

THE RAILWAY LINE

“Sure, the next train has gone ten minutes ago”

(Punch)

The Bideford to Torrington section of the London & South Western Railway (the Torrington Extension Line) opened on July 18th 1872, following a two year construction period. The Act authorising the line had been passed on June 19th 1865. Work had been delayed as in 1868 the railway company had sought to abandon the line, but local support defeated Parliamentary applications that the line should not be built, in both 1868, and 1869.

The line comprised a new passenger station at Bideford close to the bridge and passed southwards through East the Water, crossing the Torridge on the long, iron, Landcross viaduct followed by a short tunnel to Annery Wood. From here it used the bed of the thirty year old Rolle Canal to the new Torrington station at Staplevale. (since 1984 ‘The Puffing Billy’ restaurant). This station was one mile from the centre of Torrington, but ideal for the construction of future extensions-southwards to the Marland clay works and westwards to Bude. The Bude line was never built, while the one from Torrington to Halwill Junction was - but only very much later, opening in 1925.

The cost of the Bideford to Torrington line, at £100,000, was relatively expensive and a quarter as much again as the 1865 estimate. The expected traffic could only generate a very limited return on the outlay but railway politics had meant that the Extension Line was

now open. The August 1872 timetable shows six trains each way daily to and from Exeter with four of these having direct connections to Waterloo. By the end of the century this had risen to eleven trains each way, eight of them to or from Exeter or beyond.

No intermediate stations were built. The line passed very close to the Parish of Weare Giffard and had considerable impact on the carriage of goods. The canal was now eliminated and by 1900, The Quay [and the Dock] no longer existed. Weare Giffard Parish Council was keen to improve communications and encourage visitors. In 1907 they drew up a petition which was signed by the Council and many residents and sent to the directors of the railway asking for a station or some other form of accommodation to be provided at Weare Giffard. The following year the Railway Board replied - ‘expressing regret that they could not accede to the request of the Council’.

No doubt there were two motives. A station would eliminate the journey to Torrington or Bideford stations but it would also be important in encouraging traffic to come to the village. The idea had been around for some time. On September 16th 1890 the Bideford Weekly Gazette had carried the following article:-

“The wisdom of erecting a station, which would accommodate the population of the neighbourhood, was a question put before the Railway

contended that the outlay will be at least as remunerative as that on the stations at Wrafton and Chapelton. The passenger and luggage traffic, which would attend upon the addition of a station fairly centrally placed between Bideford and Torrington would, they confidently assert, more than repay the cost of its provision and maintenance. The line is there; no branching is necessary. On the part of the general public there will certainly be a strong disposition to support the suggestion now that its possibility is believed to have been admitted by the company. The fame of the Wear Gifford gardens is not confined to North Devon. "Strawberries and Cream" is a delectable mixture, which is obtained at its daintiest and most acceptable form in this exceedingly pretty neighbourhood. On the part of the holidaymakers it will be an instance of "all hands up" for the proposition"

Weare Giffard halt was not to happen. Perhaps the railway company did not agree with the estimated revenues or costs, or perhaps they were already envisaging the reduction in traffic that was to occur from 1913 onwards.



Would Wear Giffard Halt have looked like this? However, where they were thought

worthwhile, or where the customer had influence, halts were constructed. Those at Watergate and Yarde opened in 1926 and were useful to the clay workers at Marland works. These appear to have been part of the arrangements which followed the replacement of a narrow gauge Torrington and Marland Railway with a new standard line to Halwill Junction.

In the 1930's the annual number of travellers to Torrington who bought tickets elsewhere was only five thousand, an average of fourteen a day, or one in ten of all passengers! Bideford handled six times as many visitors. In contrast Torrington handled more freight (30 loaded wagons each working day) and a far greater volume of livestock and goods were forwarded than from Bideford. The largest part of this traffic was clay from the Marland Works, but milk, livestock and coal were also significant.

Despite declining numbers of travellers passenger services continued through until 1965 with, in summer, ten trains a day. There were only 27,000 tickets issued at Torrington in 1962, half the pre-war level. There followed a series of downgrading - in 1964 to diesel car services and then in October 1965, passenger services were replaced with buses. Despite relatively buoyant freight volumes goods services were also reduced and in 1982 withdrawn. By 1984 the line was being lifted and Torrington station auctioned.

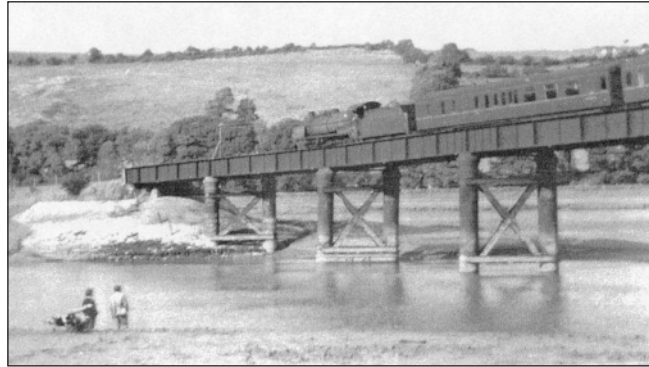
The Tarka Trail now follows the line of the Torrington Extension Railway. This leisure cycle route, laid out in the 1980's, with its bridges and embankments still has the feel of a railway. Memories of the trains are still alive in the village, but the canal which followed the same route now seems virtually lost.

Acknowledgements:

Bideford Weekly Gazette (Article from 16th September 1890.

Railway information from:-
 "Lines to Torrington", by John Nicholas,
 Oxford Publishing Company;

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Iron Bridge, Landcross, 1963

A COT AT WEARGIFFORD AND JANIE FOR ME.

*I sigh not for honour, I covet not station,
 A man may be noble, though lowly his birth,
 The world's my domain, and my home is creation,
 And proud as a monarch I traverse the earth.
 Yet still there's a wish in my bosom I cherish,
 I long for a spot where the soul my be free;
 A fig for ambition and gold let it perish,
 A cot at Weargifford and Janie for me.*

*Sweet vale of green Devon, wood-sheltered and cosy,
 How blest are thy maidens, and happy thy men!
 Thy little ones all, like thy gardens, are rosy,
 The orchards are fruitful, and fertile thy plain!
 Long, long may thy hall throw its shade on the river,
 The beautiful Tor winding up from the sea -
 Thy woods, herds, and flocks, and thy sunsets forever,
 A cot at Weargifford and Janie for me.*

*And O, the sweet bees and their hives full of honey!
 And O, the hay warblers that pipe there in spring!
 And O, the fair banks and their blossoms so bonny,
 And the sweet village bells with their ding-a-dong-ding!
 I hate to be bound by the fetters of fashion,
 The town hath its chains for the soul that is free;
 My love for dear Nature was ever a passion,
 A cot at Weargifford and Janie for me.*

(from "Wayside Warbles", 1865)