

14th March 2018

The Alnwick and Cornhill Railway

Railway enthusiast Reverend Dr Stephen Plattern gave a fascinating talk on the Alnwick to Cornhill railway, with reference to other local branch lines such as those to Scots Gap and Rothbury, Seahouses and Kelso to Tweedmouth.

He started by discussing the impressive station at Alnwick, designed by architect William Bell who was also the architect for many other stations on the line. The Duke of Northumberland had to give his permission before building could commence in Alnwick, and clearly only a grand building would suffice for his home town. Part of this station still survives today as Barter Books, which incidentally has a model railway running around above the stacks.

The railway opened in 1887 and was 35 miles in length. It was mainly a freight line, transporting livestock, but a limited passenger service also operated until 1930. Given the sparsity of the local population, and the fact that the stations were often situated some distance from the villages they served, owing to engineering constraints and the whims of local landowners, it is hardly surprising that the service was unsustainable. During the winter of 1948–49 a bridge was washed away south of Mindrum, and in 1949 a further bridge near Ilderton also succumbed to floodwaters. The Mindrum bridge was rebuilt, but the line was insufficiently profitable to justify reconstructing that at Ilderton, particularly under conditions of post-war austerity. However, the line continued to operate in two sections. Freight trains continued to run from Alnwick to Ilderton until the early 1950s, while the section between Wooler and Coldstream (actually Cornhill) survived until 1963, when it succumbed in the Beeching cuts. The line was also used for a time for holiday carriages. Most of the line was single track though the larger stations such as Wooler had double track, serving two platforms, and there was an Island platform at Whittingham.

This line was undoubtedly one of the most picturesque in England. It was connected to the main East Coast line by a further branch adjoining Alnwick to Alnmouth. Some progress has been made in reopening part of this branch as a heritage railway.

The line from Alnwick started off in a south-westerly direction, after about a mile passing through woodland, then four miles further across the magnificent viaduct near Edlingham with fine views of the castle and interesting church. It continued northwards, passing the crenelated eyecatcher (folly) of Levington with views up to the Simonside Hills near Rothbury. After a short tunnel the train would have pulled into Whittingham station, which is visible if you look down towards the north from the bridge near the Bridge of Aln pub. The line continued to Glanton station, then it follows a section (now walkable) mainly parallel with the A697 as it approaches Powburn. The fine iron bridge that carried the line over the river was removed after closure and relocated on the surviving rail network. The next station was Hedgeley, originally to be named Powburn, a far larger community. Further north was Wooperton, the area to the south of this

surviving station now occupied by Scott's Sawmill. The line then passed the landmark Percy's Cross, to reach the surviving rather grandiose but isolated station at Ilderton. Later this station became for a time a restaurant, and a disused carriage was parked nearby.

Passing over the site of the collapsed bridge that sounded the death knell for the line, the train would shortly have pulled into Wooler, the major stop on the line, with two platforms and a Goods Depot, now the home of Millers Antiques. Beyond Wooler the line meandered its way through Glendale. The next station, again out of all proportion to the community it served, is Akeld. The station, some outbuildings and a signal box still survive and can be seen from the A697.

The first railway proposed for this area was intended to continue northwards from Akeld to Ewart Newtown, where a Railway Hotel was in fact constructed. This building now stands empty beside a farm, an incongruous monument to a railway that never existed. Instead the line turned westward at Akeld, passing through a cutting under the A697 then along the Glen Valley to Yeavinger where the crossing keeper's cottage still exists, then on past the site of Ad Gefrin, the Anglo-Saxon palace of King Edwin, discovered by aerial photography in 1960s. From Kirknewton station, the line continued across the river at Westnewton then on to Kilham station and the sidings used for loading sheep. Here the line veers northwards once more towards Mindrum. An old road sign nearby still points to 'Mindrum Station', although now it is just a private house, like all the surviving stations on the line. Shortly after Mindrum, the line joined up with the Kelso–Tweedmouth line, crossing Learmouth viaduct before arriving at Coldstream (Cornhill) station, where one could change trains for Tweedmouth for the main East Coast line, or head westwards to Kelso and beyond.