The coming of the railway to Portrush: by John Moore

In the early years of the 19th Century Portrush was little more than a small fishing village with a natural harbour for small boats. Substantial houses were few and the bulk of the small population resided in small houses and cabins clustered around the harbour.

By 1834 the town had grown somewhat, and we can see the evidence of this on the ordnance survey map of that period. We have the beginnings of Main Street although most of the buildings are still close to the harbour. The harbour itself was greatly enlarged in 1826/35 by the construction of new piers with the original natural harbour becoming known as the old dock.

In 1837 Doctor Boyd, a native of Coleraine, constructed the first purpose-built hotel in Portrush, The Antrim Arms. In subsequent years this hotel changed hands several times and was subject to many enlargements and improvements. There was also an increase in the number of substantial villas situated in prime locations to provide holiday homes for the wealthier members of society. This growth of the town, the provision of the enlarged harbour, an hotel and the new big houses all provided more work opportunities and thus accelerated an increase in population and the need to provide more services and accommodation.

After much negotiation, failed proposals and financial difficulties a railway line, the Belfast and Ballymena Railway, connecting those two places opened for business on 12th April 1848. Closer to home the Londonderry and Coleraine Railway had reached the market town of Newtownlimavady in December 1852 and on 18th July 1853 opened to Coleraine.

But Portrush still had no railway connection. This was resolved by the construction of the Ballymena, Ballymoney, Coleraine and Portrush Junction Railway which fully opened to traffic on 4th December 1855. It had already been ceremoniously opened when on 7th November a train left York Road station in Belfast and ran non-stop to Coleraine and thence to Portrush. It conveyed, we were told, the wealth, intelligence and beauty of the north

Through running from Londonderry to Portrush was achieved on 19th November 1860 with the opening of a new timber and iron railway swing-bridge crossing the River Bann: replaced in 1924 by an iron and concrete structure with a cantilevered central section which lifted to allow passage for ships. Portrush was now fully connected by rail.

The earliest representation of the railway in Portrush appears on an Ordnance Survey map made about 1855. In simple form it is shown as a double line terminating in a circle with a station structure on the east side of the track. This of course was a much-simplified version of what was on the ground.

The single track approaching from Coleraine branched out into five separate tracks; one forming a branch line to Portrush Harbour; another the line to the passenger platform; a third to the goods platform; and the remaining two forming sidings which abutted the end of the passenger platform.

A head shunt and return line was provided for the goods platform line and a further crossing may have existed to provide a similar arrangement for the passenger line.

This view from the approach to the station shows two trains. One is waiting for passengers at the single platform and the other is shunted into a siding. The branch line to the harbour can be seen falling away to the left. A wall has been constructed to the west of the main tracks to provide some protection from the prevailing weather. The locomotives date to around 1870 and were manufactured by Sharp Stewart. Many carriages is evident giving an indication of the substantial numbers of passengers then using the railway. The main station building seen here on the right was a substantial stone-built building with all the usual offices such as Waiting Room, Ladies Waiting Room, Left Luggage, Toilets, Station Master's Office and so on. An overhang on the roof formed a canopy over part of the platform providing some protection from the weather.

In this picture the station yard is clearly seen together with two coaches and horses from the Antrim Arms hotel evidently waiting for guests arriving on the next train. Behind these is the goods platform and the branch line can be seen curving down towards the harbour. At the end of the

goods platform line a turntable was installed so that locomotives could be turned around in order that they would be travelling forwards for their return journeys. This turntable appears to have some form of winding mechanism by which it was turned but the motive power was probably human.

Over the next 25 years Portrush grew in popularity and blossomed as a sea-side resort. Hotels and guesthouses abounded and catered to all classes of Victorian society. Many of these holidaymakers travelled to Portrush by train and the increasing volume of traffic soon meant that the railway station opened in 1855 was no longer able to cope, or as we say today, it was not fit for purpose.

A new, larger terminus was required.

Our thanks to John for this excellent contribution.

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