

THE CARLISLE AND PORT CARLISLE RAILWAY

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The remarkable story of these two railways begins in 1819 when a company was formed to build a canal between Carlisle and Fisher's Cross on the Solway Firth, a distance of 11¼ miles. Fisher's Cross was to be renamed Port Carlisle. Increasing trade and commerce had brought about a demand for better communications. In the 18th century vessels with cargo bound for Carlisle made their way up the Solway till they entered the River Eden. The Eden was navigable for vessels of up to 60 tons as far as Sandsfield, five miles from Carlisle. From here goods were brought to the city by cart. Larger vessels had to lay off at Fisher's Cross and discharge their cargoes there. The canal was to allow ships of up to 100 tons to come right into the heart of the city. Railways went farther and faster but the canal was the first to support Carlisle's developing industry.

The Carlisle Canal was opened for traffic on 12th March 1823. Mr. Ferrier, the canal sub-engineer, estimated that a crowd of 26,400 people, almost twice the population of Carlisle, were down at the Canal Basin. One old man, 97 years of age, resident in Caldewgate, on hearing that ships had come up to nearby Primrose Bank, declared that nothing but seeing them would make him believe it. He was carried by two friends down to the basin to stare and wonder at the "Robert Burns", the first ship to enter Carlisle. The only mishap of the day was

when a gentleman in attempting to board the "Irishman" slipped and fell into the water and had "a taste of early spring bathing against his will."

The canal brought about a great improvement in trade. Carlisle was a cotton manufacturing city and one of the canal's major objects was to reduce the cost of transporting cotton from Liverpool.

In 1830, one of Stephenson's locomotives, intended for the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, was shipped at the Canal Basin for Liverpool. The boiler, the only part of the locomotive that could be seen, was described as "very small and compact." So the seeds of the canal's destruction were sent slowly south.

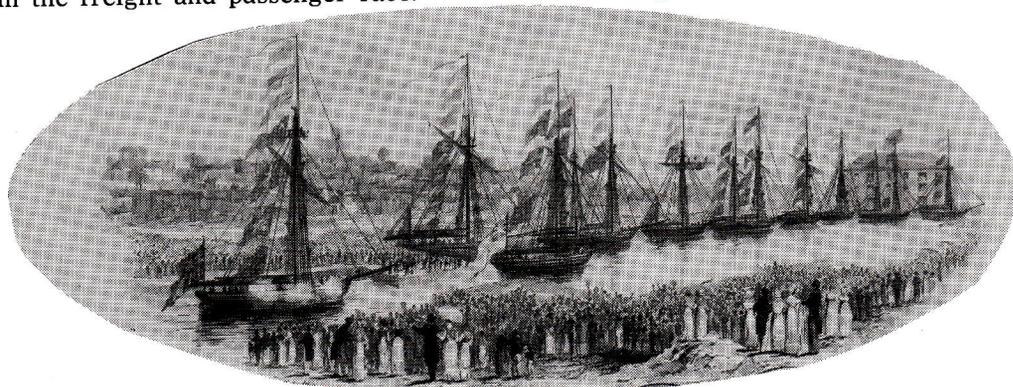
The coming of the railways had been foreshadowed six years previously when a committee had been formed to promote either a canal or railway between Newcastle and Carlisle. (Linking the North Sea with the Irish Sea was one of the "grand schemes" of the day.) William Chapman, the engineer, estimated that a canal would cost £880,000, a railway £252,488.

The Bill for the building of the Newcastle and Carlisle Railway received the Royal Assent in 1829. The line was opened in stages. The section most affecting the canal was the opening of the 1½ mile freight line between

London Road Station, the Carlisle passenger terminus for the N and CR, and the Canal Basin. This was opened on 9th March 1837. Coal from the pits at Midgeholme and Blenkinsopp could now be brought direct to the basin for shipment down the canal. The first locomotive along the line was the "Hercules" followed by the "Goliath" and "Atlas", each drawing 20 wagons of coal. The coal was loaded into the "Eden" bound for Glasgow and the "Swan" bound for Dublin. In 1839 the line to Newcastle was opened throughout. The canal initially profited from this railway link. However following the opening of the Maryport and Carlisle Railway in 1845, the Lancaster and Carlisle Railway in 1846 and the Caledonian Carlisle to Glasgow line in 1848, there was a considerable falling off in traffic on the canal. The Lancaster and Carlisle Railway gave direct access to Liverpool, the Maryport and Carlisle Railway a swift outlet to the sea. The canal fell far behind in the freight and passenger race.

Although proposals for converting the canal into a railway were discussed as early as 1847, it was not until 1853 that a Bill was obtained for the conversion. The canal was closed on 1st August 1853. When the water was drained off myriads of small boys retrieved a huge quantity of pike and eels. One of the pike, estimated to be over 20 years of age, was so large that an onlooker was heard to say that "he was in doubt whether he ought to attempt to eat it or suffer himself to be eaten by it."

The iron rails were laid in the bed of the canal. The twisting, turning route from Carlisle to Burgh was hardly suitable for a locomotive. Yet only one of the canal's many curves and bends was ironed out by the engineers — the long bend on the Port Carlisle side of the branch in Kirkandrews was cut out. Up to the closure of the branch in 1964 the road from the Canal Junction up to Dykesfield was one of hard riding with a speed restriction of 25 m.p.h.



12th March 1823; the opening of Carlisle Canal. A huge crowd was down at the Canal Basin to see the first ships enter Carlisle.

(Illustration courtesy of Cumbria County Library).

The principle object of the new road was to form a continuous and uninterrupted line of railway communication between the east and west coasts of England. This would be achieved in alliance with the Newcastle and Carlisle Railway. The **Carlisle Journal** proclaimed that the new railway would "prove of immense advantage to the commerce and general prosperity of this locality." Yet when the line was opened for passenger traffic on 22nd June 1854 this same paper merely reported "CARLISLE AND PORT CARLISLE RAILWAY — This line was opened for the conveyance of passengers yesterday." The report in the **Carlisle Patriot** was a little fuller though equally puzzling. It stated "the event excited no very great interest, if we may judge from the number of passengers by the train that went down in the morning — scarcely more than a dozen." There were no demonstrations, speeches or dinners on this momentous occasion. The only station in existence between the termini was at Burgh. The journey took 35 minutes and was charged at 2s 9d, 2s 2d and 1s 5d for 1st, 2nd and 3rd class returns respectively. The third class carriages were described as being "a great improvement upon the prevailing 'convict cage' into which economical travellers are thrust." The engine driver in charge of the excursion trains, who had occupied a similar post on the N and CR for 15 years, declared he had never travelled over a better and easier line. The **Carlisle Patriot** expressed surprise at the opening of the line being so long deferred as it was known that the permanent way and other works executed by Mr Simpson, the contractor, had been completed some time back.

Why the delay in opening the line? Why did the railway line which promised so much excite so little? The

attention of the good burghers of Carlisle had passed to a new and bigger speculation — the proposed Carlisle and Silloth Bay Dock and Railway development.

The idea for developing Silloth Bay as a harbour and extending a railway to it was first discussed in 1847. It was not until 1854 that a Bill was introduced to make a floating dock of four acres at Silloth Bay and to connect that dock with Carlisle by means of a railway 12¾ miles long. This railway was to join the Port Carlisle branch at a place 8½ miles distant from the city, near Drumburgh. This development was chiefly intended to give a competent port to the vastly increased and increasing traffic which passed to, from, and through the city of Carlisle. It was stated in evidence to the parliamentary committee examining the proposals that the Port Carlisle Railway Company itself felt the need for a better terminus for their railway than the existing one.

Port Carlisle was a tidal harbour. It was dry at the outgoing of the tide and accessible only for about two hours in a tide. Larger vessels could reach the port only at high water of high spring tides. The channel to the port had also begun to silt up. This was attributed to a large jetty which had been erected higher up the stream and which threw the River Eden off towards Scotland, so putting the channel further off from Port Carlisle. The promoters of the Bill claimed also that there were great delays in ships having to wait in Silloth Bay for water up to Port Carlisle. It was of great importance to the cotton industry to have raw materials with certainty and on time. About six thousand hands were then employed in

the cotton manufacturing industry in Carlisle. Generally trade was increasing and steamers were getting bigger. Port Carlisle, it was claimed, was totally inadequate to handle the growing traffic.

Silloth Bay, the promoters stated, was a place of safety, into which steamers ran in all weathers and in all states of tide. Floating docks as opposed to tidal harbours were becoming essential as ships increased in size. All the ports on the Cumberland coastline — Maryport, Workington, Whitehaven and Harrington — had tidal harbours. There, a considerable portion of the loading and unloading had to be carried out while vessels were aground. It was damaging to steamers to lie aground for any time. There would be no such problems at Silloth. Civil engineers stated that the site at Silloth Bay was very favourable to the project. Construction of the docks would be a very easy operation compared with what it would be at some places. The site was "much more favourable than the side of the Mersey along the docks at Liverpool."

Predictably the Bill was vigorously opposed by the Maryport and Carlisle Railway Company, the Maryport Harbour Trustees and the Earl of Lonsdale, who had harbour interests to protect at Whitehaven. They had no desire to see rival docks established on the West Cumberland coast. They claimed that the M and CR gave Carlisle ample access to the sea and that the west coast ports had been improved "at great expence" and were adequate for every commercial requirement. Mr. Jacob, the secretary of the M and CR, put it bluntly when he said "I cannot conceive the necessity for a line passing over a district so utterly bare of inhabitants, or anything else, as this

projected line. It ends in a rabbit warren, and they can only hope for success by abstracting the traffic from us; we are able to carry it all." The opponents of the Bill called expert witnesses to contradict everything the promoters' experts had said: Silloth Bay was not a good place to make a dock; as soon as the work commenced the docks would fill up with sand. A Mr. Denison, a fisherman who had known the bay for 29 years, said that small boats of 30 tons could not ride safely at anchor in the bay. He knew of several ships that had foundered in this area. There were also claims that shifting sands made the bay treacherous to navigate.

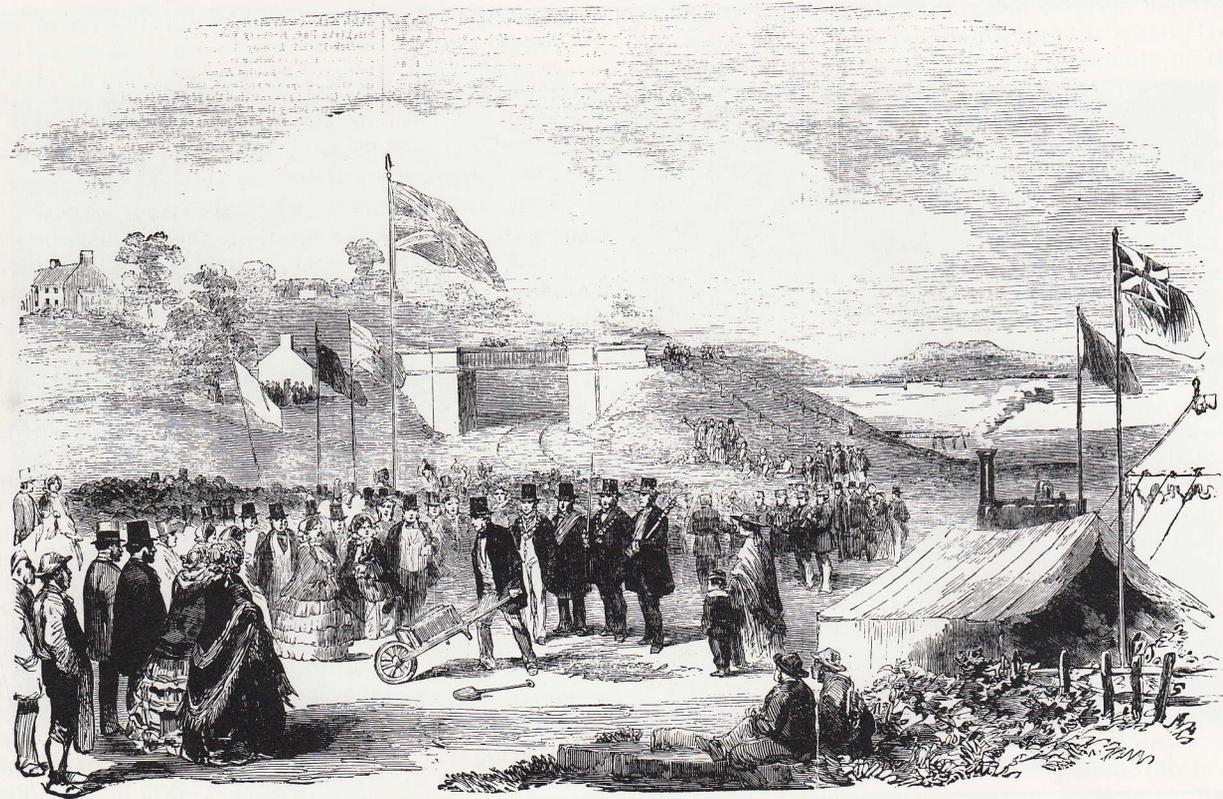
Faced with this strong conflict of evidence upon the nature and capabilities of Silloth Bay many local tradesmen — potential investors in a new port which might rival Glasgow and Liverpool — folded up their aprons, and determined to ascertain the facts for themselves, by personal observation. "Some brought lead lines and took elaborate soundings on their own bottoms, while others ostentatiously noted down the fathoms deep at all states of the tide, the size and character of the sand banks, the nature of the currents and the general adaptability of the whole for the accommodation of the fleets which were, by and bye, to be crowding into the hitherto unknown Bay of Silloth."

Confronted with this wealth of contradictory evidence, the parliamentary select committee decided against the project. The following year the promoters tried again. The evidence was once more strongly conflicting on every point. Mr. Dixon, a chief promoter, said "I think we are only asking to spend our own money on our own port. There is nothing speculative in it. I have



The North British Silloth Bay, centre background, shows the only signs of railway activity on an otherwise deserted Carlisle Station. The newspaper headlines on the John Menzies stand proclaiming "Russian Disaster: Battleship Sinks: Admiral Drowns: 700 Lives Lost." suggests a date of April 1904 for this photograph. On the 12th of that month, during the Russo-Japanese War, the Russian battleships Petropavlovsk and Pobieda ran into a minefield. Admiral Makarov went down with his ship.

(Author's collection).



31st August 1855, Drumburgh. Sir James Graham turns the first sod of the Silloth Railway. The spade and barrow he used were the ordinary implements of the navy. The engine "Solway", pulling 16 crowded carriages, brought hundreds of sightseers down to witness this momentous occasion. (Illustration courtesy of Cumbria County Library).