'heyday of steam'.

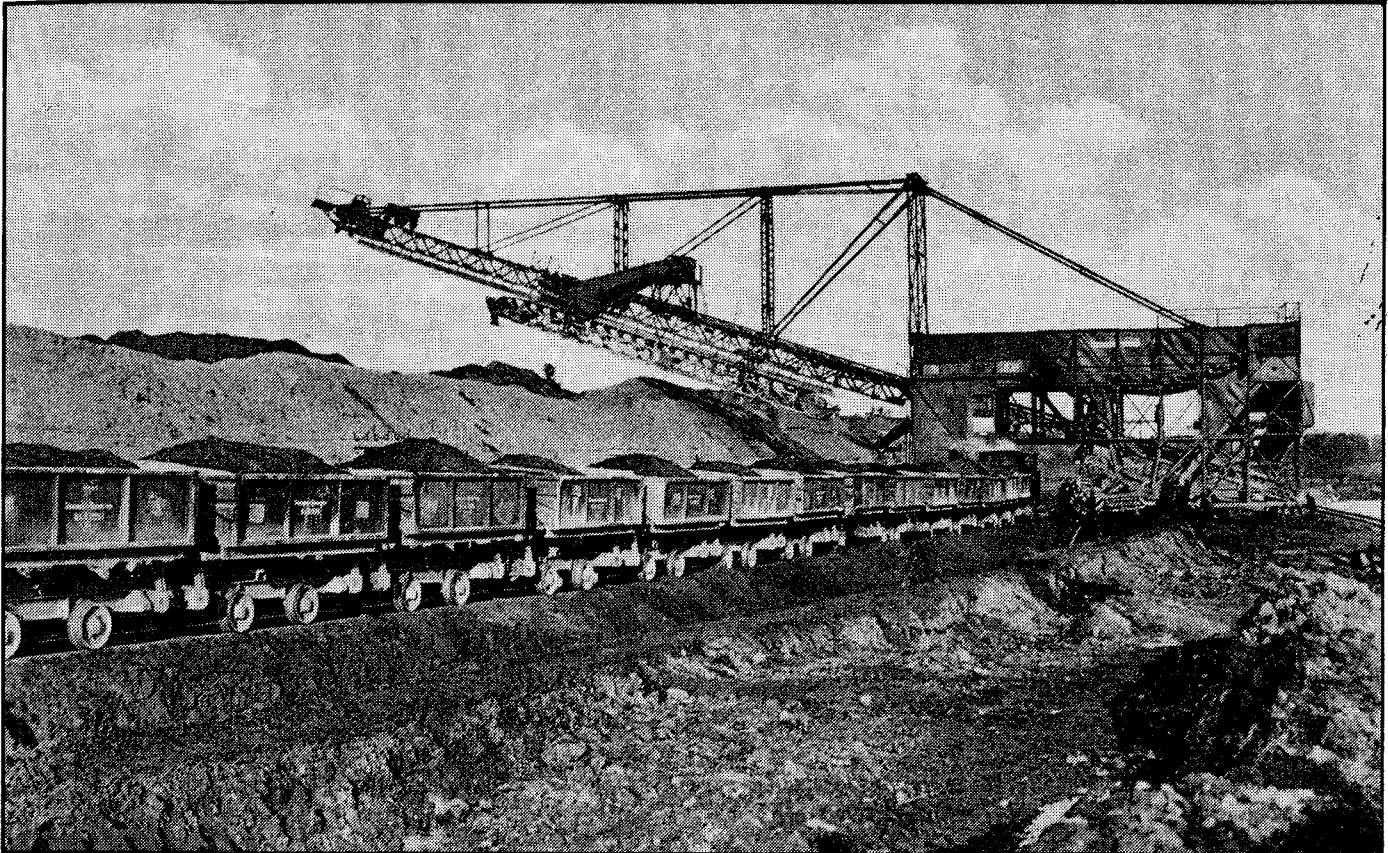
*M*y overall recollection is of a smartly run system - except in the World War Two period and its immediate aftermath. Trains seemed to run to time and at a fair lick of speed. Sunday and Thursday afternoon excursions were very popular. I have always been something of a 'train observer', and I often took up a position near 'The Pavement' (as it was colloquially called) on a Sunday morning to watch the 'specials' pass by. They never stopped

at The Pavement - except on return journeys (details of which I will give later).

When looking towards Limerick, the first sight of a train was usually a wisp of steam. Perhaps one might hear the sound of a whistle. Then the train would come into view, puffing gently along towards the end of the huge curve which constituted the first four miles of the line from Limerick. With two steam locomotives at its head, it was a magnificent sight to behold on a beautiful Sunday morning (for some reason I can never remember a



The Limerick-born artist, Sean Keating, painting the construction of the Shannon Scheme, near the Longpavement Railway Station.



Loaded railway wagons during the building of the Shannon Scheme.

wet Sunday in those days) as it cruised on to the long 'Metal Bridge' across the Shannon. It ran slowly past the Long-pavement for the 'staff exchange', and then the drivers proceeded to give the excursionists value for their money.

Ballynanty Bridge became a riot of steam, as the locos blasted away from The Pavement, raising echos all over the countryside. The sound gradually died away, but on a busy Sunday there would be another train along in half an hour or so. These excursions - in later years hauled by diesels, of course - continued up to about ten years ago. From then on they grew more infrequent, and pilgrimage trains-which provided a large amount of the excursions-now usually go by another line via Portarlinton and Athlone.

Most of the journeys I made on the line were on the steam excursions to Claremorris (for Knock) and a number of other destinations such as Galway, Lahinch or Kilkee. If you were going to either of the latter two towns, you changed at Ennis to the West Clare Railway, which, incidentally, had gained a most undeserved reputation from Percy French's song. The trip was always enjoyable. We sang the hit parade songs of the day, and if we were going to Knock we added a few hymns with similar gusto. Outside, people living near the track waved to us and we waved back. We went up through places with picturesque names such as Ardsolus, Crusheen, Ardrahan, Ballyglunin etc., and in front the engines drove on faster and faster, it seemed.

The sensation of speed one gets on a steam-hauled train is a very thrilling experience, mainly, I think, because the linkage is not like the modern 'inter-city' kind, where 'apparent stability' for the traveller is the keynote. In a steam train, the 'pull' of the loco, or locos, when picking up speed is noticeable. Sometimes, if a carriage window was open too wide, a grain of soot would blow in and settle in a child's eye, and there was often a brief emergency while a fond parent produced a handkerchief and performed an extraction operation. After a day at the seaside or praying at Knock, we all crowded in for the return journey, which was no less exciting as the train thundered home through the gathering darkness and eventually through what appeared to be the pitch blackness of the night. There was great trust in our driver and fireman, however, and, as the crowds trudged down the platform at Limerick Station, people waved and shouted their thanks to them.

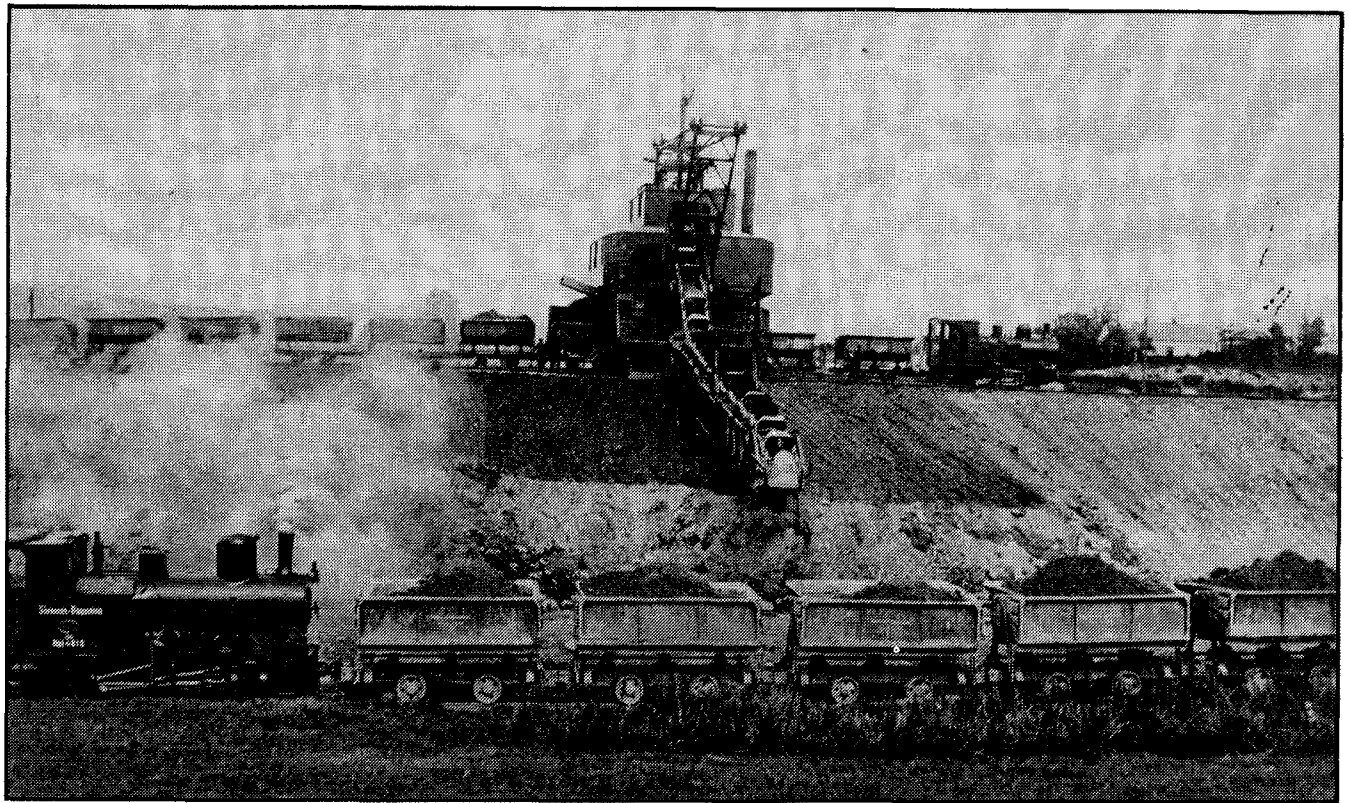
My 'maiden' trip on the line was on a Thursday afternoon excursion to Lahinch in the early nineteen thirties. My home was in Parteen, and my father cycled from there to Limerick Station with my brother on the bar and me on the carrier. The return fare was 2 shillings (10p) for him and 1 shilling (5p) each for us children. It was an absolutely fabulous experience. Despite the excitement of the train trip, one of my most vivid recollections of the day was my first glimpse of the Atlantic Ocean from the old West Clare, as it chugged its way from Ennistymon to Lahinch. It was a fantastic blue that is

for ever etched in my memory.

A year or two later, we went on one of the all-day Sunday excursions. My father thought it would be very convenient if the train stopped at The Pavement, as it was only a mile from Parteen, so he went into the station at Limerick beforehand to try to arrange it. The Great Southern Railway Company, the owners of many of the railways in the State at that time, agreed to stop the train on the return journey but not on the outward trip-which was fair enough. It is likely that the difficulty in restarting a long train from The Pavement-which was sited on a hill going towards Ennis-was the reason for the company's decision.

As we neared The Pavement on the return journey, we wondered if the driver and fireman, being used to a non-stop operation there, would forget and we would be hauled into Limerick, but there was a more obvious 'slow' than usual coming under Ballynanty Bridge and, a minute or two later, we duly ground to a halt at Platform No. 2. No sooner had the train stopped than there were calls of 'Is this The Pavement?' and 'This is great, we are only a few minutes from home' etc., and, as my father said later, 'Half the population of Thomondgate alighted!' He thought this stop was such a good idea that he wrote to the G.S.R. suggesting its introduction on a permanent basis. He had no success, however, and, as far as Sunday trains were concerned, the Longpavement remained a non-stop station.

The station had a station master's residence, which was occupied up to the



Excavating the canal at Ardnacrusha, during the construction of the Shannon Scheme.

mid-nineteen thirties, and also a waiting room, a storage hut and a signal cabin, the latter having a very important part to play in the 'section control' of train traffic between Limerick and Ennis. The cabin controlled signals and points for the 'crossing loop', and it also contained a lever to operate a lock on the level-crossing gates by remote control. As far as I was concerned, there was a certain uniqueness about the track work at The Pavement because it was the only station I ever saw that had a single crossing loop and no terminal siding.

There were two timber platforms at the station, but these were demolished in the nineteen forties and replaced by one platform, banked up one with a shingle surface. Up to 1940, four regular passenger trains operated through the Longpavement in each direction on weekdays. There was also a frequent service of goods trains and cattle specials.

After the war, the passenger train service on week days was not restored to its former frequency. Back in the pre-Second World War days, the 'busy hour' at The Pavement was between 3.20 and 3.25 in the afternoon, when two passenger trains were scheduled to 'cross' each other at the station. The one from the Ennis direction, which started its journey in a West of Ireland town, was due at 3.20 and it usually arrived right on time, stopping just short of the level-crossing gates. The 3.15 p.m. Limerick train arrived a few minutes later, glided into the other track and stopped momentarily to discharge or collect passengers. The line, like most other Irish railways, was single and for that reason this crossing operation was

necessary at various stations. After the first train had pulled away, the one to Limerick took off and The Pavement was quiet once again until the next movement.

Sometimes two goods trains, which were usually very long, met at Longpavement and on quite a number of occasions I saw two of this type of train halted to allow a passenger train, which had priority, to 'filter through'. This required a certain amount of rather complex manoeuvring because of the single passing loop. For cars using the Limerick-Parteen road, this exercise was a nuisance, as the level-crossing gates had to remain closed to the road for twenty minutes or even longer. Those, like myself, who were wont to shoulder our cycles through the wicket-gates were in difficulty too, because a goods train very often straddled the gates, and it was necessary to scamper around the end of this train, complete with bike, to get across, and with two other trains in the immediate area, this was a rather dangerous operation.

The weekday trains plied mainly between Limerick and other stations such as Ennis, Tuam, Claremorris, and Sligo. It seems there was very little traffic directly to Galway City, and passengers had to change at Athenry to Dublin-Galway trains. These arrangements were probably 'inherited' from the days when the company operating the service on the line via Longpavement had no operating rights on the line into Galway because it did not own it. Obviously tradition ~~held~~ hard, because common train traffic rights had been established there since 1925. Passenger numbers at Longpavement

were never very high, and in the winter the station was often inaccessible due to flooding of the road.

About 200 yards on the Limerick side of The Pavement, there was a junction to Ardnacrusha Power Station, which was disconnected some years ago. The line remains, but, judging by its present state, it is doubtful if a train will ever run on it again. It is a sad end for this railway. In his article 'The Shannon Scheme Railway', in the Limerick Museum's 1984 publication *Reflections on Munster Railways*, Michael McCarthy has vividly described the dreadful working conditions, the fatalities and accidents and the back-breaking work involved in the building of the two and a half-mile railway line in 1926. During the construction of the Shannon Scheme in the following three years, the Longpavement experienced its most hectic period.

Today, all the station buildings are gone, as are the signals, the platform and the crossing loop. All that remains is a set of level-crossing gates. To cater for the limited number of trains now running on the line, an Irish Rail operative drives out from Limerick three or four times a day to operate the gates. It is a far cry from the days when the Longpavement was manned on a 24 hour rota.

The station may not have generated a great deal of revenue for the several railway companies which owned it, but it did fulfil a vital role in the operation of an important railway line for more than a century. The Longpavement may not have been the biggest or the busiest station in Ireland, but it deserves a place in Irish railway history.