

THE KILMARNOCK TO TROON RAILWAY

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It was not a big event. No fanfare, no celebrations. In effect it was just the start of a new coach service. But when the whip cracked and the horses pulled the Caledonia away, a new era in public transport was born.

It was June 27, 1812 and the passengers making their way from Kilmarnock to Troon didn't know they were making history, and probably didn't care. But what happened that morning was the beginning of something new; something very special. The journey was the start of regular railway passenger services in Scotland.

The passengers had good reason to think that it was nothing special. The coach ran between Kilmarnock and Troon on the new fangled railway, tram line, metal road, or whatever they called it, but in the line wasn't even finished at the Kilmarnock end and the passengers had had to make their own way to Gargieston, almost two miles from the town centre. Still, it was a good service. Three times a week and the run was smooth and reasonably swift. All things considered, the fare of one shilling (5p) wasn't too bad.

The proprietor of the Caledonia was a William Paterson from Kilmarnock. The driver was one by the name of Willie Wight, sometimes referred to as Willie Wright. He was the first driver of a passenger train in Scotland, though he drove horses, not an engine. He must have made a bob or two at this service, because he later purchased it.

The Kilmarnock and Troon Railway was built primarily to take coal and minerals from the pits around Kilmarnock to the harbour at Troon. It was the first railway in Scotland which was to cross land owned by more than one person and subsequently was the first constructed under Act of Parliament.

First survey work suggested that a canal should be built and a plan was drawn up. It even reached the stage of a Parliamentary Bill. But that fell through. Then a plan for a railway was completed and an Act of Parliament obtained. Construction on the railway started in 1808 and took four years. The line was completed in in July 1812. It was double track throughout, with frequent passing places.

The railway was a major undertaking, one of the most ambitious engineering projects of the day. The Duke of Portland was the prime mover and the major investor. He had acquired the lands around Kilmarnock when he married Henrietta Scott in 1796. He wasted no time in exploiting the rich coal deposits of the area. The biggest problem was transporting the coal from Kilmarnock to the coast, for much of it went to Ireland. At the end of the 18th century coal from Kilmarnock was taken by road to Irvine for export to Ireland. In those days the roads were poor and the only practical alternative was a canal.

The proposal to build a canal was probably dropped because the railway plan was cheaper, even if it was technically more advanced. Railways had been built in Scotland before, but nothing on such a

grand scale as the Kilmarnock and Troon. Most of the earlier railways, or waggonways were built at colliery pitheads and ran for just a short distance.

The construction of the Kilmarnock and Troon Railway posed several problems. Spanning the River Irvine at Gatehead required a bridge of four arches - the world's first railway viaduct. Now (1996) the bridge has been restored and plaques explaining its historic significance placed there.

The passenger traffic that first summer proved that the service was viable, so the following year it ran again, following the same pattern as before. Three return trips were made each week, on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. This year the service was extended into spring and summer. The Caledonia carried goods as well as passengers and it left Kilmarnock at 9.15 am. The return journey started from Troon at 6 pm. It doesn't seem much, but the services were adequate for the demands of the day.

Fares were adjusted too. In 1813, a day return for an inside passenger was 2/6. A single journey was 1/6. Outside passengers paid 1/6 and 1/- (1/- = 5p). Tickets were sold by William Patterson in Kilmarnock and a Mr Thomson in Troon. A claim has been made that the Kilmarnock and Troon Railway was the first railway to have a booking office.

One feature of the journey was a stop at Drybridge, where both men and horses were refreshed. With this stop and with the horses jogging along at seven miles an hour, the journey took between one and a half and two hours.

The original Kilmarnock terminus was at the offices of Kilmarnock House, but the exact location is unclear. It might have been about where the Episcopalian Church is now at the corner of Dundonald Road. Or might have been just a little further on at what became the Bank Street Police Station and is now a car park. This terminus was moved down the line in 1821 to allow developments on the Duke's land.

As a general rule the passengers in the very early days did not go all the way into Troon, preferring to disembark at Johnnie Hay's pub, the Bottle and Glass. It was an easy trudge from there down through the fields to the sea.

Others ran passenger vehicles on the line. One was known as The Boat and was just an open truck, and according to the company minutes a Mrs Jean Brown of Troon was given permission in 1830 to run a jaunting car on the line. At the same time Willie Wight was allowed to run an additional vehicle.

The Kilmarnock and Troon Railway is one of the most fascinating little lines in the country, with more 'firsts' than most other lines. But it has been poorly researched to date.