

number of short mineral branches. In the same year, a committee 'of some of the best people' in South Wales was formed, to promote the construction of a railway from South Wales to London. Although a survey of a route from Gloucester to Swansea was undertaken by Brunel, the concept of a trunk railway from South Wales to the metropolis was not to materialize for another fourteen years.

The Taff Vale Railway, opened between Cardiff and Navigation House (Abercynon) on 9th October 1840 and on to Merthyr on 12th April 1841, proved an immediate success, and provided a local illustration of the benefits which could accrue from railway development. On 25th April 1844, a private branch railway, built by Thomas Powell to serve his Dihewyd Colliery near Llantwit Fardre, was connected to the TVR at Maesmawr about 2½ miles below Treforest. Leaving the TVR main line, this branch, variously known as Dihewyd Railway, the Lantwit Vadre (sic) Railway or the Llantwit Branch, curved sharply to the west, before climbing out of the Taff Vale by means of a self-acting 1 in 6.5 inclined plane worked on the balanced load principle. From Incline Top, the railway followed a winding, but perfectly level, course to its terminus at Dihewyd Colliery. The line was later extended about ½ mile to Ystradbarwig Colliery. This obscure mineral line was later to form an important key in the provision of a rail link between Cowbridge and the TVR.

Towards the end of 1843, a proposal for a South Wales Railway was accepted by the Great Western Railway, and Brunel embarked on a survey for a trunk railway from Gloucester to Fishguard. It appeared to many that the shortest route for the railway across the Vale of Glamorgan would be via Cowbridge, a prospect which did not meet with the approval of the corporation or the inhabitants of the town. Whether or not this antipathy influenced the eventual choice of route for the SWR is not known, but in the summer of 1844 the prospectus of the SWR appeared, giving the route through the Vale of Glamorgan as follows:

'From Cardiff the railway passes by the Valley of Ely through the rich agricultural district adjacent to Llantrissant (sic), Cowbridge, Bridgend, Porthcawl and Pyle, the produce of which would thus be rendered available towards the supply of the surrounding manufacturing population.'

As for Cowbridge itself, its position in relation to the question of the route of the SWR was summed up in September 1844, by a director of the Bristol & Gloucester Railway, who commented that 'it has been reported that the proposed railroad will run through the coal works about five miles to the north of Cowbridge, and the good people of that ancient borough are well pleased to be left undisturbed, as no symptom of any wish to have the railway nearer has yet been evinced.'

Not all the inhabitants of Cowbridge were hostile to the SWR. For in 1845, the Reverend Edmond, Vicar of Cowbridge (one of only two people from the town to have attended the public meeting held in Cardiff the previous year to discuss the proposal for the SWR) wrote to Dr J. Nichol MP. He requested that provision for a railway to Cowbridge be inserted in the SWR Bill, then before Parliament. Reverend Edmond subsequently received a reply from Mr Hunt of the solicitors to the SWR Bill, pointing out that 'having due regard to the main features of the undertaking, and to considerations of an engineering

character, it would be impossible that every town throughout a line of this length should be equally accommodated.' Hunt did offer the assistance of the SWR, however, if a self-financed branch line was promoted locally.

This letter was referred to by Reverend Edmond in 1855. He refuted the suggestion that it had been intended to route the SWR via Cowbridge, but that this had been prevented by the mistaken opposition of its inhabitants. This version of events has since become part of the folk-history of the Vale of Glamorgan, but the clear implication of Hunt's letter is that the route via Pontyclun was chosen for engineering reasons. Although a route via Cowbridge would have been more direct, it would have involved significant gradients and earthworks, compared with the easier route provided by the valleys of the Ely and the Ewenny, between Cardiff and Bridgend. Perhaps the best idea of the relationship between Cowbridge and the route of the SWR can be gained from the contemporary writings of David Jones of Wallington, the local historian who was born in Llanblethian, who said:

'No one had ever believed the action of the Corporation to have compelled the SWR to pass by Cowbridge. The point of the accusation against them was that, under the force of apathy, they were hostile to the railway when as guardians of the welfare of the town, they should have taken active steps in getting the railway to enter their neighbourhood'.

The first section of the SWR, from Chepstow to Swansea, opened to traffic on 18th June 1850, with a station for Llantrissant at Pontyclun, about five miles to the north of Cowbridge. The impact of the opening of the SWR on Cowbridge was immediate and catastrophic; the mail coach service was withdrawn on 5th July 1850, and with it went much of its associated trade. That year also saw the last occasion on which the Quarter Sessions were held in the town. Whilst its function as a market centre continued largely unimpaired, the loss of the coaching trade, coupled with the decline in its role as a social and administrative centre, undermined the prosperity of Cowbridge and led to its stagnation.

The effect of the SWR on Cowbridge was soon realized, however. A correspondent to the *Cardiff & Merthyr Guardian* in 1853, reporting on that year's Glamorgan Show, remarked that 'the want of railway accommodation reduces Cowbridge, and its delightful environs, to a state of hopeless isolation, and cuts them off from the rest of the world . . . The absence of the greatest improvement of the age confines Cowbridge to the humble position of a small country market town, and there is not, at present, any hope of its advancement'.

Within Cowbridge, people began to advocate the construction of a branch railway as a means of restoring at least part of the town's lost fortunes. Two competing schemes for a railway to Cowbridge emerged: one involved the building of a broad gauge branch from Llantrissant Station to Cowbridge, and on to Aberthaw where the creation of a port was advocated; the other, an altogether more ambitious scheme, involved the construction of a loop line from the SWR at Peterston-super-Ely through Cowbridge to rejoin the SWR at Bridgend. It was hoped that the SWR would find it advantageous to transfer the passenger service from the main line to the loop line, as a more direct route between Cardiff and Bridgend.