

The Avon and Gloucestershire Railway

CR Clinker

The Clinker Collection recently acquired three manuscript volumes of reports and other Great Western Railway documentary material covering the period from about 1852 to 1905. One of these volumes contained the subjoined report dated 2 October 1885.

Construction of the Avon and Gloucestershire Railway was authorised by Act of Paliament 9 Geo IV, cap xciv, 19 June 1828, the principal proprietor being the Kennet and Avon Canal Company, whose river navigation rights extended from their basin at Bath down to Hanham. It was intended the railway should feed the canal with coal from Coalpit Heath and other collieries for waterborne carriage to Bath, Devizes, Newbury and even London. It was opened for traffic in July 1832. In 1852 the canal was purchased by the Great Western Railway and with it the Avon & Gloucestershire which for some years had been the sole property of the canal. Like many other early railways, it appears to have fallen into a state of gradual desuetude. All traffic had ceased by 1865 in which year the Great Western's (Additional Powers) Act 28 & 29 Vic cap ccxcix, 5 July 1865 s 33 authorised complete abandonment. Clearly, complete abandonment did not take place for, as the report states, the line had 'been recently overhauled'. Final closure would appear to date from 9 July 1906 when the Great Western general manager informed his Traffic Committee that all traffic had ceased.

After a visit to the area on 25 May 1930, the present author noted 'certain portions of the railway company's lands are still in GWR possession and the company's notice boards remain in one or two places, though now barely legible. Little remains of the railway itself, apart from the formation which is clearly identifiable throughout its length, the tunnels, some stone sleepers and fish-bellied rails supporting an overbridge between the Oldland Common and Willsbridge tunnels. That portion of the line lying between these tunnels is surprisingly picturesque for a district which does not pretend to any particular beauty and the deep, curved cutting approach to the North end of Willsbridge Tunnel might even be called romantic!'

Purposes of the Act

In June 1828, an act was obtained for the purposes of making and maintaining a Railway, or Tram Road, for the passage of waggons and other carriages from Rodway Hill in the Parish of Mangotsfield in the county of Gloucester; to the river Avon in the parish of Bitton in the county of Gloucester 'with the view of opening a convenient communication from several extensive collieries and stone quarries on the line and in the neighbourhood to the City of Bath, and various other p/aces in Somerset, Wilts and Berks.

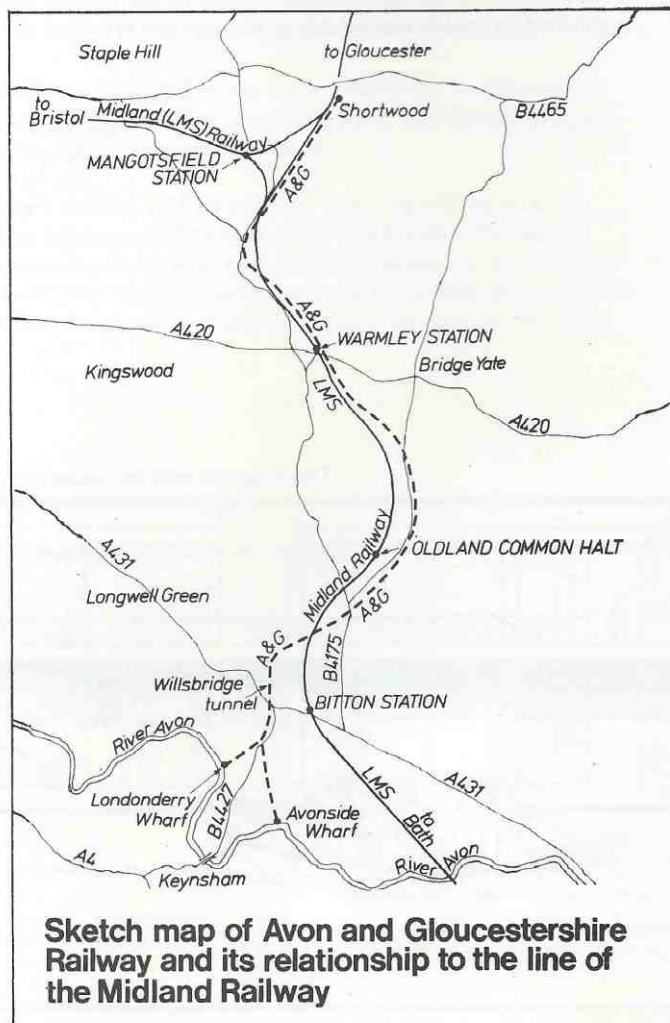
Course and Length of Line

The line which is about 4 miles long, begins at Avonside,

in the parish of Bitton, where a Wharf Weighbridge and Tipping Stage have been constructed for the purpose of loading minerals and goods into Boats on the River Avon for conveyance to Bath, and places on the Kennet and Avon Canal, and to places on canals in connection with it, and runs through Willsbridge, Oldland, Siston and Warmley to Mangotsfield, where formerly siding accommodation was provided and Traffic was transferred from the Bristol and Gloucester (then a Broad gauge railway) from the 'coal pit heath' and other Collieries and works on the line.

A short branch of about 25 chains in length is also constructed from the River Avon at Londonderry in the parish of Bitton, which forms a junction with the main line at a point 40 chains from the Avonside terminus.

At Londonderry a wharf sidings and loading stage are constructed and a crane and weighbridge are erected, so that convenient means are provided for loading and unloading traffic that may be received on the Avon from or be despatched Westward to Bristol, and other places.



Sketch map of Avon and Gloucestershire Railway and its relationship to the line of the Midland Railway

Gauge and Permanent Way

The line is laid on a gauge of 4'8½"; the rails are single 'T' headed, and weigh 30 lbs to the yard, and they are fixed by means of a light iron key. into chairs (weighing 8 lbs each) on stone blocks (except where these for repairs have been substituted by wooden blocks). There are three tunnels on the line. No 1 which is at Willsbridge is 6½ chains long, is lined with masonry throughout, and in section gives a height of 9 ft 8 inches from Rail level to crown of arch, and a width between side walls of 10 ft 2 inches. No 2 Oldland Tunnel is 7 chains in length, cut through the rock and unlined, except for 30 yards where the Midland (Bath & Mangotsfield) Railway passes over it, the height from Rail level to crown of arch is 9 ft 3 inches and width in lined portion between walls is 9 ft 2 inches - No 3 Tunnel is situated near to Cowhorn Hill, but is not lined. It is 72 yards long, is 8 ft 2 inches from rails to top of arch, and 8 ft 9 inches wide. A bridge at Oldland which crosses the tramway has a headway of only 8 ft from tails to crown of arch with a width between walls of 8 ft 8 inches, all the other bridges are at least 9 ft high and 9 ft wide. The height of Tunnels and Bridges might if required, be increased by lowering the rails and underpinning the walls, but increased width could only be obtained by their complete reconstruction.

Between Avonside and Warmley, except at places where turnout sidings occur, the widths of cutting and embankments at rail level, vary from 9 ft to 12 ft between Warmley and Mangotsfield, the line is chiefly surface formed through common land, the width is not clearly defined, but the original plan shows the land taken, to have been 40 to 45 ft wide.

In 1864 the Midland Ry Company obtained powers under which they diverted the tramway near Rodway Hill, but there is no record in my office (Mr Hart), of their having paid anything in respect of land taken or for easements, neither have I obtained any information of the disposal of Land abandoned, when diversion of Tramway was made - I am not aware whether the Company acquired the land through Siston Common absolutely or only surface rights over it for their purposes, but a clause in the original act (pages 8 & 9) enables Lords of the Manor and other persons to negotiate and convey so that they may possibly have purchased the land occupied absolutely. I direct attention to this as important whenever a sale of the undertaking is determined upon.

Capital

The capital authorised to be raised under the original Act of 1828 was £21,000 in shares of £100 each, and £10,000 by mortgage of the undertaking, and in 1831 a further act was obtained to make certain deviations of the tramway and to construct certain branches which are described as 'the Cowhorn Hill branch' the Haul Lane Branch, the Grimsby Branch and the Soundwell Branch and this act conferred upon the Company, further capital powers under which they were authorised to raise on mortgage or otherwise, a sum not exceeding £15,000 and to pay interest thereon at a rate not exceeding £5 per centum per annum. I am unable to state how much of the authorised capital was expended upon the undertaking, but the probabilities are the powers of the Act of 1828 were wholly exhausted, but seeing that only

the 'Haul Lane' and the Soundwell branches were constructed, the powers conferred by the Act of 1881 may not have been fully exercised.

Present State of Repair

The Tramway between Avonside and Warmley, and between Londonderry and Warmley has been recently overhauled and is now in a fair state of repair, there is one turn out siding about midway between the places named and another at Warmley, and the line could now be used for the transmission of a considerable amount of traffic over this portion if necessary. The recent repairs were executed at the request of a Mr Coslett, who conducts some brick and tile works at Warmley, but since the line was put in working order his use of it has been so limited that the tolls received from him have not half paid interest on the sum expended. Between Warmley and Mangotsfield the tramway is in a very defective condition, in several places. The rails have been removed for repairing other parts of the line, and the transverse sleepers laid down by the Midland Company in about 1866 when they diverted the tram way would require to be entirely renewed, before Traffic on that part of the line could be resumed.

There is now no means of exchanging Traffic with the Midland Company at Mangotsfield, probably for the sufficient reason that the Bath and Mangotsfield Ry now meets the requirements of the district, so that for the tramway there is no traffic to be exchanged.

Sources of Traffic

The tramway runs through a well populated district, but it is well served by the Midland Co for conveyance of every description of Traffic, so that Tramway Traffic must be derived from works and coal pits to which it affords the only outlet, and these for the most part have been either abandoned, or are in an unsatisfactory working condition.

The Paper Mills at Avonside have been overtaken by financial difficulties before they were completed. The Oldland Colliery works have to contend with water in the lower seams, so that their output is only equal to sales at the pit, and the Warmley Pit is now, and has been for 2 years or more contending with faults in the working seams, so that there is no immediate probability that any Traffic will be derived from these sources.

Some Brickworks at Warmley are doing a good business, and the Tramway runs close to the Kilns, but they are also near to the Warmley Station, and the manufactured goods are sent away by the Midland Ry.

There is also a Penant Stone Quarry about half a mile from Warmley, which at some future time may be developed, the stone is good in quality, but at present all that is quarried is used in the neighbourhood of the Quarry between Warmley and Mangotsfield, the coal pits and Spelter Works have been abandoned, so that future Traffic prospects are not encouraging.

Present Income from Property

The rents derived from the letting of Tramway Banks, Cottage Property &c and House at Avonside amount to £82 : 6 : 8 per annum.

Negotiations for sale of Tramway

The propriety of disposing of the Tramway has in past years been considered by the Committee, the latest negotiations are referred to in the minutes of the Committee of 26th November 1879, where it appears that Mr Gabriel Goldney desired to acquire it, and in pursuance of that object made an offer of £1200 for the tramway with the houses and cottages and land appertaining to it.

At the same meeting Mr George F Fox of Hamleaze, Keynsham approached the Committee for terms of sale, or lease of the Tramway, with the view of making it useful to the district through which it passes. Both negotiations were barren in results, Mr Goldings offer was declined and Mr Fox's never became a definite proposal.

Conversion and Extension of Tramway

The prospects of utilizing the Tramway, wholly or in part, extending it at both ends and converting it into a permanent Railway, do not appear worthy of much consideration, for although it passes through a fairly populated district, and at one time might with advantage have been converted, the necessity for conversion passed away when the Midland Company constructed the Bath and Mangotsfield Railway, which traverses the whole district, and running almost parallel to the Tramway affords all the accommodation at present required. The only extension that suggest itself is the construction of a line about 6 miles long from Patchway to Warmley and from Avonside across the river to join the Great Western Main line between Keynsham and Saltford for the purpose of affording a shorter route and increased facilities for the conduct of Traffic conveyed through the Severn Tunnel from South Wales in an eastern direction, but the immediate necessity for a nearer route will be supplied when the new loop line at Bristol is completed and the future Traffic requirements will be better met both as regards the providing a shorter communication and the affording accommodation to a district now without a Railway by the making a line from Patchway to Malmesbury.

Sale of Tramway

From the foregoing details the Committee will be able themselves to determine whether or not the sale of the undertaking should be attempted, for my own part, I do not think that purchasers for the Tramway as a whole could be found at present at a price that could be entertained, and if it were sold piecemeal as land and materials, the property would have to be sacrificed, therefore notwithstanding its failure to earn a traffic income, seeing that the income derived from other sources protects the Company from a monetary loss, I am of opinion that their interests will be best promoted by continuing their ownership, and retaining any advantages that future necessities may develop.

I have conferred with Mr Balding and Mr Hearne on the subjects of this report, and I am authorised on their behalf to state that in their view the sale of the Tramway is undesirable.

(Signed) Charles F Hart

Kennet & Avon Canal
Engineer's Office
Devizes

2nd October 1885

Editor's comment. It had been assumed that this railway had been abandoned within two years of the enabling Act of 1865, only to be rescued by the opening in 1876 of the California Colliery which had then been thought to provide the only subsequent traffic. In 1881 it is known that the colliery initiated the building of an incline adjoining its premises and repairs of the tramway route to the river, but we learn from this manuscript that by 1885 the line had been overhauled considerably further, from Londonderry to Warmley in fact. Recent repairs had been executed for the owner of a Warmley brick and tile works, although his eventual use of the line had proved disappointing..

The reference to Severn Tunnel brings the observation from C R Clinker that it actually opened the following year on 1 September 1886, and that 'the new loop line at Bristol', between Dr Day's Bridge and North Somerset Junctions providing a direct line from Severn Tunnel to Bath and beyond, was in use from June of the same year. Such progress in the surrounding network denied all possibility of extension and development of the Avon and Gloucestershire Railway which was to remain horse-drawn until its closure. This was finally brought about by massive underground flooding to California Colliery in March 1904. All equipment there was sold the following year and by July 1906 it could be declared officially that all tramway traffic was at an end. This did not prevent unofficial use by miners in the North Common area in the Depression when obtaining fuel from their own unofficial sources.

At the visit referred to in 1930, Charles Clinker would have been able to view the line almost in its entirety. Most of it could be followed in the 1960s but, since then, the rate of obliterations has been gathering momentum. In recent years the cutting approaching Avon Wharf has been filled, a length has been despoiled near Willsbridge weigh-house and planning permission has been given for industrial use near Mangotsfield Station. Finally, Kingswood District Council gave planning permission for large-scale development at North Common.

As the route at this point had also been used as a public footpath a diversion order was required to enable development to proceed. The Ramblers Association decided to oppose this, seeing it also as a means of protecting the tramway. Our own society agreed to support them in company with the Kingswood District History Society and the Downend Local History Society. At the inevitable Inquiry the late Mat Southway spoke to defend one of his long-standing interests, in what probably was his last effort on behalf of BIAS. In this he was helped by Will Harris.

BIAS committee members realised that, as planning permission had already been granted, the cause was almost certainly lost, but felt impelled to register a protest at the lack of concern shown by the authorities in allowing the tramway to disappear piecemeal. In the event, the footpath issue was settled when the Minister of State confirmed the diversion, leaving the tramway length open to obliteration. However, a note now appears on current plans stating that the Council will endeavour to secure a layout retaining the footpath along part of this section. A further length of the tramway, just beyond the area under dispute is to be retained by the Council and declared a public open space. Perhaps this is the most favourable outcome which could be expected in the circumstances.