

1 Origins of the railway past Great Ayton

The celebrated Stockton and Darlington Railway, and its later extension to Middlesbrough, were built to carry coal. But the first railways around Guisborough, Stokesley and Great Ayton were for the transport of ironstone. In the climate of national laissez-faire and ferocious local rivalries, individual companies made their own plans as if the other companies did not exist. This resulted in the duplication and fragmentation, as for example between Middlesbrough and Guisborough. Here the Bell Brothers' Cleveland Railway of 1861 carried Skinningrove ironstone to their Port Clarence ironworks, passing to the north of the town, whilst the Pease's Middlesbrough and Guisbrough (sic) Railway of 1853, carrying ironstone from Codhill to their Middlesbrough ironworks, ran to the south. In places there was just over half a mile separating the two tracks. As if this wasn't enough, at the same time the Stockton and Darlington Railway was gradually stretching itself out eastwards along the coast to reach Redcar in 1846, Saltburn in 1861 and Whitby in 1883.

The Middlesbrough and Guisbrough Railway passed through Ormesby, Nunthorpe, Pinchinthorpe and Hutton, terminating at the Pease ironstone mines at Codhill. A spur was then added to take the line into Guisborough when it was thought that there might be a demand for passenger rail travel. The railway opened on 11 November 1853. With a station at Pinchinthorpe, rail travel was within reach of Great Ayton, and in 1855 the Friends' School were given a "commodious phaeton" for travelling the three miles between the school and the station.

But a struggle between two other companies was eventually to bring the railway much nearer to Great Ayton. The Stockton & Cleveland Union Railway had plans for a route from Stockton to Stokesley, and the North Yorkshire and Cleveland Railway had plans for a route from Picton to Grosmont via Stokesley. Railways needed large amounts of capital and, although there were many individuals with money to invest, companies with more than six partners had to be incorporated by Act of Parliament. Obtaining an Act of Parliament was a lengthy and expensive affair, and many politicians had no understanding of railway businesses so their decisions could be arbitrary, but the process was virtually essential for the new railway enterprises. Accordingly two rival bills were presented to parliament. The Stockton & Cleveland Union Railway proposal was thrown out while the North Yorkshire & Cleveland Railway was approved, and on 10 July 1854 it was given the Royal Assent.

The Company was obviously keen to attract investors. The similarity between two extracts from contemporary reports suggest that there was some form of early press release for hack journalists to copy.

".... and will skirt the Cleveland Hills, abounding with valuable ironstone, through Kildale, Commondale, Danby, Egton, etc opening out through its entire extent, enormous quantities of excellent ironstone, jet, blue whinstone, freestone, etc., etc. It is expected that this district will become a great seat for the manufacture of pig iron" (Darlington and Stockton Times 4 August 1855)

"There is no district in the kingdom of so important a nature as the North Yorkshire Mineral Fields, and the line under notice is intended to run from Picton on the North Eastern Railway, to Grosmont, near Whitby (where it runs into the Whitby branch of the North Eastern), a distance of about 29 miles, skirting the famed Cleveland Hills, through Kildale, Commondale, Danby, Lealholme and Egton Brodge, all full of valuable beds of iron and presenting to capitalists connected with the iron trade one of the most lucrative fields for investment that can anywhere be found." (Mining Journal 1855)

Construction began in 1855, with the company chairman Lord de Lisle of Ingleby Estate cutting the first sod on his own land at Ingleby.

By 1857 the line had reached Stokesley, and the occasion was marked by a special train for directors, shareholders and their friends on Friday 9 March. It departed from York at noon for Picton, where there was a large crowd cheering and bands playing. At Potto Station the party saw ironstone arriving on the branch line from the Marquis of Aylesbury's royalty at Whorlton. The train arrived at Stokesley about 3:30 pm. All alighted and joined a procession of townspeople with flags and more bands, down to Stokesley Town Hall. There dinner was served for 200 gentlemen. Work continued to the east, and Kildale was reached in 1858 (and eventually on to Whitby down the Esk Valley), including the branch to the Rosedale ironstone mines. These developments brought the railway just north of Ingleby Greenhow, but no nearer to Great Ayton than Pinchinthorpe. The line past Great Ayton was only to come about later as a shorter route for Rosedale ironstone to reach Middlesbrough.

The arrogant independence of the iron companies behind so many different railways soon yielded to economic realities, and rationalisation began almost as soon as new lines opened. Thus in 1858, only five years after its opening, the Middlesbrough and Guisbrough Railway was taken over by the Stockton and Darlington Railway, which in turn became part of the North Eastern Railway in 1863.

The North Eastern Railway (NER) had been formed in 1854 by amalgamation of the three principal railway companies operating in the region:

-York, Newcastle and Berwick Railway Company

-York and North Midland railway Company

- Leeds Northern Railway Company (original owners of the Northallerton to Stockton line).

Over the years the NER was to take over around 50 railways. The NER became part of the London and North Eastern Railway (LNER) in January 1923, which in turn became part of British Railways on nationalisation in January 1948.

2 The line to Rosedale

In 1857 the North Yorkshire and Cleveland Railway opened a line from the main NER Northallerton to Stockton line at Picton running east to Stokesley, with intermediate stations at Potto and Sexhow. A year later, in 1858, this line was extended to Kildale, with stations at Ingleby, Battersby (originally called Ingleby Junction) and Kildale. Within a few months of opening this extension, the North Yorkshire and Cleveland Railway was absorbed into the North Eastern Railway. At this time the Ingleby Ironstone and Freestone Mining Company opened a 3 mile stretch of narrow gauge track from their ironstone mine at Rudd Scar to Battersby. An agreement was reached with the North Yorkshire and Cleveland Railway to use this track as part of the route to Rosedale, but following the absorption of the North Yorkshire and Cleveland Railway into the NER it was the NER who opened the standard gauge 14 mile Rosedale Branch on 27 March 1861. Extensive facilities were provided at Battersby, with marshalling sidings, a turntable and a three-road engine shed. The famous self-acting Ingleby Incline took wagons from Bank Foot onto Greenhow Moor, the 1430 yard incline climbing at 1 in 11 for most of its length, with a final section of 1 in 5.

3 The railway at Great Ayton

Even at the planning stage of the Rosedale Branch, it was apparent that a line through Great Ayton would shorten the journey of ironstone wagons from Rosedale to Middlesbrough, which would have gone through Stokesley to join the Northallerton to Stockton line at Picton. So in November 1854 plans were published for a railway from the Middlesbrough to Guisborough Railway down to Battersby Junction. "Plans and Sections of a proposed railway with double junctions from the North Yorkshire and Cleveland Railway at Battersby to the Middlesbro' and Guisbro' Railway near Morton Grange in the North Riding of the County of York to be called The Middlesbro' and Guisbro' Branch" by John Bourne, Engineer. There was an intermediate station at Great Ayton (originally referred to simply as Ayton).

The proposed route of the new line went over land owned by the North of England Agricultural College, established by the Quakers in 1841. In 1858 Wm Flounders, Wm Cudworth, James I'anson and Edward Pease Junr inspected the land about to be taken over by the North Yorkshire and Cleveland Railway for the new line. It was described as half an acre across the High Dykes field. Then in 1861 at a special General Meeting the Friends agreed "to sell absolutely to the North Eastern Railway Company a Stripe of Land contained by admeasurement Two Roods as now staked out being part of a Close of Land commonly called High Dykes". The NER paid the sum of £100 for this land, equivalent to over £50,000 at today's values. Given that this is possibly a relatively small sum for half an acre of ground of great importance to the new railway, and that it is such a round figure, there doesn't seem to have been much negotiation over the deal. But then the Quakers always recognised long-term business interests.

This line was opened on 1 June 1864 for the Rosedale ironstone traffic, and passenger services started on 1 April 1868 after the station at Great Ayton had been completed in 1867. It was not until some years later that the station name was changed from Ayton to Great Ayton.

4 Later developments

The layout of the tracks at Battersby had been planned with ironstone transport in mind. Trains from Middlesbrough going down the Esk Valley had to reverse at Battersby, and as this traffic increased plans were put forward for a new curve east of Battersby Junction to remove the need for this reversal. The curve was authorised in 1866 but never built.

Great Ayton Station was converted into an unmanned halt from 1 January 1962.

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