

# Cowbridge 150 years THAT THE TRAIN

*Local historian Brian Keitch looks at the history of rail travel in the Vale, 150 years after a rail station opened in Cowbridge.*

**TODAY, there is hardly a trace of the Cowbridge Railway left to be found.**

Yet when the first passenger train left Cowbridge for Llantrisant (now Pontyclun) station on September 18 1865, the 'local line' was on course to serve the town for almost exactly 100 years!

Goods traffic actually commenced on January 30 earlier in the same year, but the Board of Trade decided that the standard of construction was potentially dangerous to passengers! Hence the delay.

Charles Frederick Cliffe, in his book of south Wales, said in 1847: "Cowbridge is an old-fashioned town, consisting of one long street which is likely to bear a crop of grass as soon as the South Wales Railway is in operation."

The South Wales Railway (later the Great Western) had toyed with the idea of building the tracks through Cowbridge from London to Swansea and west Wales. Up until the railway (through Pontyclun) opened in 1850, Cowbridge was on the main mail coach run from Swansea to London. The *St David* ran from Cardiff to London in one day!

David Jones of Llanbleddian takes up the story: "On the fall of the coaching system (just three weeks after the first train) people predicted that the town would soon sink into a mere village and were not slow in saying that such a fate was a fit punishment upon the inhabitants for opposing the railways coming near the town.

"Don't let it come near us!" was their cry when the GWR was an embryonic scheme and bitterly they have since had to repent their selfish short-sightedness'.

For years afterwards, Mr Jones continued, "Trade in the town had been exceedingly dull".

However, thanks to a few local people, in particular the Rev Edmondes, a fresh look was taken at the idea. The main change in thinking was that the Cowbridge railway was not to go to Cardiff or Bridgend, but to Pontypridd – hub of the coal mining boom in Dyffryn Taf.

Passengers who wanted to go to Cardiff or west had some really bad connections at Llantrisant station – with sometimes an hour's wait to change trains!

Local bus services did not arrive until the 1920s – which pretty well sealed the fate of the railway. But let's not rush.

The opening of the Cowbridge line was just one of a rash of railway plans – including a line to Llantwit Major, another line to Ewenny and yet another to Llanbedr y fro (Peterston super Ely).

None of these materialised (though Llantwit was to get its rail services courtesy of the Vale of Glamorgan Railway). But one did – the Aberthaw branch.

Why? The Barry Railway had arrived and built the largest docks and railway schemes in the world, masterminded by David Davis of Llandinam (and owner of the Ocean collieries in the Rhondda, among others).

The Taff Vale Railway (TVR) made its mega profits through Cardiff and Penarth Docks. Barry was a rude awakening. To stop the Barry Railway building Dock Number Two, the TVR tried to build a railway over the proposed site, via Lavernock and Sully.

Parliament refused and the line eventually joined the Barry line to Dinas Powys and Cogan, but Taff Vale trains could go no further than Cadoston. When rumours went about of the Barry Railway building a dock at Aberddawan (Aberthaw) a new station was built at Cowbridge and it was 'heavily built' (the track could be doubled if necessary) as far as the seaside.

The dock at the 'port of the Vale of Glamorgan' was never built and the TVR could only rely on a bit of agricultural goods, the Aberthaw Lime Pebble Works and a handful of passengers.

Now here is a list of towns and villages on the railway map of 1910 or so: Pontyclun, Llanhari, Ystradon, Trehyngyll and Maendy, Aberthin, Cowbridge, St Hilary, St Mary Church Road, Llanbethery, St Athan Road, Aberthaw (high and low level), Rhoose, Gileston, Boverton (St Athan), Llantwit Major, Sigginstone came later as Llandow (Wick Road), Llandow, Southerndown Road, Llanharan, Pencoed, Peterston, St Fagan's, Wenvoe and even a short-lived halt at St y Nyll! Apologies if I've left any out.

The railway to Aberthaw was not a success! At its peak there were six trains a day. Cowbridge fared better with nine trains.

With passenger trains from Aberthaw rarely getting into double figures, it was perhaps not surprising that the GWR, who ran the line after grouping of the railways in 1922, suspended services in May 1926, though the passenger trains were restored (for some reason) in July 1927 – with just three trains a day.

Aberthaw Lime Pebble works closed in 1926, leaving the line with little freight. Bus services took off in 1926. Most stations on the Aberthaw branch were a mile or so from the places they were supposed to serve.

The final day of the Aberthaw branch for passengers was Monday, May 5 1930, though there was a final excursion from Cowbridge to Barry for local Sunday schools, organised by Mr Billy Lewis, the station master at St Mary Church Road, requiring a change of trains at Aberthaw.

What was left of freight on the line was abandoned in 1932. However, the Cowbridge railway struggled on regardless – until the last passenger train left for Llantrisant on November 26, 1951. But there was still a daily freight train (plus an occasional special excursion for railway

# Years ago... *THE DAY* *CAME TO TOWN!*

enthusiasts) until Monday, February 1 1965 – having just reached its 100th birthday.

The competition from bus services (ironically after the end of the mail coach years before) can best be put in numbers – in 1923, 66,000 passengers purchased tickets from Cowbridge railway station. In 1932 that total had dropped to a mere 6,000.

Just to complete the story, a quarry at New Beaupre kept a bit of the Aberthaw branch going until 1947, while goods traffic to Llanharry Iron

Ore mine finally ended at the end of 1975 – though this last ‘stub’ of the Cowbridge Railway was not officially closed until June 10, 1977.

Finally, there are two excellent books which offer much light on the whole story – especially the book by Colin Chapman – *The Cowbridge Railway*, and John Hutton’s *Taff Vale Miscellany*.

*I hope this piece will be of interest to readers of The GEM about a bygone age. Unless, of course you are from Rhoose or Llantwit Major where once again you can travel through the Fro by train!*