THE STORY OF LIMERICK

WILIAM SMITH O'BRIEN, the Young Irelander, was convicted of High Treason following he abortive rising at Ballingarry, Co. Tipperary in 1848. As he awaited trail, he feated that his estate at Cahermoyle, near Ardagh, Co. Limerick, might be confiscated by the Crown after he had been convicted. To prevent this, he signed a deed of transfer, but, fourteen years later, this deed backfired and left him with nothing and forced him to leave his home.

In January of 1862, O'Brien with nothing but his personal savings to rely upon, and facing the prospect of being chased through the courts by Lord Inchiquin, his brother, and by a shady legal genius called Warouzow Grieg, William Smith O'Brien put still more money into the County Limerick railways.

He explained at the time that he was doing so to encourage others to follow his example and that thus a considerable amount of money might be put into circulation for the employment of the labouring classes who lived near the proposed line of railway.

Limerick City was linked to Dublin by rail, in 1848, via Nenagh and Roscrea. At once branches began to radiate from Limerick, one of them heading westward to Foynes, with stations at Patrickswell, Adare, Ballingrane (which served as Rathkeale station), and Askeaton. Two of these places were later to become junctions as more money was made available.

The so-called Cork and Limerick District Railway was the line which joined Patrickswell, through Croom and Bruree, with the main Dublin to Cork line near Charleville. Kilmallock and Knocklong, on the main line, already had stations further east.

A second spur would join Ballingrane with Rathkeale and Newcastle, and a company was formed with Lord Devon as Chairman. The involvement of major landowners, suich as Wm. Smith O'Brien, had much more to do with potential profit, and with opening of their estates to easy commerce, than with the philanthropic sentiments ex-O'Brien at the time.

However the contractor, Joshua Hargrave Clement, and the Waterford and Limerick Railway and the Public Works Loan Commissioners had to find £21,000 to bail the eight-mile long spur out of the red.

All of the trains on LimerickK County's railways were operated under contract by the Waterford and Limerick Company, and they can hardly be said to have done it well, at least in the early years.

If, for example, in 1870, a passenger left Limerick for Foynes, he would have to leave the train at Ballingrane while it when off to serve Rathkeale and Newcastle. Only on its return to Ballingrane did it pick up the stranded traveller and convey him to Foynes - to arrive more than three hours after leaving Limerick.

And yet the railways were popular, as shown by the fact that in September 1868, 603 Ennis people paid 2/6d each for a day trip to Newcastle along the new line.

VALUE

But it was the goods service which was the real value of the railways to County Limerick. Buyers came from Limerick City, Cork and Dublin to buy at the country fairs and markets, and they dispatched their animals, butter and vegetables back to the cities by rail.

In West Limerick, where it had been common for farmers to haul their butter the fifty miles to Cork for sale, the railways brought immediate relief. Tiny stations such as Ardagh and Devon Road were viable for a time as despatch points for butter and cream.

But the long-term objective remained to link Limerick with Tralee. The obvious route - an extension of the Foynes line along the Estuary to Tarbert and then south to Listowel and thence to Tralee - had been ruled out by surveys in 1864 and 1870. And this left an extension of the Newcastle West line as the only alternative. Lord Devon, with O'Brien, formed a new company for the project, and Devon gave nine miles of land across his property to the new line.

Construction required taking the line through Barnagh Gap, the only opening in the ring of hills which surround Newcastle on three sides. Enormous works of cutting, banking and tunneling brought the line up to what it was to become, and to remain, the highest rail-point in the country. The first Limerick to Tralee train ran, after fourteen years' work, in 1880.

One incident happened on the line in the early part of this century. During the Civil War, anti-Treaty forces stopped a train from Tralee at Barnagh station. They ordered everyone off, and sent the train, unmanned, down the steep track to Newcastle. The runaway crashed through three level crossings and thundered into Newcastle station. It careered past the signal-box, ploughed through a havey buffer at the end of a siding, and tumbled into the back garden of a house, where fire spread from the engine to the wagons, and roasted several hundred squealing pigs which were on board. The town feasted sumptuously for days.

But the railways suffered badly during the Second World War, due to fuel shortages. At one tie there were only three trains a week between Limerick and Tralee, where once had run four a day. By 1950, this was down to one a day, and this service ended in 1963. The goods service was scaled down, and on November 3, 1975, the line was closed.

Now, with the closure of Kilmallock and Knocklong, Limerick County has no station offering passenger services, and its only remaing branch-line, its first, to Foynes, carries only ore and oil to and from the port.

Perhaps Limerick's railways have served their purpose, but it is difficult to see the overgrown stations which are dotted around the country, without remembering the erratic trains, the generations of hardy men who served them, and the absentee peers and eccentric patriots who established them.

THE STORY OF LIMERICK'S RAILWAYS

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