



Newton St Cyres History Group

May Meeting

These days, our railway station at the end of Station Road, by the Beer Engine, is not much used but in the past it was a busy communications hub. Our meeting on Thursday 15th May was on the history of the Exeter-Crediton Railway and St Cyres station (as it was originally known). With much input of information from Chris Southcott and Tim Sedgwick, Malcolm Brooks prepared an excellent power point presentation and presented the material, which was an outline of the development of the line, and a series of photographs of the people who ran it and the changes over the last century and a half.

During the mid nineteenth century the rail network was being built over the country; the work was financed by companies and shareholders, and this meant that development was piecemeal. Furthermore, some companies built the broad gauge line (7ft ¼in) favoured by Brunel, and others the narrow or standard gauge (4ft 8½ in) and this caused many problems.

The Exeter – Crediton railway was first proposed in 1831, but no progress was made. The Bristol - Exeter railway was opened in 1844 and was built to the broad gauge, and this stimulated renewed interest in a link to Crediton. In 1845 a new Act was passed to enable the line to be built, and it was completed with the broad gauge in 1847. However, there were complicated delays, because the company planning the Taw line from Barnstaple down to Crediton chose the narrow gauge, and this caused delays and heated arguments between the various boards, committees and shareholders. The lines were left to rust. Eventually, an agreement was reached and on 12th May 1851 the Crediton railway was opened to full passenger services on a broad gauge line, with Barnstaple link following in 1854. St Cyres was the only stop between Exeter and Crediton in the outcome, but originally there had been a station built at Cowley Bridge (Cowley Meadows) and this wooden building was moved to St Cyres station.

At last the Crediton businesses were able to reach Exeter quickly and St Cyres became a busy place. The Railway Inn (now the Beer Engine but also briefly The Barn Owl and the Iron Horse) was built and it issued tokens, (shown in one of the photos), which were in lieu of money and paid as wages to the navvies, and payable to the landlord, Thomas Moore, for food and drink. Cattle pens were made on the siding, which had its own shed and also a loading gauge, something like a curved suspended metal arc, which was used to measure the freight on an open truck and prevent overloading. Sweetham also was built at this time because, as so often, the railway was away from the main centre of the village. As well as the business connections to North Devon, local people could easily get into Exeter and a Mrs Parker, who used to carry butter and cheese on a yoke to sell in Exeter, was remembered in discussion.

The London and South West Railway (LSWR) now entered the fray. They had been building a western link through Salisbury and reached Exeter in 1860, building the much more central Exeter Queen Street station, but using the narrow gauge. They won yet another complex power struggle and took over the Barnstaple line, and also built the link, one of the steepest stretches of rail in the country, between Exeter Queen Street and Exeter St David's. The gauge was now mixed, with both broad and narrow gauges running. Furthermore, the line was extended through Okehampton and Tavistock down to Plymouth, and it is this link that would be re-instated if there is a decision to bypass the vulnerable Dawlish mainline. To finish the history, Malcolm mentioned the singling of

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the line at the Cowley bridge in 1965, and the singling of the whole line to Barnstaple in 1984. Now Newton St Cyres station is a request stop, and a 'hump' has been built to make it easier to get on and off the train. Passenger numbers have risen from 702 in 2004/5 to 2252 in 2012/13.

The many interesting photographs which Malcolm showed were from a variety of sources including some from village families, such as one of Mr John (Jack) Griffin and Mr Bert Davey, both of whom worked at the station in the first half of the last century. It was possible to see the alterations to Station House over the years, through to when David Baker lived there. There was a picture of the Dawlish line washed away in 1890, and also of the Cowley/Main Line junction flooded in 1866, 1960 and most recently 25th November 2012. Continuing the weather theme was a photo of a train fitted with a snow plough in thick snow in the mid seventies. Different pictures of the track showed where the rods used to come out from under the signal box and below the platform to operate the signals and points: Malcolm said how heavy the levers could be and how much strength was needed to push and pull them in and out of position to make he changes. The various station signs and the bridge number sign (542) were recorded, and the various station buildings, all demolished by 1979. For a short time then there were allotments on the south side of the station. Also the Recreation Ground buildings went up and again the landscape altered.

Interesting anecdotes and memories cropped up in discussions, stimulated by the photographs. A visit to the station garden, on the site of the old waiting room and signal box, and where there is an information board, is recommended – you may well see one of our three contributors there, who can tell you more!

Our thanks go to Malcolm for delivering the talk and to Tim and Chris for their input.

Summer Events

By the time you receive this we shall hopefully have enjoyed our outing to the War Horse Country Park at Idlesleigh and also Nick Baker's historic tour of Upton Pyne. We shall still be looking forward to the REVELS on July 6th where we shall have a display. Do come and see what we have been researching this last year.

2014 Autumn Meetings all Thursdays at 7.30pm.

Everyone is welcome. There is a small charge of £2 which includes tea and biscuits.

- Sept 18 First World War in Newton St Cyres - Roger and Jean Wilkins
- Oct 16 Peter Keay on Eastholme
- Nov 13 Roger Mortimer The Monmouth Rebellion
- Dec 11 Joint Christmas Social with Gardening Club

If you are interested in the history of the village and would like to help on the committee we should love to hear from you. If you have been independently researching but don't wish to get involved we should still love to hear what you have been up to. For example have you researched the history of you house, or perhaps you would like to know how to go about it. Please do make contact with Jean or Isobel. Phone numbers above. We are particularly lucky in Newton St Cyres that we have a village with very good records.

From January 2015 our meetings will be held on a Wednesday evening.

For further information contact Jean 851337 Isobel 851351