VALE OF RHEIDOL RAILWAY – SOME DISPUTED ASPECTS OF ITS PRE-PRESERVATION HISTORY

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The chronological beginning and end of its 60+ year life until its sale by the British Railways Board are well recorded, but some of the intervening steps have caused confusion and disagreement amongst railway historians. This paper is an endeavour to reconsider these developments from such primary sources as may be available, and to offer considered views on what ought to be recorded.

The secondary sources referred to are, in chronological order of publication:

Cozens *The Vale of Rheidol Railway* (1950)
Kidner *The Narrow Gauge Railways of Wales* [ca.1956]
Davies *Vale of Rheidol Railway* (1960)
Boyd *Narrow Gauge Railways in Mid-Wales* (1965)
Christiansen & Miller *The Cambrian Railways vol. II* [1969]
Clinker *Clinker's Register* (1978)
Green *The Vale of Rheidol Light Railway* (1986)
Baughan *A Regional History of the Railways of Great Britain vol. XI* (1991)
Baker *Vale of Rheidol Railway – a visitors (sic) guide* (2008) [also 2017 edition, no longer credited to Baker]
Mitchell *Corris and Vale of Rheidol* (2009)
Johnson *An Illustrated history of the Great Western Narrow Gauge* (2011)
Phillips *The Vale of Rheidol Railway IN DETAIL* (2021)
Quick *Railway Passenger Stations….* (2023)

• *Note that this list does not purport to be a fully exhaustive bibliography.*

1. Closure of Aberystwyth Harbour branch

Cozens, p.27 says "In 1924 the last scheduled train ran over the Harbour Branch. The branch rails were not lifted until about 1930 and during the intervening years an annual return trip was made…to maintain sovereignty!"

Kidner, p.N19 gives closed 1924, lifted 1930.

Davies, p.61 says: "1924 – Last regular train over the harbour branch."

Boyd, p.200 gives 1924, and records annual right-of-way movement until lifted 1930..

Christiansen & Miller, p.145 give closed 1924, lifted 1930.

Clinker makes no mention of this location

Green, p.107 states that by Mar 1908 the branch was in poor condition but gives no date for end of regular revenue use; right of way was maintained by at least an annual trip – hauled by loco (until 1924), horses, or p.w. staff with a trolley. Lifted "about 1930".

Baughan, p.236 gives closed 1924, lifted 1930.

Johnson, p.78 notes unused at 1921.

2. Extension of line by 9 chains to Aberystwyth GWR station

Cozens, p.4 gives 1925, and p.29 asserts it was "in time for the [1925] season."

Kidner, p.N19 gives 1925.

Davies, p.61 gives 1925.

Boyd, p.200 gives summer 1925.

Green, p.29 gives 1926.

Christiansen & Miller, p.145 give 1925.

Clinker, p.2 gives 31 Jul 1925

Baughan, p.236 gives 1925.

Baker, p.7, gives 1923.

Mitchell, fig.73 gives 1 Aug 1925.

Johnson, p.81 gives 1926
Phillips, p.303 gives 1926, p. 307 gives GWR engineer's plan dated 3 July 1925.
Quick (citing Clinker) gives 31 Jul 1925

3. Closure of line to goods traffic

Cozens does not mention this
Davies, p.25 gives "mid-1920s"
Boyd, p.193 gives "mid-1920s"
Christiansen & Miller, p.145 give "soon after grouping"
Clinker, by implication from closure dates of various stations, gives 1 Jun 1964 – apart from Aberystwyth original VoR station for which p.2 gives 26 Sep 1937
Green, pp.29 and 47 gives 1 Jan 1927. At p.47 he implies that the retention of the table - in the service or working timetable - of numbers of goods wagons which could be conveyed by mixed trains was superfluous (but ignores the possibility that may have been for engineer's traffic). Timber traffic (for pit props) – heavy in World War1 – had ceased by 1919 (p.164).
Baughan, p.236 gives 26 Sep 1937, but restored (apparently) 23 Jul 1945 until finally withdrawn 1 Jun 1964.
Baker, p. 8 gives 1 Jan 1927.
Mitchell, fig. 87 *implies* 1927 (because thereafter only loco coal transhipped to the narrow gauge line).
Johnson, p.81 gives 1 Jan 1931. At p.85 he explains that the 1 Jun 1964 date was merely putting right an administrative oversight from 1931 *(but he doesn't explain the 1933 advert about reopening for goods).*
Phillips, p. 346 gives 1927. This is, however, rather given the lie by a photo on p.253 of open wagons with sheeted and unsheeted traffic (the latter doubtless domestic coal) at Devil's Bridge which is dated 1928, credited to Boyd (this photo was not dated where it was used in Boyd's own book, between pp. 200 and 201).

4. Withdrawal of winter services

There is no disagreement among the various writers about this: winter services were withdrawn from 1 Jan 1931.

5. Closure for World War 2

Cozens, p.29 offers no specific date.
Boyd, p.193 gives 31 Aug 1939.
Davies, p. 61 offers no specific date.
Christiansen & Miller, p.145 offer no specific date.
Clinker, by implication from note 2054, gives 31 Aug 1939
Green, p.234: "trains were run to the end of the advertised season, all stock being laid away after 24th September."
Baughan, p.236 gives 31 Aug 1939.
Baker offers no specific date.
Johnson, p.81 offers no specific date.
Quick (citing Clinker) gives 31 Aug 1939

Turning, now, to available primary sources:

1. Closure of Aberystwyth Harbour branch

This branch - railway no. 2 of the 1897 Act - was principally for shipment of mined lead ore from Rhiwfron. See Green pp. 154-158 for details of the mines and their careers, the last functioning appears to have been about 1925 – after a pause during World War 1.
In compiling their response dated 10 March 1921 to the Light Railway Commissioners, the Cambrian declared – in response to question 26(h) about facilities for dealing with water-borne traffic – that there was "A siding from Aberystwyth station yard down to the Harbour, but is disused. No special facilities are provided for transhipping on the Quay." (MT6/2892).

In a letter (now in private collection) dated 20 Nov 1924 the Divisional Engineer, Oswestry, wrote to the GWR Chief Engineer in these terms:

"Owing to tidal wash the … branch has got somewhat undermined and an expenditure of £85 *[about £6,400 at 2023 values]* is necessary to make the line fit for traffic. In view, however, of the fact that there has been practically no traffic over the branch for some years it is a question whether the Company should incur the expense. Some months ago there were a few wagon loads of lead ore over this Branch which were hauled by horses instead of a locomotive as the Aberystwyth Corporation, who … had the temporary use of the branch and erected a temporary structure which interfered with the passage of engines. Will you please let me know what should be done in the matter.

"The point that should be considered is whether it is desirable to make a trip over this branch, say once a year with a view to maintaining the Company's rights over that portion of the branch for which the Company have an easement only. I understand that prior to the amalgamation the Cambrian Company used to run an engine once a year over the branch on this account.

"I may say that if this latter arrangement is decided upon it will be possible to make the line fit for one trip at a slow speed without the expenditure of anything like the amount of money quoted above."

This indicates that very occasional revenue movements did pass after 1921 and also explains that the use of horses over the branch was not directly related to the departure of locomotive *Rheidol* as some writers have asserted. All references to movements subsequent to that date seem, therefore, to refer to the occasional (at least annual) trips to sustain their right of way over the line. The harbour location was deleted from the *Hand-book of Stations* after the 1927 Appendix but before the 1929 Hand-book. Internal correspondence within the GWR in December 1936 (now in private collection) shows that, at that date, the Corporation were anxious to remove rails from the branch, and agreement was given; clearly, therefore, lifting was not complete by that date.

2. Extension of line by 9 chains to Aberystwyth GWR station

Date of extension of line to the new site alongside main GWR station cannot have been before Oct 1925, because the scheme:

(a) was not approved in principle by Aberystwyth Corporation until 19 June 1925 (*Welsh Gazette* 25 Jun),

(b) was not approved by GWR Traffic Committee until 25 June (RAIL 250/354),

(c) required public consultation because it involved crossing a public road and consultation period did not expire until 15 Aug (*Welsh Gazette* 20 Aug), and

(d) required authority from the Minister of Transport – the Great Western Railway (Vale of Rheidol) Order, 1925 – which was not granted until 20 Oct (*London Gazette* 20 Oct, p.6780).

Some works were indeed put in hand in anticipation, but there is no press report to suggest the GWR pre-empted obtaining their order – particularly so far as the level crossing was concerned; at the time, relations with Aberystwyth Corporation (or at least some councillors) were 'strained' and any attempt to pre-empt obtaining of requisite powers would have been pounced upon by them. Therefore, dates of July 1925 (including GWR drawing at RAIL 253/808 sheet 59) must be discounted. The extension opened at some date towards the tail end of 1925 or in 1926 (Green and Johnson favour the latter); no press references to the change have been observed.

3. Closure of line to goods traffic

The GWR Traffic Committee (a committee of Directors rather than a managerial committee) on 27 Nov 1930 (RAIL 250/356) approved the General Manager's recommendation that withdrawal of goods service and suspension of winter passenger service on the VoR should both be effected from 1 Jan 1931. Known *public* utterances are press adverts: *Welsh Gazette* 11 Dec 1930 announcing the 1 Jan 1931 withdrawal of goods service and the same paper of 22 Jun 1933 announcing its resumption (although that may merely have reflected the annual summer reopening that year). No mention of any such resumption of VoR goods traffic was given in GWR General Manager's fortnightly reports to the Traffic Committee of Directors during 1933 [RAIL 250/460] (nor, come to that, in 1931 [RAIL 250/458]).

The Chief Goods Manager issued a fortnightly General Instructions circular to all stations with details *(inter alia)* of openings and closings of goods stations – not just those on the GWR. There were **no such entries** in respect of the VoR – not even at the turn of 1930/1. Nor was any advice published *through that medium* that there would be no service in winters in future. In practical

terms, any C&D (collected/delivered) traffic would have been dealt with at Aberystwyth – certainly after the establishment of the Country Lorry Service there (believed to have been Aug 1928 [GWR CGM GIC 257 of Jul or Aug 1928]) – leaving only S to S (station to station) traffic for transhipment. Of that, the only likely traffics would be domestic coal, and lime and basic slag for agricultural use. The latter might cope with the seasonality of the train service while the former would be restricted to laying down stock at cheaper summer prices. Indeed, the **only** entry in the Chief Goods Manager's series of circulars between 1930 and 1945 affecting the Vale of Rheidol was of the increase (from 10d to 11d per ton) of the charge for transhipment of coal and coke traffic at both Aberystwyth and Welshpool (for the W&Ll) from 1 Oct 1937 (circular no. R.1534/492 at RAIL 253/730). It may be noted that in the list, supplied by the GWR, of closed branch lines that appeared in *Railway Gazette* 6 Nov 1936 (repeated in *Railway Magazine* Apr 1938) the VoR was *not* shown as closed for goods. Likewise, no VoR location was deleted from the *Hand-book of Stations* – the 1938 and 1956 editions both show Aberystwyth (VoR *(as distinct from Cam & GW Joint)*), Capel Bangor, Nantyronen, Aberffrwd, Rhiwfron and Devil's Bridge as having accommodation for Goods traffic.

Incidentally, between the 1941 and 1944 Appendices, the P (passenger) designation for the VoR stations was amended to P†, signifying parcels and miscellaneous but **not** passenger service at those locations; this was never subsequently corrected….

The Reshaping of British Railways (1963), map no. 4, Distribution of Freight Traffic – Station Tonnage, does not show any VoR location with the red coloured dot signifying 0 to 5000 tons p.a., based on a survey in 1962. This could be taken to signify that no station on the line was open for goods traffic, and that no such traffic was passing over the line.

Only writers after 2002 will have had the opportunity of access to BR LMR's files dealing with the closure and disposal of the line (AN155/238 in particular). Letter from Line Manager, Crewe, 8 Apr 1964 explains the position in these terms: "…freight service was withdrawn, and in effect the depots closed about 1939 and all traffic for the depots concerned dealt with by direct collection and delivery from Aberystwyth, but apparently no steps were taken by the W(estern) R(egion) to close the records. They are all still open in the Station Handbook with letter "G", still open in the Designation of Stations Book and also included in the list of stations for which loading instructions have been issued under the National Sundries plan. As from 1st June they are officially included in the Aberystwyth concentration scheme and our proposals for closure have been approved and will be applied."

In effect, therefore, *revenue* goods service was not *formally* withdrawn from the VoR until 1 June 1964 – even though it is highly unlikely anything other than engineer's traffic had been handled during most of the previous three decades. The reputed closure date of 1927 – favoured by several authors (including a work published by the present-day Vale of Rheidol company in 2021) – appears to be entirely without substance. Nor can the 1937 date favoured by two authors be substantiated.

4. Withdrawal of winter services

Winter services were withdrawn from 1 Jan 1931. This is shown by GWR Traffic Committee minute of 27 Nov 1930 (RAIL 250/356) and the GWR's advertisement in, for example, *Welsh Gazette* 11 Dec 1930.

5. Closure for World War 2

The GWR's summer season timetable was due to expire on Sunday 24 Sep 1939, which would normally have been the last day of the VoR's service for the year. However, the summer service was prematurely terminated by the eight day evacuation programme. So far as the GWR's Central Wales Division – essentially the former Cambrian system – was concerned, the arrangements were set out in printed notice no. 283 of "Special Passenger Train Arrangements … in connection with the Evacuation of Civilian Population from London, Liverpool and Birkenhead". This had been issued earlier in the summer, the actual implementation date to be advised in due course by telegram under code word EVAK which, when it duly arrived, designated Friday 1 September 1939 as Day 1. This notice is quite explicit: "The Winter Passenger Train Service will operate…" – and that, of course, excluded any VoR service. That 1 Sep was the start date of the evacuation is affirmed by Oswestry's stencilled notice no. 400, but notice no. 390 of 31 Aug had already decreed that various half-day excursions trains were to be cancelled and that "…no departure from the curtailed services laid down in EVACTUATION NOTICE No. 283 must be made." Notice no. 401 of

4 Sep, affirms “All Excursion Trains are cancelled. Please destroy all handbills and wash down poster advertising excursion trains…”. While the VoR is not specifically mentioned in any of these notices (it very rarely was) it cannot be gainsaid that its was purely an ‘excursion’ service and that the train crews who would have worked it would have been needed for duties working the main line evacuation programme. Therefore, it has to be concluded that the VoR passenger service last ran on Thursday 31 Aug, i.e. withdrawn with effect from 1 Sep 1939 for the duration. An oblique piece of supporting ‘evidence’ is that in each previous year, a notice was issued from Oswestry about the arrangements on the last operating day of the summer for converting the VoR between ETS and one engine in steam working; no such notice was issued for 24 Sep 1939 – presumably because the service had already ceased. Nor was there a notice for such change-over on 31 Aug – but that is likely to be because of the short notice for the withdrawal. The conclusion drawn is that the VoR passenger service was withdrawn with effect from 1 Sep 1939 (rather than the disparate dates various authors have posited). The several notices mentioned above are at RAIL 279/45.

MT6 and RAIL files cited are at The National Archives, Kew.

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