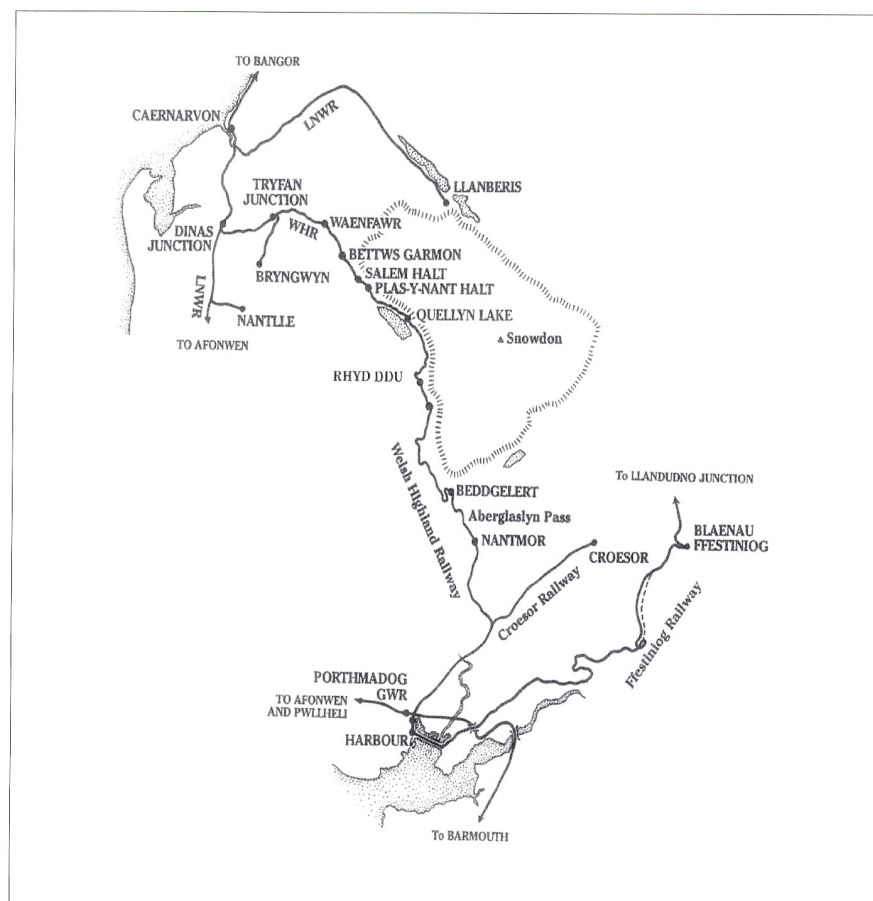


achieved ever greater celebrity as time has passed since their closure. Thus the USA had the Carson & Colorado and the Rio Grande Southern, whilst Britain had the WHR—the Welsh Highland Railway.

Originally opened as part of a grandiose plan by the North Wales Narrow Gauge Railways (NWNG) to cover North Wales with a network of 2-foot gauge lines, what became the WHR was quickly in financial trouble—it failed to raise enough capital, fell out with its contractor, had to open its line in stages and couldn't afford to purchase either locomotives or rolling stock, being forced to hire these essential items from a company set up by its own directors. Completed as far as Rhyd Ddu by 1881 it was soon in receivership, a condition it endured until an upturn in traffic during the 1890s.

Remarkably, these difficulties did not deter attempts to build a line to connect the NWNG with the Ffestiniog Railway (FR) at Porthmadog. These efforts culminated in extensive work for an electric line, the Porthmadog, Beddgelert & South Snowdon Railway (PB&SSR) in 1906-1908 which was abandoned when money ran out, leaving the Beddgelert area festooned with earthworks and three complete tunnels in the Aberglaslyn Pass. A "bridge to nowhere" constructed for this scheme still stands near Beddgelert and a Hunslet 2-6-2T delivered to the NWNG, but paid for by the PB&SSR, has become a WHR icon in recent years. Following this failure, traffic on the NWNG languished despite the uncompleted PB&SSR being used to transport timber for the war effort from 1914. Passenger traffic ceased by 1916 and even freight traffic was intermittent by the end of the war.

By all normal standards the NWNG should have died at this point and stayed dead. However, times were not normal in the early 1920s. The post-war economic slump meant that local and national government was looking for projects to revive industries such as slate quarrying and to stimulate new activities like tourism.



The WHR in the 1920s. (Christine Siviter)

Conditions were ripe for yet another attempt at forging a link between the NWNG and the FR. Funded this time by central government and the local authorities, the new line utilised much of the right of way completed by the PB&SSR, although some 3.5% grades around Beddgelert were abandoned in favour of a more meandering route with long stretches of 2.5%. The completed line opened throughout, as the Welsh Highland Railway, in 1923. Unfortunately it was too little, far too late. Government largesse wasn't sufficient to purchase adequate motive power or rolling stock. The only "new" locomotive was a Baldwin 4-6-0T formerly used by the British army to serve the trenches in WW1. From the earliest days, traffic was kept going only by borrowing locomotives from the FR. None of the available locomotives was really powerful enough for the grades above Beddgelert and trains were slow. Local passengers soon deserted to the motorbus services which sprang up

everywhere during the 1920s. Year-round passenger trains ceased after the first winter. The summer passenger season was short and even tourists were deterred by the slowness of the trains. To cap everything, freight traffic was sparse. Unsurprisingly, the line was in receivership by 1927 and the depression of the 1930s made matters worse. The line would have closed in 1934 had not the FR, wanting to maintain circular tour traffic from the North Wales coast, leased the line. By 1937 even the FR had had enough and the line closed. It lay derelict until 1941, when the track materials and rolling stock were requisitioned for the WW2 scrap drive. The Hunslet 2-6-2T survived to run on industrial lines in England, being preserved in the mid-1950s and later returned to steam. One of the 1877 NWNG single Fairlie locomotives went to the FR, but was cut up in 1954 during the FR's pre-revival scrap drive. It seemed that the

idea of a narrow gauge railway across Snowdonia was irrevocably dead.

However, around 1960, a number of volunteers on the reopened FR became dissatisfied with the rather strict management style then prevailing and went off to the other end of Porthmadog to start their own, "more democratic," society with the stated objective of reopening the WHR. No one paid much attention, especially when "democracy" led to considerable squabbling and very little progress. Nevertheless, by 1989, the growing importance of the tourist industry led the Gwynedd county council to look more favourably on schemes like the WHR and it became apparent that there was at least a possibility that the line might be reopened. Unwilling to risk the possibility of having a rival tourist line established in close proximity, the FR made a pre-emptive bid to take over the WHR company, which still existed due to legal complications caused by the 1941 requisition. A period of frantic legal activity ensued, involving three separate public enquiries, during which the FR faced down opposition from numerous objectors, including not only the Porthmadog-based WHR "1964 Company" and the usual nimbys, but also farmers who had usurped stretches of the trackbed for access roads, the National Trust and the Snowdonia National Park Authority. The final result was that the FR not only received permission to reopen the WHR but was also allowed to take over the trackbed of the closed former standard gauge line between Dinas and the county town of Caernarfon, giving it access to a major tourist centre.

During this period the FR was also busy sourcing 2-foot gauge equipment from South Africa, eventually acquiring several miles of almost new 60-lb rail complete with fastenings, steel ties, points and crossings; three NGG16 Beyer Garratts (the most powerful 2-foot gauge locomotives ever built); two NG15 2-8-2s; two 350-hp bogie diesel locomotives; numerous bogie wagons and a large quantity of spare bogies suitable for

use under passenger carriages. An application was also made to the Millennium Commission (a body funded by the UK lottery) for a grant to cover the cost of trackbed clearance and reconstruction as far as Rhyd Ddu. This was successful and a grant of £4.3 million was obtained, against matching funds provided by various private backers and members of a new Welsh Highland Railway Society (unconnected with the 64 Company) giving a final total of £9.1 million.

Construction started on 15 January 1997 and the 3 miles from Caernarfon to Dinas opened in October. Reconstruction of the first part of the NWNG, between Dinas and Waunfawr, followed between June 1999 and September 2000, the work being delayed by a very wet winter and a land slip near Waunfawr. Work on the long section from Waunfawr to Rhyd Ddu started in late 2000 but came to an abrupt halt between February and July 2001 when a major epidemic of bovine foot and mouth disease, involving outbreaks in Anglesey and an exclusion zone covering much of Snowdonia, prevented access to unfenced stretches of trackbed. As a

result, reopening to Rhyd Ddu was delayed well past the Millennium, the ceremony finally being performed by Prince Charles on 30 July 2003. Much of the track laying on this section was done by volunteer labour provided by members of the WHR(Caernarfon) Society. By this time, peace had also broken out between WHR(P) (the 1964 Company) and the FR to the extent that WHR(P) members started reconstruction of the WHR trackbed from the Porthmadog end.

The line was now 12 miles long and construction staff were happy to take a short breather. Traffic staff were also anxious to get down to the job of running trains and earning revenue. The final 5 miles below Rhyd Ddu are particularly scenic and traffic rose rapidly as the line became known in tourism circles. The line is currently carrying about 50,000 passengers a year and generating around 25% of the revenue of the FR/WHR group. Nevertheless, everyone was aware that in excess of £10 million would be required to complete the railway between Rhyd Ddu and Porthmadog and that, by agreement with the National Park, the whole 13 miles has



The first passenger train to reach Rhyd Ddu was a special Royal Train laid on for (and driven by) Prince Charles on 30 July 2003. Here the special, hauled by the Ffestiniog Railway's 1863-built 0-4-0 Prince, breaches the celebratory banner at Rhyd Ddu. (Photo by John Dobson.)

to be reconstructed before it can be opened – a temporary terminus at Beddgelert having been ruled out to prevent road traffic congestion.

The FRCo board was being very cagey about the progress of negotiations over finance, so it was a surprise to many supporters when, on 8 September 2004 at a ceremony held in Waunfawr station, Dr. Brian Gibbons, deputy Minister for Economic Development and Transport in the Welsh Assembly Government, announced that grants of £3.7 million from the European Union Regional Development Fund and £1.3 million from the Welsh Assembly transport budget were to be made available to help complete the WHR. The balance of the required £10.75 million is to be met by a grant from the Wales Development Agency; large donations from private individuals and £0.5 million raised by tax-efficient covenants from other supporters. The WHR will also have to find, at least partly from revenue, a minimum of £1 million for additional passenger carriages. Costs will be kept down by using volunteer labour to do much of the track laying.

By the end of 2008, if all goes to plan, the revitalised WHR will extend from its current terminus at Rhyd Ddu through Beddgelert and the spectacular Aberglaslyn Pass, to a junction with the FR at Porthmadog. The FR/WHR will then be by far the longest enthusiast-run railway in Britain. It will also be the final realisation of a dream, dating back to the 19th century, of a 40-mile narrow gauge railway running across the heart of Snowdonia from the Menai Straits to Blaenau Ffestiniog. As custodians of Russell (the Hunslet 2-6-2T) and several original items of WHR rolling stock recovered from agricultural use, the WHR(P) company will be in a good position to provide “heritage” trains when the line is complete, whilst the FR/WHR runs regular services with some of the world’s most modern steam locomotives.

Access to North Wales has been greatly improved in recent years thanks to roads such as the A55 North Wales Expressway. There is also a growing willingness amongst Britons to take weekend breaks throughout the year and to take part in seasonal special events such as Halloween or Father



Christmas trains. Tourism is therefore a much more lucrative industry nowadays than it was in the 1930s. And the “Abode of Eagles”? The Welsh version of the WHR’s name is Rheilffordd Eryri, “The Railway in the Abode of Eagles.” With a name like that we really should make it pay this time around!



In a view remarkably reminiscent of a C&TS train at Windy Point, green Beyer-Garratt No.138 Millennium climbs through one of the many curves on the final section of line before Rhyd Ddu. (Photo by Roger Dimmick.)



Reopening the Waunfawr to Rhyd Ddu section involved the reconstruction of three single span bridges and one triple span “viaduct.” Here Beyer-Garratts Nos.138 and 143, with a combined weight of around 125 tons, head a bridge testing train in early August 2003. (Photo by Ian Butters.)

(Left) In early 2004, Green Beyer-Garratt No.138 Millennium is seen hauling a regular service train across Plas y Nant bridge. The curved girders date from the original construction of the line in the 1870s and were probably second-hand even then. They have been considerably strengthened for their current use. (Photo by Roger Dimmick.)

2005 Schedule of Friends' Events

Volunteer Work Sessions

May 9—13, Session A

May 16—20, Session B

June 13—17, Session C

June 20—24, Session D

August 1—5, Session E

August 8—12, Session F

Annual Meeting

June 17

Moonlight Train

June 18



In preparation for sessions C and D, kitchen car team members had a "two vans load" shopping trip to Sam's Club in Santa Fe. Shown here are five dollies and two shopping carts of supplies. One more trip was necessary for sessions E and F. (Photo by Tom Cardin.)



**Friends of the Cumbres & Toltec
Scenic Railroad, Inc.**

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