

The Burry Port & Gwendreath Valley Railway – *Nigel Wassell* (September 2018)

Our Chairman interrupted his holidays at New Quay to pay a flying visit for the first meeting of the new season and to present his talk on the Burry Port & Gwendreath Valley Railway. Note that it is Gwendreath, not the correct spelling Gwendraeth – all the fault of a parliamentary draughtsman in London. But that it is how it was spelt in the Act, so that had to be the Company's official title throughout its existence.

The BP&GVR was only a short railway tucked away on the western edge of the coalfield in Carmarthenshire. It ran from Burry Port through the Gwendraeth valley to Cwmmawr with branches to Kidwelly and Trimsaran and an extension to Llanelli. Its entire *raison d'être* was to serve the collieries in the Gwendraeth valley.

Its history ultimately goes back to Kymer's canal which was built in the 1760s to carry coal down the valley for shipping at Kidwelly. An Act of Parliament of 1812 extended this canal, as the Kidwelly & Llanelly Canal, up the valley to Pontyberem and south to Llanelli. In 1865 the company decided to convert itself into a railway and became the Kidwelly & Burry Port Railway; the following year it amalgamated with the company that controlled the docks at Burry Port and so became the Burry Port & Gwendreath Valley Railway. The main line was opened from Burry Port to Pontyberem in 1869 and the branch to Kidwelly followed in 1873. Extensions were added to Cwmmawr at the top of the valley in 1886 and to Sandy (where it joined the Llanelly & Mynydd Mawr Railway) in 1891, together with a branch to Trimsaran.

The railway was laid mostly on the bed of the canal or on the towpath. This led to a tendency to flooding during wet weather and resulted in the line becoming known in later years as the 'Onedin Line'. The original canal overbridges were retained and the resultant limited clearance always affected the dimensions of the rolling stock that could be used, including some interesting locomotive adaptations in its closing years.

For its first forty years the railway was almost exclusively a goods railway. Some workmen's services, run by arrangement with the colliery companies, were started in 1898 and there are records of occasional special excursions (e.g. Sunday school outings). In due course the Railway Inspectorate started to take an interest in these activities and the company was obliged to put their operations on a proper basis. In 1903 they appointed Holman Fred Stephens (later better known as Colonel Stephens) as a consultant to upgrade the line to approved passenger-carrying standards. This he did and a regular public passenger service started in 1909. Proper station facilities were built (mainly timber-framed buildings covered with corrugated steel sheeting) and a number of second-hand carriages were acquired from London's Metropolitan Railway, no longer required by that company as a result of their recent electrification.

Along with all the other local companies in south Wales the BP&GVR was taken over by the Great Western in 1923. New steel-panelled coaches were supplied in the 1930s, specially built to take account of the line's limited clearances, but even so a number of ancient 4-wheeled coaches remained in use right up to the withdrawal of passenger services. It was quite normal practice for trains to be composed of one of these 4-wheelers together with one of the new carriages.

Passenger services ceased in 1953 but a steady traffic in anthracite kept the line in business. Steam was replaced by diesel traction in 1984. Originally small class 03 diesels were used, often in pairs, but they were then replaced by the larger 08 diesels, but specially cut down to fit under the bridges. They worked the traffic until 1996 when the line closed following the closure of the last colliery in the valley.

As well as describing the history of the railway, Nigel also showed us scenes from various points along the line, mainly during the 1950s and 1960s. Where would we be without all those photographers who rode the enthusiasts' specials in those happy days when nobody had heard of elfin safety?