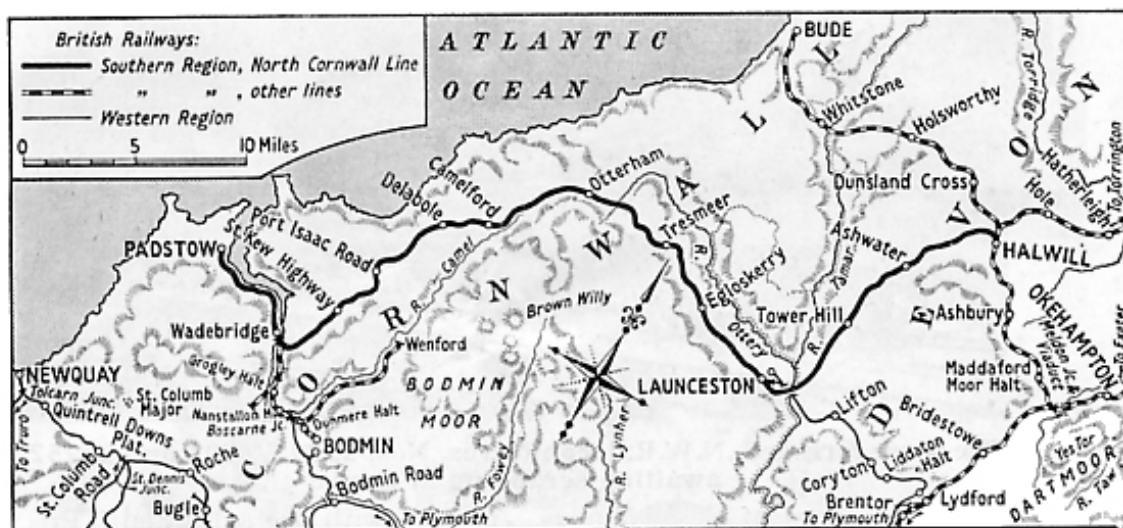


The North Cornwall Line of the Southern Region

By B. G. WILSON



The North Cornwall Line, Southern Region, and its connections

ON March 27, 1899, the first train of the London & South Western Railway steamed into Padstow, which ever since has remained the western outpost of Waterloo influence. The project for a railway through North Cornwall had been maturing for many years, and ambitious schemes had been formulated as far back as the 1840s for carrying the South Western to Exeter and into Cornwall. Not until the early eighties, however, when the North Cornwall Railway, nominally independent but controlled by the L.S.W.R., was promoted, did any construction begin.

Before the coming of the railway, North Cornwall was a remote part of the country. No railway approached nearer than Launceston and Wadebridge, and, save for summer coaches, carts and gigs were the only conveyances. Wadebridge was served by the Bodmin & Wadebridge Railway, which even then was something of a curiosity, as may be seen from the two interesting illustrations which appeared on page 114 of the March-April, 1948, issue. Nevertheless, it was this primitive railway—opened in 1834—which was the spearhead of the long-planned South Western attack on the Duchy; for, incredible though it may seem, it was acquired by the L.S.W.R. as

early as 1847, when that company had only got as far as Salisbury! It was not taken over legally, however, until 1886, and remained isolated from the main system until 1895, though in 1888 it was improved and linked with the Bodmin branch of the Great Western Railway by a connection between Bodmin (G.W.R.) and Boscarne Junction.

On July 17, 1862, the Okehampton Railway was authorised from Coleford Junction, on the Exeter-Barnstaple line, to Okehampton, and on July 13, 1863, from Okehampton to Lydford (then spelled Lidford) to meet the broad-gauge Launceston & South Devon Railway. The Okehampton Railway was opened in sections, and reached Okehampton on October 3, 1871, and Lydford on October 12, 1874. Powers for a branch from Meldon, west of Okehampton, to Bude were granted on June 29, 1865, but lapsed until re-enacted for the Meldon-Holsworthy section on July 1, 1873. This was opened on January 18, 1879, and was taken over by the L.S.W.R. In 1871, the L.S.W.R. had consolidated its position in Devon by taking over the Okehampton Railway, or the Devon & Cornwall, as it had become.

Meanwhile, on July 29, 1864, the Launceston, Bodmin & Wadebridge

Junction Railway had been authorised from Launceston to a junction with the Bodmin & Wadebridge at Wadebridge. Its real purpose became apparent in the next year, when the company changed its name to the Central Cornwall, and sought to extend from Ruthern Bridge, on a branch of the Bodmin & Wadebridge, to Truro. It must be remembered that the West Cornwall Railway, running westwards from Truro, was then standard-gauge, and that the Launceston & South Devon Railway Act of 1862 empowered the Board of Trade to order the provision of narrow-gauge rails between Lydford and Launceston, and running powers for any connecting company. The Central Cornwall Railway was never built, and the powers, already extended in 1867, lapsed in 1870.

At last, with the authorisation of the North Cornwall Railway under the aegis of the L.S.W.R., on August 18, 1882, the northern part of the Duchy was assured of railway communication. The Act authorised a line from Halwill, on the Holsworthy (later Bude) branch, to Padstow, passing through Launceston, Camelford, and Wadebridge. Progress was sure, if slow, and the line was opened in stages, as follow:—

Halwill-Launceston on July 21, 1886.

Launceston-Tresmeer on July 21, 1892.

Tresmeer-Camelford on August 14, 1893.

Camelford-Delabole on October 18, 1893.

Delabole-Wadebridge on June 1, 1895.

Wadebridge-Padstow on March 27, 1899.

Besides fish from Padstow, and china clay from Bodmin Moor, the great slate quarries at Delabole, worked since Elizabethan days, promised a heavy goods traffic. Indeed, so eager was the slate company for railway connection that it gave $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile of its land free to the railway company. The once-flourishing fishing trade of the ancient port of Padstow had been much reduced, but the L.S.W.R. had high hopes of reviving it.

At the half-yearly general meeting of the North Cornwall Railway in 1896, when the construction of the final section to Padstow was being pushed forward, the Chairman, Mr. J. Tremayne, said that they had hoped to go west of Padstow and he trusted that there might

shortly be "a continuous line" beyond. The Parliamentary notices for 1894 included one for a line from the North Cornwall to Newquay and Truro, with running powers over the Great Western to Penzance and Falmouth. But Padstow was to remain the terminus, and no "Atlantic Coast Express" of the future was to carry a Newquay, or Penzance portion, although it is understood that on one occasion, during the war, an odd turn of fate necessitated the diversion of the "Cornish Riviera Express" *via* Launceston, Wadebridge, and Bodmin Road.

On March 27, 1899, the official train conveying the General Manager and other officers of the L.S.W.R. left Exeter at 9.30 a.m. and arrived at Wadebridge at 12.10 p.m. As the special, with its decorated locomotive, drew into Padstow, the Padstow Artillery and Delabole Brass Bands struck up "See The Conquering Hero Comes," after which Mrs. Prideaux Brune, the wife of one of the North Cornwall directors, declared the line open. Even so, Padstow felt that this was not enough, for when, later, the Hon. Prideaux Brune was leaving for London, a procession, led by the Artillery Band, marched to the station, where to the sound of exploding detonators, and the tune "A Fine Old English Gentleman," he was presented with a testimonial.

The L.S.W.R. was pleased with its new line, and the fine scenery of the North Cornish coast and its attractions as a holiday resort were well publicised. Padstow Station was built on the site of the old shipbuilding yard. The Padstow Harbour authorities erected what was at that time the only fish market in Cornwall, and the railway was extended past the station to the market, to enable fish to be loaded direct into the vans. Arrangements were made to receive the fish at the last possible moment to ensure an early delivery in London. The confidence of the L.S.W.R. in the revival of the fish trade was not misplaced. In 1900, twenty-four tons were sent away by rail, and the receipts were £65; but in 1911, the figures were no less than 3,074 tons, and £6,879 respectively.

In 1905, no doubt fearing an extension of the North Cornwall line to the increasingly popular resort of Newquay, the G.W.R. sought powers (granted but not

The North Cornwall Line

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Halwill Station, looking in the down direction



Wadebridge Station, looking towards Padstow, in L.S.W.R. days.
Rail motor at down platform

exercised) to shorten its route to Newquay by a cut-off from near Bodmin Road to Roche. Up to 1911 at least, there were plans for light railways in the country between Padstow and Newquay, but nothing came of them. However, a coach service from Newquay and St. Columb connected with some trains at Wadebridge and through bookings were given from Waterloo.

Until recently the heaviest locomotives permitted to work over the line were the mixed traffic 2-6-0s. The limiting factors were the weight restriction over Meldon Viaduct and the short turntable at Padstow. For a long time, the Adams "Jubilee" class handled much of the traffic. Now the provision of a larger turntable at Padstow has enabled the "West Country" class to work right through. The benefit is felt particularly during the summer, when the Padstow portion of the "Atlantic Coast Express" is expanded to form a complete train of a weight sufficient to demand considerable engine power on the long and heavy gradients. For the ordinary Okehampton-Padstow local trains the Moguls and "T9" class 4-4-0s suffice.

The North Cornwall Railway is single throughout, with crossing loops at all stations. The loop at Tower Hill, formerly removed, has now been reinstated. From Halwill (210½ miles from Waterloo), which has two platforms and a bay, and a separate platform for the Torrington branch, the railway to Padstow diverges sharply from the straight line to Bude, and falls for three miles, to mile post 213, at 1 in 73 and 82. Easier gradients and level stretches follow, through Ashwater and Tower Hill, to mile post 222, from which the railway rises for a mile at 1 in 94. The train winds for some distance beside one of the first tributaries of the Tamar, through a well-wooded valley, and then crosses the Tamar—here the boundary between Devon and Cornwall—and the Western Region line from Lydford. The two lines run parallel into Launceston (224 miles) where there is a single-line connection. Launceston stands on a great rock, topped by a castle, at the foot of which lie the two stations. The Western Region station is a single-platform terminus, and the Southern is the usual two-platform through type, which is standard on the line, except at Padstow.

Through Launceston, the line climbs, gradually at first, to the charmingly-named stations of Egloskerry, and Tresmeer. The gradient steepens to 1 in 78 and 74 before Tresmeer, and the ascent continues to mile post 237½, mostly at 1 in 73. The country becomes increasingly wild as the line runs on high embankments and through deep slate and shale cuttings, to the summit, 800 ft. above the sea. Mr. S. P. B. Mais has described the landscape here as resembling Connemara. Unseen, yet unmistakable, is an atmosphere of mystery and romance, and a sense of being in an ancient land. A reminder of the Arthurian legends comes with the next station, Camelford, where passengers alight for Boscastle and Tintagel with their fine coast scenery, and near to which is Slaughter Bridge, where King Arthur is supposed to have fought his last.

From Otterham summit, come about 2½ miles of level and easy down grades, followed by easy undulations through Camelford, to about mile post 241½. From this point, there is a long fall at 1 in 74, 73, 88, 75, 73, and 75, broken by short strips of easier grades and level to mile post 253, a mile east of Wadebridge. Just before reaching Delabole, the first station on this long descent, the line skirts the great slate quarry, 400 ft. deep. From the carriage window the ropeways for the slate wagons can be seen going down into the depths. There is ample siding accommodation for the slate traffic.

The next two stations are Port Isaac Road (a good three miles from the little port) and St. Kew Highway, and between them comes Trelil Tunnel (333 yd. long) the only tunnel on the line. Near Wadebridge the Allan Water and the River Camel are crossed, and the railway, which has now dropped to sea-level, curves sharply westwards, and runs alongside the Bodmin line, before joining it at Wadebridge Station (254½ miles). This layout was adopted in 1907, and the apparently double-line section is worked as two single tracks. Wadebridge Station has two platforms, of which the up platform is an island, with the outer face reserved for the Southern and the Western Region trains to Bodmin. The latter diverge at Boscarne Junction, and run into their own station at Bodmin. Wadebridge is chiefly notable for its fine

17-arch road bridge, built about 1485.

The remainder of the line is easily-graded, and there is a fair amount of level track. Beyond the level-crossing at the Padstow end of Wadebridge Station, the railway runs for a short distance between houses, and past sidings to the waterfront. It then follows the banks of the ever-widening estuary of the Camel, until the mouth can be seen, with the golden sands of Roch on the right-hand side, and the port of Padstow on the left. After a sharp turn northwards, the line crosses a tributary of the Camel, at Little Petherick, by a fine iron girder bridge of three 130-ft. spans, situated on a curve. This structure figures prominently in a Southern Region poster. A final short run alongside the estuary brings the train into the terminus at Padstow, 259½ miles from London.

Padstow is a little town of steep narrow streets converging on the harbour. It is a good centre for an energetic holiday, as although not directly on the open sea, it is within walking distance of the fine beaches of Trevose and Trevone, and there is fishing, sailing, surf bathing and golfing. The name is a corruption of Petrock Stow—St. Petrock was a disciple of St. Patrick.

The station is situated almost at the water's edge. There is a single platform, with a short umbrella roof, and a run-round loop, on the far side of which are two carriage sidings. Then comes the fish platform, with its lines and sidings for coal and other traffic. The turntable is at the London end of the station, and is built on to the foreshore. All roads converge to single track just outside the station.

The down summer service through to Padstow is five trains daily (seven on Saturdays). As the three Sunday trains terminate at Launceston, to leave Padstow for "England" on a Sunday one must take the morning bus *via* Wadebridge and Bodmin to Bodmin Road, where connection is made with the 8.50 a.m. from Penzance. This is, indeed, a reversion to the days before the opening of the North Cornwall and the G.W.R. Bodmin branch, when Bodmin Road was the nearest main line station for Bodmin, Padstow, and Wadebridge.

There is talk of transferring all the Southern lines west of Exeter to the Western Region, but this, should it come

about, would probably make little difference to the working of the North Cornwall, whose through trains would still be from Waterloo. In any event, however, one or two improvements in connections seem called for, including the concentration of all traffic at Launceston at the former L.S.W.R. station—and connection made there between Western and Southern Region trains—and the establishment of a Padstow-Fowey rail motor *via* Wadebridge and Bodmin. Through railway communication between these two places would be a realisation of the scheme of William James, the Bodmin "Father of Railways," who in 1825 planned a Padstow-Fowey railway (of which only the Bodmin-Wadebridge section was then made) as the alternative to an intended canal.



Otterham Station, near the summit of the North Cornwall line



Viaduct over creek at Little Petherick, near Padstow