

Steaming around Co. Down – Charles Friel

11th September 2019

Charles Friel, an active member of the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland (RPSI) took the audience of more than 70 back to the time when for many, other than walking, taking the train was the main mode of travel whether it was for work or recreation. The Belfast and County Down Railway (BCDR) opened the first line in 1848 that took passengers and freight from Belfast (Queen's Quay) to Holywood, investment during the following 20 years resulted in a network of lines that linked many towns and villages in Co. Down. Newtownards was considered a priority because of the sizeable population and concentration of industries, the line via Comber was opened in May 1858 with an extension to Donaghadee opening in 1861. It was planned that the railway would benefit from the steamer and mail services to Portpatrick, however the crossing was moved to Larne as the journey to Stranraer was less subjected to bad weather and rough seas. A southern line running from Comber connected Ballynahinch, Downpatrick and finally Newcastle. In 1892 a spur ran from Downpatrick to Ardglass via Killough and in 1906 a track took trains between Newcastle and Castlewellsen.

The BCDR flourished until the end of WWI when returning soldiers and others began operating taxi and bus services that frequently undercut the cost of a rail ticket whilst providing greater flexibility regarding pick up location, route and destination. In the years leading up to WWII competition intensified with growth of road transport and freight services that began cutting into the profitability of the rail companies.



Belfast and County Down Railway (BCDR) network 1906

In addition to a great deal of information about the engines, rolling stock and stations there were lots of 'snippets' and interesting facts associated with the railway, a few of which are listed below: -



Tickets from Belfast to Portaferry could be purchased, a bus met passengers off the train to transport them to villages along the peninsula terminating at Portaferry.



In its heyday, Newtownards station had a permanent staff of 14 that included the station master, ticket master, signal men, porters and carriers that offloaded freight and loaded carts and trucks for distribution around the town and beyond.

In 1903 King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra travelled by Royal train from Dublin to Newtownards spending 3 days at Mount Stewart.

As was customary the staff and luggage travelled ahead on another train but for some reason they were taken to Bangor and so arrived later than the Royal party.



The BCDR built the Slieve Donard Hotel Newcastle which opened in 1898 as a luxury destination that quickly became a focal point for golfers and a resort where visitors and guests took advantage of the health-giving benefits of the sea and sea air.



A carriage that had been converted to a caravan with 3 bedrooms, a kitchen and a living room was kept at Donaghadee. In return for purchasing 6 First Class return fares from Belfast, a family could have the use of the carriage for a week and holiday at a cost of 37/6 (£1.88).



1893 the BCDR purchased 'Slieve Donard' the first of 3 paddle steamers that plied between Belfast and Bangor, for many years the cost of a return ticket was 1 shilling (5pence). Travel was by boat in one direction with return by train, the service was extremely popular, especially at weekends the route was known as *'Bangor and back for a bob'*.



Railmotors provided shuttle services between Queen's Quay and Holywood from 1905 until 1957. These were essentially a single carriage with an engine and driver at one end and a guard at the other. They had several drawbacks the main one being that the passenger compartment only had a door at each end that made getting off and on a cramped and time consuming task.

The End of the Line

The Ulster Transport Authority (UTA) was established during 1948 and took control of most rail, road and freight services. Cuts started to take place as road replaced rail, and many of the Co. Down services were closed.



Belfast-Comber-Newtownards-Donaghadee was an early casualty with the service ceasing in April 1950.