

THE LEEK & MANIFOLD VALLEY LIGHT RAILWAY

“A line starting nowhere and ending up at the same place”

The above quote was by a sceptical local! The little line along the lonely valleys of the Hamps and Manifold should perhaps never have been. Ambition outweighed commercial acumen however when, in 1896, the businessmen of Leek proposed a railway between Leek and rural areas to the south-east. They were convinced that otherwise the new line between Buxton and Ashbourne would capture the trade of this rich agricultural area, traditionally looking to Leek.



Locomotive 'J.B. Earle' pauses with a train at Redhurst Halt.

Seeing the light

The promoters took full advantage of the Light Railways Act of 1896 which slashed red tape and costs and offered treasury grants to encourage the building of railways in rural areas. Building to a narrow gauge of 2ft 6ins (the standard gauge in Britain is 4ft 8½ ins) also saved money. The line cost £67,243 including two locomotives and rolling stock. It took two years to build when work eventually started in 1902.

Eastern promise

The Leek & Manifold Valley Light Railway (L&MVLR) was opened on June 27th 1904. It was operated, under agreement, by the North Staffordshire Railway who built a connecting standard gauge line between Leek Brook, on its Macclesfield to Uttoxeter line, and Waterhouses. The L&MVLR itself never reached Leek, it ran the 8 miles and 8 chains from Hulme End to Waterhouses at the 2ft 6ins gauge to meet the Leek branch here. It was built by the engineer Everard R Calthrop to designs perfected in India - he built the Barsi Railway near Bombay. Calthrop even purchased the line's two locomotives from the Yorkshire suppliers to his Indian lines, designed for India rather than Staffordshire.



A train at Thor's Cave Station, showing the Refreshment room.

Cheesed off

The promoters anticipated the re-opening of the Ecton Copper Mines and that an extension to Buxton would attract rich tourists from the spa town. Neither occurred and the eccentric little line never made a profit. Passenger traffic was always light, although excursions and summer weekends saw heavy use, sometimes overloading the line's entire stock of four primrose-yellow carriages.

The mainstay of the line was the collection of milk from the local dairy farms and the transport of milk and cheeses from the large creamery at Ecton. This closed in 1933 and inevitably the line followed. The last train ran on March 10th 1934.



The original poster for the line.



Train at Wetton Mill c.1904.

The Built Environment

Of the line's ten stations only the two termini served villages directly, the others were lonely halts marked by nameboards and a low platform. Steep paths or rough roads led to the villages on the plateau above. Thor's Cave and Beeston Tor stations offered refreshment rooms for tourists but most just had a simple wooden shelter, built by the Portable Building Company of Fleetwood, at a cost of £40 each. Only Hulme End, the "Headquarters" of the line, had a range of buildings - most of which remain to this day.

Scaling up

A unique feature of the railway was the design of transporter wagons which carried full size standard gauge trucks over the narrow gauge track to short stretches of standard gauge sidings laid at most stations, leaving them on site until such time as they were ready to return to the national network. The major use of this system was made by milk tankers; up to 600,000 gallons a year was transported from Ecton Creamery to London. Coal, animal feedstuffs, mine spoil and beer from Burton on Trent was also carried.

National Asset

The track-bed was presented by the London, Midland and Scottish Railway to Staffordshire County Council, who spent £6,000 on fencing, bridge parapets and resurfacing work before opening the route on July 23rd 1937 as a "National Pedestrian Path". Intended solely for ramblers, the route soon became popular with cyclists, although not until 1981 was the official prohibition of cycles finally lifted. Part of the route, between Redhurst and Swainsley, was opened to cars in 1951, plans to open further sections have always been thwarted. The Manifold Track stands proudly as probably the first example of an old railway being converted for recreational use, a practice increasingly in vogue in the 1990s.



The end of the line - track removal in 1937.

