

7th April 2018

Outing to the Aln Valley Railway

Members of Glendale Local History Society went to visit the Aln Valley Railway, located on the edge of the Lionheart Business Park just outside Alnwick on the far side of the A1. The weather was overcast with a chilly breeze though at least the rain held off until lunchtime.

We assembled in the carpark at the site of the new terminus for the railway, formerly a dome shaped field covering the old Alnwick rubbish tip. We were given a fascinating insight into the history of the line, both past and present. The Alnwick branch line opened in 1850 leaving the mainline at Bilton Junction, later to be renamed Alnmouth. The railway had strategic importance in both World Wars with timber traffic from Whittingham and Thrunton in WW1 and fuel traffic for the local RAF airfields in WW2. It turned out that the original line was not earmarked for closure in the notorious Dr Beeching cuts as it had a frequent, profit-making service from the fine station at Alnwick (now Barter Books) with through trains to Newcastle lasting well into the 1960s. The line became the last branch in the North-East to have steam-hauled passenger trains, which were eventually replaced by DMU's in 1966. Unfortunately, plans to construct the new A1 Alnwick bypass were the death knell for the line, as it bisected the track bed and the cost of building a bridge over the road were astronomic and uneconomic.

The Aln Valley Trust and Society were created in 1995 and, supported by the Duke of Northumberland, many obstacles were overcome and funding acquired, so that permission was given to begin reconstruction in 2010. Since then with the help of many loyal volunteers the scheme has gone from strength to strength. We visited the site of the proposed new station. The platforms and footbridge are already in position and the far-side platform has a waiting room, attractive old-style advertisements, and trolleys complete with leather suitcases. We visited the workshop where work is progressing on restoring a Victorian carriage and saw a variety of wagons and several exciting, recent acquisitions of steam and diesel locomotives. Other equipment acquired by the Railway includes a water tank, crane, gas lamps and signal levers.

Meanwhile, a small steam loco Richboro was puffing gently in front of two carriages full of excited faces, and a guard's van. With a toot of the horn, off she went past the newly constructed signal box and impressive gantry of signals down the line to re-join the old track bed at the bottom of a steep incline. A short time later, while we stood at the gate with its interesting old signage at the bottom the platform, a cloud of steam heralded the loco's return which made a great photo-opportunity. With plenty of steam the train made it up the incline and puffed its way back into the platform.

We boarded the train and took our seats in a comfortable carriage complete with pictures from a local artist, and with another toot we were off and continued for a mile through farm land towards Alnmouth. The young ticket collector gave us some more interesting information en route. At the bridge the train came to a standstill because although the next mile of track is in

place it is still awaiting safety checks before it can be used for public trains. With a wave of the guard's green flag we headed back alongside the proposed cycle track to Lionheart station and a welcome lunchbreak.

The café provided an enjoyable lunch of sandwiches, cakes and hot drinks. After that we had plenty of time to peruse the museum and shop, and explore the site more fully. There was the opportunity to take several more train rides, drive a diesel loco up the siding, under supervision of course, and to stand on the footplate and chat to the driver and fireman of Richboro. Unfortunately the rain had set in by then, but a good time was had by all, and plans were made to visit again with friends or relatives, especially when the line has been extended to Alnmouth.