

## **RAILWAYS AROUND SKELMANTHORPE**

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### **CONTEXT – (1) LOCAL GEOGRAPHY**

A glance at the railway map of Britain in, say, 1914 shows the country well covered apart from gaps in areas such as the Scottish Highlands, the network being especially dense in major cities and in industrial, especially coal mining, areas. Skelmanthorpe lies on the western edge of such an area, extending southwards through the Yorkshire/Nottinghamshire coalfield and its associated cities. If we focus in on the former West Riding area (covering Leeds / Bradford / Huddersfield / Sheffield / Wakefield / Pontefract) we could describe its rail network as both dense and complicated. While there's nothing special in its density - plenty of other areas can match it – it is arguably unusually complex, a product both of history and geography. In confirmation of this, six out of the eight largest pre-Grouping companies (measured a little crudely by the number of locomotives owned) had a presence in the West Riding area (though the North Eastern was confined to the north and east of Leeds). Only London had a comparable number, while Greater Manchester, for instance, had only four of the eight, or the West Midlands three. Even the immediate local area involves three of the largest - the London & North Western (ranking 1) through Huddersfield plus the Kirkburton branch, the Great Central (ranking 7) through Penistone and the Lancashire & Yorkshire (ranking 5) with the Huddersfield-Penistone line and its three branches.

## **CONTEXT – (2) SOME HISTORY BASICS**

Key dates in British railway history (in terms of the basic organisation of the railways) are 1825, 1923 and 1948.

**1825** : the Stockton & Darlington Rly opened, often regarded as the first railway. It wasn't, but it was "the first public railway empowered by parliament to convey goods and passengers by steam traction" (Oxford Companion to British Railway History), though for the first 8 years its passengers were still conveyed by horses. Sporadic periods of growth followed which gradually formed a single network with a common track gauge. Larger companies formed through mergers or takeovers, though many small ones survived. From the 1890s onwards competition from trams and buses caused some contraction in local passenger services with occasional station closures, especially in urban areas, but with relatively few line closures. Some companies did more than run railways and ran connecting bus services as well as goods collection and delivery services by road. But the most significant ancillary activity undertaken by some companies was shipping, both passenger and freight, and some ports were owned by railway companies. [After the Grouping (see below) the Great Western apparently became the largest dock owner in the world. (This could mean miles of waterfront, but I can't be sure).]

**1923** : under what is known as the Grouping an Act of Parliament merged the main-line companies into four companies on a geographical basis. Three of the companies were new - the London, Midland & Scottish, London & North Eastern and the Southern - while the fourth, the Great Western, already existed and merely had to absorb smaller companies in its area, especially in South/Mid-Wales. These four companies were known as the "Big Four". (The main exceptions were the railways that later became London Underground, including the Metropolitan, which ran well beyond the capital.)

**1948** : nationalisation of the Big Four, followed by privatisation, but on a completely different basis to the way railways had been organised before.

## **TIMELINE**

(Opening dates refer to commencement of passenger services; freight often started slightly earlier or sometimes later.)

### **March 1841**

Summit Tunnel opens, completing Manchester-Rochdale-Sowerby Br-Brighouse-Mirfield-Wakefield-Normanton route of the Manchester & Leeds Rly (later L&YR - see Appdx). (Access to Leeds was then via Normanton.) Coaches from Huddersfield connected at Cooper Br.

### **December 1845**

Woodhead Tunnel opens, completing Manchester-Penistone-Wadsley Br-Sheffield route of the Sheffield, Ashton-under-Lyne & Manchester Rly (later GCR - see Appdx).

### **January 1847**

Wooden viaduct under construction at Denby Dale blows down, but building of the wood version resumes despite public pressure to revert to the original plan for a stone structure.

### **August 1847**

Rly reaches Huddersfield when LNWR (see Appdx) opens branch from Heaton Lodge Jct, giving through link to Leeds and Manchester via Todmorden.

### **August 1849**

Standedge Tunnel opens, completing LNWR's Manchester-Marsden-Huddersfield-Dewsbury-Leeds route.

### **January 1850**

First railway reaches Barnsley when the L&YR opens branch from Horbury Jct, giving access in Wakefield direction only.

**July 1850**

Huddersfield & Sheffield Jct Rly opens Huddersfield-Penistone line, trains being worked by the Manchester, Sheffield & Lincolnshire Rly (GCR) (later taken over by L&YR to Penistone). The short branch from Brockholes to Holmfirth branch opens at the same time.

**July 1854**

Manchester, Sheffield & Lincolnshire Rly (later GCR) opens Penistone-Barnsley line, but only as far as Summer Lane.

**December 1859**

Summer Lane-Barnsley gap finally closed, giving Huddersfield, Denby Dale and Penistone access to Barnsley and on to Doncaster.

**October 1867**

LNWR opens Deighton-Kirkburton branch.

**July 1869**

L&YR opens the Lockwood to Meltham branch.

**May 1870**

Midland Rly (see Appdx) reaches Barnsley with link from its main Sheffield-Leeds line at Cudworth. (Significant for Clayton West branch.)

**September 1879**

L&YR opens Clayton West branch but Skelmanthorpe station not ready.

**December 1879**

Skelmanthorpe station opens.

**November 1910**

Midland Rly builds branch from Mirfield to Huddersfield Newtown for freight only. Ambitious plans to build a passenger station and hotel were dropped in 1914.

## **THE RAILWAY IN SKELMANTHORPE**

Although Skelmanthorpe station opened relatively late, at the end of 1879, villagers had access to the railway much earlier with the completion of the Huddersfield-Penistone line and the opening of the station at Denby Dale. A goods yard was also provided there on land now occupied by Myer's, sharing the site with pipe and stoneware manufacturers Cammell & Nall.

This history of the Clayton West branch itself is surprisingly complicated, involving several different railway companies - a contrast with the earlier branches to Holmfirth (1850) and Meltham (1869). In 1867 the railway reached Kirkburton with a branch from Deighton on the Manchester-Huddersfield-Leeds main line, all built by Britain's largest railway company, the LNWR. Probably the railway saw the branch as the first stage of a link on to Barnsley with the lure of its coal traffic. Kirkburton station was located above the A629/B116 junction, where there were also sidings, a goods shed and wagon loading bay as well as the passenger platform.

Before the branch had even been completed the Midland Railway came up with its own plan to extend the branch to Barnsley, which it already served. The attraction for the Midland wasn't Kirkburton, but Huddersfield, to be reached by using running powers over the LNWR's line. After initial opposition, the LNWR agreed, on the basis it would have running powers over the Midland's new line. This plan would have brought the railway through Clayton West and Skelmanthorpe and so the Midland scheme had the backing of these villages.

The private Bill authorising the extension of the Kirkburton branch had already been passed by the Commons before the L&YR and MSLR raised objections. They did not want to see the Midland Railway linking with the LNWR and offered instead to allow the Midland to run into Huddersfield over its Penistone route. As the Midland already had (unused) running powers over the MSL line from Barnsley to Penistone this was not only feasible but more attractive to the Midland, which would save the expense of building a new line. The Bill was halted in the Lords. (In the event the Midland never used these powers and seemed to lose interest in Huddersfield until it built its own short-lived line in from Mirfield, opened in 1910.)

The abandoning of the Kirkburton extension meant the loss of a railway at Clayton West, but it seems in these complicated dealings between the Midland, L&YR and MSLR some form of commitment was made by the L&YR to provide its own line to Clayton West. This was the line eventually built but the L&YR was in no hurry to fulfil the promise. Work didn't begin until November 1872, the line finally opening in September 1879. Although the line was single, the earthworks, bridges and tunnel at Skelmanthorpe were all constructed to allow for a second track. There was a reason for this: the L&Y saw some advantage in extending the branch further to link up with its Barnsley-Wakefield line near Darton - a short but expensive line entailing a tunnel over a mile long - which of course was never built. (The plan was later revived in 1906 as a light railway, which would have had steeper gradients and so be cheaper to build.)

If the arrival of the railway at Clayton West was far from inevitable, this was even more true of Skelmanthorpe. After planning for two "temporary" stations on the branch, to be built of timber and stone as cheaply as possible, the L&Y decided to save costs further and abandon the station at Skelmanthorpe, re-siting the structure at Clayton West. Fortunately it changed its mind but now Skelmanthorpe would only get a wooden structure, though it was of quite a generous size. The procrastination delayed the opening of the station by three months after the line itself. Like Denby Dale (and Clayton West), sidings alongside facilitated the collection and delivery of goods. There were also sidings serving Emley Moor colliery, while a freight tramroad linked Skelmanthorpe to Nineclogs colliery.

## **APPENDIX - BACKGROUND NOTES ON THE FOUR MAJOR COMPANIES IN HUDDERSFIELD/BARNSLEY AREA**

If the various companies involved in our local railways are no more than names, these notes are intended to “put some flesh on the bones” and give an idea of what lies behind the names of the four major companies that either built the lines themselves or soon took over the smaller companies that did.

### **1 LONDON & NORTH WESTERN RAILWAY (LNWR)**

Ran through Huddersfield, linking Leeds to Manchester, and the branch from Deighton to Kirkburton.

Open today: most of the Manchester Piccadilly to Leeds line through Huddersfield (though a section between junctions just beyond Deighton and just before Ravensthorpe is L&YR – see below).

Formed in 1846 through the amalgamation of three smaller railways. It grew to be the largest railway by 1923, when it became part of the LMS (London Midland & Scottish Railway) created by statute in 1923. For a time it claimed to be the largest joint stock company in the world.

Styling itself “The Premier Line”, its principal route (eventually) ran from Euston to Carlisle via Rugby, Stafford, Crewe, Preston and Lancaster. At Carlisle a Scottish company continued the route to Glasgow and elsewhere, the whole route being known as the West Coast Main Line (though passengers only get one fleeting glimpse of the sea). Major branches ran to Coventry/Birmingham/Wolverhampton, Manchester, Holyhead (for Dublin) and Liverpool. It competed with other railways over most of these routes for London traffic, but had the shortest route except for Birmingham (where early 20<sup>th</sup> Century competition with the Great Western Railway was especially fierce). Its trains even reached Swansea, Cardiff and Newport (Mon) from

Shrewsbury, as well as Oxford and Cambridge, partly through running powers over lines of other companies, and also had interests in Ireland. It crossed the Pennines (the third to cross) with its Manchester-Leeds line through Standedge Tunnel, opened in 1849. It was the longest tunnel in Britain until the Severn Tunnel opened in 1886.

The Railway effectively created its own town at Crewe, where it even built a steel works, rolling mill, soap works and printers. There it was more than an employer, providing housing and dominating local politics and religion.

## 2 LANCASHIRE & YORKSHIRE RAILWAY (L&YR)

Ran the Huddersfield-Penistone line and its branches to Holmfirth, Marsden and Clayton West.

Open today: the Huddersfield-Sheffield line as far as Penistone; most of the Manchester Victoria-Bradford Interchange line via Todmorden, Halifax etc; the line from Sowerby Bridge through Brighouse, Mirfield, Wakefield and Pontefract; the Wakefield Kirkgate-Darton-Barnsley line.

Formed in 1837 as the Manchester & Leeds Railway, it renamed itself the Lancashire & Yorkshire Railway in 1847, soon absorbing other smaller companies. As the name implies, the Railway had an east-west orientation. In a complex network, its principal line could be described as running from Liverpool Exchange (now closed) to Manchester Victoria via Wigan and then on to Goole via Rochdale, Todmorden, Sowerby Bridge, Brighouse, Mirfield, Wakefield Kirkgate and Pontefract. The port of Goole was effectively created by the L&YR. It also served Fleetwood (where it developed the fishing port), Blackpool, Southport, Bolton, Halifax, Bradford, Leeds, Huddersfield and Barnsley, using running powers over other companies' lines in some cases. It was the first to cross the Pennines, Summit Tunnel being briefly the longest railway tunnel in the world when it opened in 1841 (though not as long as Standedge canal tunnel, opened in 1811).

On the map the railway looked relatively small, ranking only 11<sup>th</sup> in route mileage, yet was fifth largest in terms of number of locomotives - a reflection of the

exceptionally dense nature of its operations, with more junctions, signal boxes and locomotives per route mile than any other main-line railway. It also owned 30 ships, more than any other British railway.

Lacking the glamour of railways like the LNWR above, with its Anglo-Scottish expresses, the L&YR called itself “The Business Line”, its passenger services being largely “all stations” or semi-fasts with relatively short distances between stops.

The railway had reasonably good relations with its larger neighbour, the LNWR, and was actually absorbed by the LNWR in 1922, a year before becoming part of the London, Midland & Scottish Railway by statute in the process known as “Grouping”.

### 3 GREAT CENTRAL RAILWAY (GCR)

Ran the Manchester-Sheffield line through Penistone and links east from Penistone, including to Barnsley. But for a time the railway also used running powers to run an express from Bradford Exchange to London Marylebone via Halifax, Huddersfield and over Denby Dale viaduct to Sheffield.

Open today: the Penistone-Barnsley section of the Huddersfield-Sheffield line.

The Great Central only adopted this name in 1897 in anticipation of opening its London extension in 1899. Previously it was the Manchester, Sheffield & Lincolnshire Railway, formed in 1847 from the amalgamation of four smaller companies. Like the L&YR above, it then had an east-west orientation with its principal line from Manchester Central to Sheffield Victoria via Penistone and on to Retford, Lincoln, Gainsborough and Grimsby, later opening its own port at Immingham. It also extended south into the Nottinghamshire coalfield and eventually ran from Sheffield Victoria through Chesterfield, Nottingham, Leicester and Rugby to Marylebone, competing with the Midland Rly over much of the route for both passengers and freight. Much of its London extension route was closed under the Beeching programme of the 1960s.

Though it had more route miles than the L&YR, it was somewhat smaller in terms of volume of traffic and number of locomotives. It was more dependent on freight than either the LNWR or L&YR.

Unlike the other three companies described here, it became part of the London & North Eastern Railway in the Grouping of 1923.

#### 4 MIDLAND RAILWAY (MR)

Ran no nearer than Barnsley (until an underused freight-only line to Huddersfield opened in 1910), but might have linked Barnsley to Kirkburton via Clayton West and (probably) Skelmanthorpe instead of the L&Y line actually built.

Open today: Sheffield-Rotherham section of Sheffield-Leeds via Moorthorpe line.

Formed 1844 from the amalgamation of three smaller companies that all met at Derby, largely the creation of the corrupt “Railway King”, George Hudson. It became the third largest railway (after the LNWR above and the Great Western) and became part of the London, Midland & Scottish Railway in 1923.

At its heart was the South Yorks/Notts coalfield, and hauling coal to London was a major revenue source. Its (eventual) main line could be described as an alternative route from London to Carlisle, running from St Pancras via Leicester, Derby or Nottingham, Sheffield, Leeds and Skipton. North of Carlisle through trains reached Glasgow using a longer route than the West Coast Main Line (see LNWR above) run by a different Scottish company. It also had a major route from Derby to Birmingham, Gloucester and Bristol, where it connected with the Great Western, while another line linked London to Manchester via Derby.

Though not the largest company, with running powers and shared ownership of joint railways the Midland probably spread across the country more than any other railway - from Stranraer to Bournemouth, from Swansea to Yarmouth. It also owned a railway in Ireland and built its own port at Heysham.

Its London expresses were generally slower than the LNWR's on services to Manchester and Scotland, and slower than the Great Northern's to Leeds, and so competed in terms of comfort, food and, in some cases, scenery. It effectively abolished Third Class before other companies (by abolishing 2<sup>nd</sup> Class and upgrading 3<sup>rd</sup>).

In 1923 it became part of the London, Midland & Scottish Railway.

### **ABBREVIATIONS**

GCR	Great Central Railway
LNWR	London & North Western Railway
L&YR	Lancashire & Yorkshire Railway
MSLR	Manchester, Sheffield & Lincolnshire Railway

## DOCUMENT LIST

### 1 – BOOKS

- D Joy            Regional History of the Rlys of Gt Britain Vol 8 S & W Yorkshire  
                                David & Charles 1975  
*A general history with chapter on Huddersfield and associated lines*
- M Bairstow    The Huddersfield & Sheffield Jnct Rly – The Penistone Line  
                                M Bairstow 1985  
*A brief well-illustrated history of Huddersfield-Sheffield  
Victoria/Barnsley lines; includes gradient profiles and timetable  
details*
- W B Stocks    Pennine Journey        Advertiser Press 1960  
*Brief but wide-ranging history including tramways and industrial  
lines. Probably not comprehensive*
- C T Goode     Huddersfield Branch Lines    Burstwick Publicity Services c1993  
*Brief history including Kirkburton branch*
- B C Lane       Branchlines of the L&YR No 2 The Holmfirth Branch  
                                L&YR Society 1984  
*Detailed account including track layouts, station and goods shed  
architecture aimed at modellers*
- B C Lane       Branchlines of the L&YR No 5 The Meltham Branch  
                                L&YR Society 1987  
*As above*
- J N Fisher     The Huddersfield & Kirkburton Branch  
                                Oakwood Press 1997  
*Comprehensive account with emphasis on construction history though  
includes subsequent operation and closure*

2 – ARTICLES [All from Platform, the L&YR Society Journal; nothing relevant found from the LNWR Society (for Kirkburton branch), according to their website index]

- H V Armitage            Huddersfield to Penistone  
*Brief history station by station, including Skelmanthorpe and Clayton West*
- C Leach                 Honley Station  
*Detailed illustrated description of structures etc*
- A Earnshaw            Meltham  
*Brief supplement to Meltham Branch booklet above with maps but no illustrations*
- A Earnshaw            The Trouble with Viaducts  
*Account of problems eg subsidence, collapses of viaducts on Huddersfield-Penistone line*
- A Earnshaw            A Bad Friday at Huddersfield  
*Describes accident on 21/4/1905; includes brief account of Huddersfield station arrangements*
- A Earnshaw            Altercation at Penistone  
*Describes accident on 28/2/1927 and its background*
- Major-General Hutchinson    Report on Berry Brow accident 11/9/1886  
*Alarming account of dangerous practices at Berry Brow*
- T Wray                 Denby Dale Viaduct  
*Detailed history of construction of viaduct*
- J Wells                 Lockwood Viaduct  
*As above*