



MOIRA STATION

Co Antrim

English Translation

MOIRA STATION

County Antrim

Canal, Rail and Road

Today we depend heavily on the road network, tied to air and sea routes, but 150 years ago roads were rough, slow, and a poor way of carrying heavy loads. Water transport was well developed in Ulster, with Lough Neagh central to a great network of rivers and canals. The Lagan River and Canal linked through the Ulster Canal to Lough Erne in an E-W line and the Bann linked with the Newry Canal provided a N-S route. The canals were built by combined government and private funds. The much more exciting but risky business of rail transport, suitable both for goods and passengers, was developed by private investment with the minimum of government loans. Banks, linen merchants, brewers and distillers were among the first directors of the Ulster Railway in 1836, and shares were taken up in Liverpool and Manchester as well as Ireland.

The Ulster Railway

The world's first rail passenger service between Manchester and Liverpool opened in 1830. The first Irish line between Dublin and Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire) opened in 1834 and plans for the Ulster Railway were announced on 4 December 1835, with formal incorporation and royal assent on 19 May 1836. The first section from Belfast to Lisburn was opened for passenger traffic on 12 August 1839 and the second section, Lisburn to Lurgan, was completed on 8 November 1841. It is surprising to realise how close the Ulster Railway was to the beginning of railway history, and Moira Station is the oldest surviving building from that venture.

The aim of the Ulster Railway to link Belfast with the west. The first target was Armagh and then Enniskillen, Ballyshannon and Sligo. Trade in Ulster and Connaught was the aim rather than a link with Dublin. In practice, the real success of the Ulster Railway was its passenger traffic, although the transport of goods, everything from the Royal Mail and milk to coal and cattle, was also important.

The engineers for the line were a distinguished trio. William Bald who directed the project was the designer of the Antrim Coast Road, John Godwin, engineer of the company, had trained under Sir James McAdam, and William Dargan, the contractor, had worked under the famous Thomas Telford. New routes were opened in every direction and by June 1852 the link was made to Dublin through Portadown.

The Great Northern Railway

By 1876 several separate companies including the Ulster Railway had combined to become the Great Northern Railway Company (Ireland). This encouraged standardisation of gauge, rolling

stock and administration, all leading to a better service for the customers. By 1900, Moira Station was part of a comprehensive rail network that provided a railway station within 5 miles of home for about 90% of the population. During the Second World War railways played an important part, but as motor transport increased, railways declined. In 1958 the Great Northern was dissolved. The Ulster Transport Association kept the bare minimum of lines open. Moira Station survived, but lost its station master in 1967 and its signalmen in 1984 when the level crossing barrier became automatic. Now Moira is a 'request stop' only.

The Station House

Moira Station was designed by John Godwin in Italianate Style, built partly of stone and partly brick with stucco finish, with slate roofs, tall chimneys and tall, round-headed windows. From the platform it appears single storey, but there was a second storey below, approached from the yard at the back, the original stationmaster's accommodation. The present colour scheme is that of the Great Northern Railway.

Of the two doors on the platform, the right-hand one leads into the station house. On the right of the passage is the office with one window onto the platform and two facing the signal-box and road crossing. The hatch onto the passage was where tickets were sold. On the left of the passage and at the end are two waiting-rooms, each with a fireplace. Originally they were first and second class, later male and female. The ladies' toilet, an addition to the rear depended on a rainwater tank on the roof. The second door onto the platform led to the luggage and parcel room where, amongst other things, one could leave a bicycle when going to work by train. The third opening, a later addition, led to a urinal.

The View from the Platform in the 1950s

The station platform known as the 'up' line (3) is heading for Dublin. The platform opposite is the 'down' side to Belfast. On it, the wooden waiting-room (2) built for the GNR at the turn of the century, used to be more welcoming, with windows and a stove. Wooden fences lined the backs of the platforms and, until they finally rotted away, some parts of the fence were built of old railway sleepers. Eight oil-lamps lit the platforms and benches were provided. The signal-box (4) used to stand next to the road and level crossing (5), but now that the barrier at the level crossing is automatic, the box has been moved away (4a) to the yard behind the station house, no longer in use. On the far side of Station Road is the late 19th-century stationmaster's house (6), of red brick with yellow trim, probably designed by GNR engineer W H Mills. In the 1950s the area in front of the house was beautifully planted, and a greenhouse testified to the stationmaster's love of gardening. Behind the 'down' line waiting-room can still be seen an old goods shed (7) which stood at the end of a siding and near the road is a hand-operated crane (8), capable of lifting loads of up to 2 tons. This served another branch of the siding, loading and unloading directly between the trains and carts or lorries.

On the far side of the road was the cattle siding (9) where young beef from the west of Ireland were brought and fattened up by local farmers before sale. Since heavy goods were usually transported by night, stockyards were needed to hold the animals until they could be collected. The farmer had to pay for their handling, food and water. Behind the cattle siding was the coal siding (10). Most local fuel would have arrived by train. In the early days of the railway it came east from Coalisland, but when that supply dried up, it came west from Belfast docks.

Access to the 'Lagan Navigation', the canal (11) which once joined Belfast to Lough Neagh, is possible from a gate beside Lady's Bridge (12), crossing the County Down, the dividing line between Antrim and Down, on the way to the tow-path. This stretch of the canal, between Lisburn and Lough Neagh, was built in 1794 and continued in use until the 1950s, competing for business with the neighbouring railway. It carried heavy goods, especially coal, and could compete in price, but not in speed. The railway bridge (13) built in 1883 over the canal is an interesting design, built at

an oblique angle with skew brickwork to take the strain.

As you stand beside the canal, the 18th-century bulk carrier, the trains above your head represent the 19th- and early 20th-century form of transport, the M1 to the south is the present-day bulk carrier, while the International Airport is not far away to the north, beside Lough Neagh.

The First Trains at Moira

The first locomotive to pull into Moira Station in 1841 was one of the Sharp Roberts 2-2-2 engines, weighing 14 tons. Our drawing is of Ajax. The other six in the Ulster Railway at that time were called Express, Fury, Spitfire, Etna, Achilles and Firefly, names that speak of their strength and fiery furnaces.

The Signal-Box

The signalling system was probably constructed in 1890 when a new, more efficient telegraph signal system was being introduced. Our drawing shows the box, the telegraph post, the semaphore blade on top of the signal-post, and the level crossing which had two heavy gates to prevent road traffic from crossing when a train was coming through. It took a minimum of three men to man the signals until the system was automated in 1984.

The Railway Staff

In 1945 it took some fifteen people to staff Moira Station, including stationmaster, clerks, porters and signalmen. The line remains the most important one in Northern Ireland, encouraging people to look for employment over the whole of the Belfast Craigavon corridor, but Moira Station itself is now a much quieter place than in earlier years.

When the station became a request stop the station house was no longer used, and Historic Monuments and Buildings Branch undertook its care and conservation. This task was completed in 1991, just 150 years after the station's opening.

Access: About one mile NNE of Moira, reached along Station Road from the NE outskirts of Moira village. Open access to platforms. Station house opened by arrangement.

Further Reading: McCutcheon W A, *The Industrial Archaeology of Northern Ireland* (HMSO 1980).