

Bala at its Birth...



Andrew Charman concludes our series of three Hunslet Homes articles by documenting the birth of the Bala Lake Railway, a line celebrating 50 years of operation in 2022.

In the summer of 1973, a little under half a century ago, the 11-year-old version of your editor

was on yet another holiday in north Wales. With a railway enthusiast for a father my narrow-gauge education

Above: Ready to run its first passenger trains – the Bala Lake Railway in July 1972, one month before it opened for business. The inset shows the scene that greeted the author in 1973 – pristine loco, spartan carriages, no-one about... Photos: Graham Fairhurst and Bryan Charman

Above left: Before work began – the first signs of life are evident at Llanuwchllyn with slate wagons stacked on the station platform.

Left: A few months later – tons of ballast has raised the trackbed and the Ruston diesel is sitting on one of the first points at the start of the run-round loop.

All uncredited photos in this feature courtesy of the Hugh Sykes Collection/Bala Lake Railway

was well underway and the Talylyn and Vale of Rheidol Railways already familiar venues that we had visited more than once.

This time, however, dad said he had something new for us three children and my long-suffering mother – a brand-new railway, opened only the previous summer. And it was clear when we arrived at the then to me unpronounceable Llanuwchllyn station of 'Rheilffordd Llyn Tegid', the Bala Lake Railway (BLR), that this was very different to anything that I had yet seen.

Standing in the station was a bright blue bo-bo diesel, looking like a miniaturised version of what I was used to seeing on the main lines back home in Surrey. It was coupled to a pair of bogie carriages, one closed and the other the most spartan vehicle one could imagine – basically a frame and roof. The two platforms and station building looked far too big for the train, as indeed it was because it had seen its last standard-gauge working only eight years earlier. And the place was completely deserted...

After about 10 minutes we had decided the line must be closed and dad was about to drive away when someone emerged from the signal box and shouted to us; "Do you want to go for a ride?" And so we enjoyed our very own private train as far as Llangower, today halfway along the line, then its extremity.

I can't recall much about our host

but today I surmise he must have been George Barnes, the BLR's first general manager and the man that masterminded the Bala Lake Railway's creation and progress over its early years.

Beeching strikes

The seed for what became the third and final of our 'Hunslet Homes' was sown in 1965, when the Great Western Railway route from Ruabon to Barmouth on the Welsh coast was added to the many victims of the Beeching axe. Passenger services through Bala ended officially on 18th January 1965, though flooding the previous month resulted in the last services being by bus, and by 1969 the track had been lifted.

The western half of the former route would eventually reopen as the Mawddach Trail, still popular today as a bridleway, walking and cycling route. The eastern section eventually spawned two heritage lines – the standard-gauge Llangollen Railway and the BLR.

It was not very long at all before thoughts turned to reusing the trackbed. As early as October 1968 *Narrow Gauge News (NGN)*, the newsletter of the Narrow Gauge Railway Society, reported that Merioneth County Council had purchased 3ft 6in gauge Bagnall 0-4-0STs 'Woro' (2133/1924) and 'Sir Tom' (2135/25) from British Insulated Cables of Erith. "They propose to lay a short tourist line somewhere near Bala on the roadbed of the BR Bala-Dolgellau line," the report credited to among others Talylyn Railway chief engineer John Bate stated, to which the newsletter editor had added "what's the betting that it's alongside the lake?"

More reports followed, notably in April 1970 when the *Railway*



Above: Looking the other way from the previous picture – points are installed for future sidings and the line stretches towards Bala.

Above right: The first trains were turned at the limit of operations courtesy of a short siding and human power... Both photos: Graham Fairhurst

Below: The extent of BLR rolling stock in the winter of 1972. Photo: Peter Johnson Collection



Magazine stated that Merioneth County Council's finance committee had recommended the council agreeing in principle to a narrow-gauge line on the trackbed – it would run from Bala to Dolgellau and if possible on to Morfa Mawddach, if it could be accommodated alongside the proposed Dolgellau bypass which planned to make use of some of the former trackbed.

If this had gone ahead it would have been quite some line, some 28 miles in length! In its advice the sub-committee formulating the proposal stressed

that the longer the line the more advantageous it would be – very forward thinking. The *RM* was less convinced, however, mentioning the proposal in its editorial under the heading *Fool's gold in Wales...*

By November 1970 the council had scaled back its plans, settling on initially opening a 4½-mile long line between Bala and Llanuwchllyn, and retaining ownership of the rest of the trackbed while it decided what to do with it. A sub-committee was formed to determine whether the council should press ahead with building the line itself or encourage the setting up of an independent organisation to take charge of the project. »





Apathy of the people?

The latter action was recommended in a feasibility report to the council and public meetings proposed to gain support for the scheme. These were held in April in both Bala and Dolgellau and according to the June 1971 edition of *NGN* a line from Morfa Mawddach to a point near Dolgellau was back on the agenda.

“Only 29 persons turned up at Bala and 37 at Dolgellau and nobody was prepared to put up money for either scheme,” the report stated, adding that committees had been formed to look into both and that a member of the Bala committee, an M Phillips, had some 2ft gauge equipment formerly of the Oakeley slate quarry in Blaenau Ffestiniog, which he had been planning to set up at Glyn Ceiriog, once the terminus of the long-closed Glyn Valley Tramway, but had run into planning problems.

There is a question over the accuracy of some of these reports, however. Certainly the sale of the Bagnall locos never went ahead – after several years in a Kent scrapyard Woto passed into the ownership of engineer Alan Keef while Sir Tom today lives at the Threlkeld Quarry museum in Cumbria – ironically both have been

regauged to the BLR’s 2ft. And *NGW* reader Richard Greenhaugh gave us a very different view of the public meetings at Bala, both of which he attended.

“At Bala, there was already a group, led by George Barnes and Councillor Tom Jones, making plans to create what would become Rheilffordd Llyn Tegid (the BLR) and as a result of the meeting they set up a committee, incorporated their company in May 1972, and had the first section of line operating in August of that year,” Richard told *NGW*. He added that the lack of a detailed plan for the Dolgellau line, plus proposals for the bypass that would force the line to terminate short of the town, doomed its hopes. Richard commented that had Merioneth Council been able to persuade BR to leave the track in situ, significantly cutting the cost of reinstatement, the route might have become the first standard-gauge tourist line in Wales, beating the Llangollen Railway, set up in 1975.

Prime mover

The constant factor in all this was the apparent and perhaps unusual pro-railway attitude of Merioneth Council, and the catalyst for this was George Barnes. An engineer based locally to Bala, he quickly saw the potential for a tourist railway, and

“Steam locos are envisaged as specially built ‘scalish’ models using the Ravenglass-pattern boiler as a basis...”

Above: Built in 1973, bo-bo diesel ‘Meirionnydd’ was indicative of a direction the BLR did not pursue.

Below: By the lake side, Meirionnydd and its train including one of the second batch of fully enclosed bogie carriages. Photo: Peter Johnson Collection

he convinced Tom Jones, chairman of the council’s finance committee and a Llanuwchllyn resident, of the wisdom of the plans. Rheilffordd Llyn Tegid Ltd was incorporated on 22nd May 1972, immediately making a little history as the first company of any type to be registered entirely in the Welsh language.

According to the *Liverpool Daily Post* construction of the 1ft 11½-inch gauge line officially started on 5th June 1972, though *NGN* claimed the first length was laid in Llanuwchllyn yard on Whit Monday, 29th May. Tom Jones, appointed chairman of the company, told the newspaper that the Welsh Tourist Board had made a grant of £18,750 to the project, which was expected to cost £75,000 in total. Initial capital of £10,000 had already been subscribed.

Again, news reports of the time reveal some curious diversions. It has always been stated that George Barnes intended to make use of redundant north Wales quarry equipment, though as we have seen in previous episodes of Hunslet Homes the prime time for obtaining such equipment in reasonable condition had already passed.

Scaled-down ambitions?

In fact, initially the BLR planners had adopted different aspirations. In the *NGN* of October 1971, it was reported that the BLR was to be operated as a miniature railway and would have been built to 15-inch gauge, as had briefly been considered by the pioneer preservationists of the Talylyn Railway two decades earlier, had the manager of the 15-inch gauge Ravenglass & Eskdale line not suggested that 2ft gauge would be better. Tom Davies told the *Liverpool Daily Post* that two steam engines would be built as “replicas of famous GWR engines scaled to the required size,” while the *NGN* report added; “Steam locos are envisaged as specially built ‘scalish’ models using the Ravenglass-pattern boiler as a

basis, the wider gauge giving improved stability and reduced axlebox wear over that experienced on 15-inch gauge.”

The report added that wagons (obtained from the Llechwedd and Oakeley slate quarries in Blaenau Ffestiniog) were stacked on Llanuwchllyn station platform and a Ruston diesel intended only for construction purposes was being overhauled by George Barnes and his son at Pen-y-Bont farm, close to the track bed. Ruston 432652, built in 1959 had previously been at Oakeley quarry – can any *NGW* reader reveal where it is today?

Llanuwchllyn was established as headquarters of the line, ballast laid between the two platforms to raise the track level (creating as a result a 1 in 72 falling gradient to the lakeside trackbed), and a run-round loop laid alongside the north platform, initially using 25 and 30lb rail and jubilee-style sharp turnouts on standard-gauge sleepers sawn in half. The GWR station building and signal box were pressed into service for storage and accommodation.

Once tracklaying had reached Pentrepiod, around 1.5 miles from Llanuwchllyn, the railway opened without any ceremony on 13th August 1972, the first trains consisting of the Ruston and two toastrack carriages built by Severn Lamb Ltd. At the temporary end of the line was only a siding just 10ft long, so passengers alighted onto the adjacent road, the loco ran into the siding and the carriages were pushed past it ready for the return journey.

The line was an immediate success with hourly trains through August – within eight days more than 1000 journeys had been made. Meanwhile extension work continued, former BR employees assisting, and tracklaying had reached Llangower, around halfway along the lake, by the start of the 1973 season.

Perhaps indicative of the miniature plans was the brand-new loco that had been ordered for the railway from Severn Lamb Ltd – bo-bo diesel ‘Meirionnydd’, styled to look like a scaled-down British Railways Western Class loco, arrived in early 1973. At six tons and 100hp it was at the time the largest engine produced by the Stratford-upon-Avon builder.

Steam arrives

In the same month the line gained its first steam power, having been hunting a suitable loco since opening. Considering George Barnes’s plans to use redundant quarry equipment and that today the BLR is renowned as a ‘quarry Hunslet retirement home’ with five in permanent residence, it’s

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Henschel Reisa class 0-4-0T ‘Helen Kathryn’ (28035/1948), owned by a member of the NGRS Chester group, was placed on loan to the BLR, but was soon found to be too heavy for the track, leaving Meirionnedd handling services alone. ‘Trixie’, an 0-4-0 built by Alan Keef Ltd, was also tried on the line in 1974 but found to be unsuitable and left to operate at Meirion Mill, 14 miles further south at Dinas Mawddwy.

The first quarry Hunslet to take up residence at the BLR was one that links all three of our Hunslet Homes stories – ‘Maid Marian’ arrived in March 1975, having travelled 30 miles south from the Llanberis Lake Railway, its owners the Maid Marian Locomotive Fund having finally found a satisfactory permanent home for their charge. Helen Kathryn went the other way, to Llanberis but the Maid soon had a familiar stablemate, joined by fellow former Dinorwic quarries Hunslet ‘Holy War’

(779/1902). Stored since 1968 in a container at the Quainton Road Railway Centre in Buckinghamshire and occasionally steamed, the loco was acquired by author the Reverend Alan Cliff in 1975 and given a home by George Barnes. After much work Holy War entered service alongside Maid Marian in 1979.

To house this stock a two-road loco shed and workshop was built at Llanuwchllyn in 1973, while that year also saw the setting up of the supporting Bala Lake Railway Society. By early 1975 the line was being extended again towards the former Bala Junction and the terminus it still uses today at Penybont, the entire 4½-mile run completed in the winter of 1975-76 – but by then there had been a setback.

Town turn-off

The intention had always been to terminate much closer to the town itself – Penybont was, and remains today, on the opposite side of the lake with a good walk required to reach the town centre facilities. But clearly »

Above right: The line arrives at Bala, terminus of the BLR to date.

Below: ‘Maid Marian’, seen here at Bala, became the first steam loco, and the first of several quarry Hunslets, to work regularly at the BLR, a task the loco is still doing today.





the council's pro-rail attitude seen earlier had dimmed somewhat in the intervening period. An application to extend across a new level crossing and round the end of the lake to a terminus adjacent to a car park, close to the Loch cafe on the Bala to Dolgellau road, was rejected in the face of more than 20 objections from local people and organisations.

The BLR persisted with its hopes of a final extension for a few years but finally abandoned them early in 1981. Thereafter it settled down to a mostly quiet life, running trains up and down the lake, making few headlines but completing subtle improvements to its facilities each year – new rakes of carriages were built by local firm Gwynedd Engineering from 1976, Llangower eventually gained a passing loop and second platform, while Llanuwchllyn station was extended and in 1979 gained a smart canopy, using supports made originally by the Cambrian Railways for its station at Pwllheli and later transferred to Aberdovey.

A significant event in 1985 was

the retirement of George Barnes after 15 years at the helm of the line. The pivotal figure in the BLR's creation and growth, he was immediately made president of the Bala Lake Railway Society.

In recent years the BLR has been making rather more headlines, under progressive management and strongly supported by the Bala Lake Railway Trust led by Julian Birley – a major figure in the standard gauge North Norfolk Railway, Julian first became involved with the BLR when he purchased quarry Hunslet 'Alice'.

The line has since played an ever larger part in Julian's life and in 2012 he repatriated Penrhyn Hunslet 'Winifred' (364/1885) from the USA – the loco had been stored in the Indianapolis Speedway museum since its export from Wales in 1965.

Extension back on

Julian has also been a driving force in the revival of the BLR's ambitions to extend into Bala itself – the Red

Above: The beginnings of the quarry Hunslet retirement home as 'Holy War' joins its Dinorwic quarry compatriot Maid Marian on the BLR. The other loco visible is the well-travelled Kerr Stuart Wren 0-4-OST 'Peter Pan', which ran at the line for a short time.

Below: Today's Bala Lake Railway – the Hunslets 'Winifred' and 'Alice' with plenty of steam on a thriving line. Photo: Andrew Charman

Dragon project launched in 2010. It's a measure of how local opinions have changed that people in Bala are strongly supportive of the plans and cannot wait to have their railway running into a brand-new station very close to where it was planned to terminate in the 1980s. As this month's news pages report, major grant aid is being secured and the plans are proceeding apace.

In the meantime the line has further improved its facilities including the restoration of more locomotives and the opening of a long-desired and much-admired heritage centre at Llanuwchllyn. Heading into its golden anniversary season, the Bala Lake Railway is in its most healthy position for many years, perhaps ever, and is a thriving 21st century Hunslet Home. **NGW**

More Information

■ The BLR has many plans to celebrate its 50 years, including an anniversary booklet, and we will of course be bringing you news on the celebrations as they are announced.

Full details of 2022 train services can be found on the line's website at <https://bala-lake-railway.co.uk> while details of the Red Dragon extension project are on the Trust website at www.balalakerailwaytrust.org.uk

Thanks to everyone who has contributed to this series. And watch out for a follow-up feature based on the many period photos of the three lines we have received since each article in the series was published. More are welcome!

