

WICK & LYBSTER LIGHT RAILWAY

The following article was published in the John O'Groat Journal to mark the 100th anniversary of the opening of the Wick and Lybster Light Railway.

On Wednesday, July 1, 1903, "an event of outstanding importance in the history of Caithness" took place. The momentous occasion was the opening of the new Wick to Lybster railway, which had been constructed at a cost of £70,000. A large enthusiastic crowd gathered at Wick station to witness the ceremony which was performed by Mrs Miller of Scrabster – the wife of John Miller, chairman of the company behind the project.



She blew the gold whistle to start the 11am train which consisted of the new Lybster engine, seven carriages and the Highland Railway directors' saloon from Inverness. Among the many guests on board were the directors of the Wick and Lybster Light Railway Company and "several lady friends".

The driver, George Horne, "turned on the steam and, amid cheers from the crowd and the cracking of the fog-signals laid on the rails, the first train to Lybster glided out of Wick station and sped along the iron road to its destination", according to a detailed report which appeared in the John O'Groat Journal on July 3, 1903.

The train "went through at a rate that left but little time for observation", noted the reporter. "Hempriggs on the left and Thrumster on the right were a glimpse of trees, sufficient to prove the fallacy of the statement there are no trees in Caithness. Then the driver put on a spurt, rushed up the incline to Heather Inn – the old coaching establishment on the main road – and along the crofts of Clyth at a rate which gave the impression that the whole coast is a street. From the numerous houses on the way, the native came out and waved a welcome to the pioneer train, sometimes with gaily-coloured handkerchiefs, sometimes with the homely and useful dish-clout".

"Nor was there a lack of bunting. On a hillock behind the manse of Bruan, a gay bannerette fluttered as a sign of welcome from the respected and revered occupant. Bruan Lodge had also flung out its banner to the breeze. Here and there along the route were such spots of colour. At each intermediate station on the line, small groups waved and cheered on the train as it rushed through without stopping. After a panorama of well-tilled crops and farms, bounded by a wide expanse of sea, the engine sounded a warning whistle and the first journey to Lybster was completed as the train drew up to the platform – at 11.40am – amid the cheers of those who had assembled to bid it welcome".

In Lybster, where there was a half-day to mark the occasion, many premises were decorated and buildings were bedecked with flags. The Wick photographers, Messrs Johnston and Humphrey, were on hand to record the events.

At noon, the train set off back to Wick – this time with fare-paying passengers – and was packed as people were very keen to experience what was, for them, a wonder of the age.

One and a half hours later, a large company sat down in the Temperance Hall where the proprietors of the Portland Arms Hotel provided a meal for 130 guests, including directors of the Highland and Lybster railway companies, the families of most of the estate owners in Caithness, lawyers, doctors, ministers, businessmen, crofters, fishermen and farmers.

Among the notable absentees were the Duke of Portland, who had helped finance the venture, the Duke of Atholl, the Duke of Sutherland, Mr R L Harnsworth, MP for the county, and Arthur Bignold, MP for the Northern Burghs. They had all sent their apologies but were said to be there in spirit.

Several speeches were made by the dignitaries and numerous toasts drunk before the assembled guests partook of the meal. Proceedings came to an end with the singing of "God Save the King" to the accompaniment of the Wick Artillery Band under the leadership of Sergeant Major Craig.

The new line, which helped bring the east coast of the county into closer contact with Wick and the south, cost and estimated £70,000. The Treasury provided £25,000 plus a loan without interest of £3,000.

The sum of £42,465 was raised by the issue of £1 shares with the Duke of Portland acquiring stock worth £15,000. Caithness County Council purchased a similar amount, while Wick and Pulteneytown Burgh Council held shares valued at £4,000.

The Highland Railway Company oversaw the project and was to operate the service following an agreement with the promoters. The contract was carried out by William Kennedy, of Partick in Glasgow, and the work was said to have been "harmoniously and expeditiously carried out".



While the Groat warmly welcomed the development, it had reservations about the line being managed by the Highland Railway Company and pointed out that the timetable was already being "adversely criticised and not perhaps without good reason. But we have no doubt," it went on, "when the management get a little better acquainted with the requirements of the districts, they will consider the wishes of the travelling public and give them as much satisfaction and facilities as the resources of the line will warrant".

On the opening day, seven services ran between Wick and Lybster with the last train leaving Wick at 7.15pm.

Stations en route included Thrumster, Ulbster, Mid-Clyth and Occumster, each of which had its own stationmaster, as did Lybster. There were request stops at Welsh's Crossing, Roster Road and Parkside.

The move to establish a railway linking Wick and Lybster had been mooted in the days when both places were active in the catching, curing and exporting of herring. Although the great boom days had passed, there were still more than 60 boats working from the Lybster area. There were five fishcuring companies, many small businesses and numerous crofts and farms in and around the east coast village, generating a considerable movement of goods, animals and people. As a result, it was felt it would be a good idea to create a railway connecting Lybster with Wick and the south.

Support gathered pace and the proposal was backed by a number of local bodies, such as the county council, Latheron Parish Council, the Lybster Fishermen's Association and Wick and Pulteneytown Chamber of Commerce. Approaches were also made to landowners, including the Duke of Portland – owner of the Lybster, Berriedale and Langwell estates and a member of one of the wealthiest and most influential families in Britain.

After initial reservations, the Secretary of State for Scotland endorsed the scheme, the Treasury approved a grant, and on November 27, 1899, the Board of Trade signed an order recognising the Wick and Lybster Light Railway Company. However, it would be almost another four years before the new rail service would become operational.

The line ran without major problems until 1914 when it was taken over by the Government during the First World War. When hostilities ceased four years later, it became clear that if the railway was to compete against the ever-increasing road traffic the many small companies would have to amalgamate to become more efficient.

In January 1923 the line became part of the London, Midland and Scottish Railway Company, or LMS as it was known. A local alternative was the "Lybster, Mid-Clyth and Sarclet", according to Wick historian Iain Sutherland, author of *The Wick and Lybster Light Railway*.

The service was again taken over by the Government at the outbreak of the Second World War.

The British Transport Commission later concluded that the Lybster railway was so under-used it should be closed as a wartime economy measure.

And so on April 1, 1944, it made its final journey. As Mr Sutherland says in his book, "It was a sad day and the little engine, with one last mournful blast on its whistle, puffed out of Lybster for the last time, pulling the train and the line into history".

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