

AMPLEFORTH COLLEGE TRAMWAY

by

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While carrying out some research into the history of the railways of Ryedale and the Vale of Mowbray, I came across a narrow gauge line that, until then, was completely unknown to me.

The tramway symbol wiggled its way for about an inch and a half across an old one-inch Ordnance Survey map. The Ampleforth College Tramway (a title that it never formally enjoyed) commenced at Gilling station, on the Thirsk and Malton (T&M) branch of the North Eastern Railway. It ran parallel to the T&M, west from Gilling, and then struck off northwards uphill, to the College.

This tramway was not, however, the first. An earlier one served quarries that were opened in 1855, in the steep hillside above the College. The stone was used for the church and, later, for the new College itself. The Ampleforth Journal describes how, for the building of the latter:

"it was deemed advisable to lay down a tram-way. And of course there was an opening; it resembled the great opening of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway to the extent of there being an accident; it differed in there being no fatality. But the result might have been much more serious. The train was worked in the ordinary way, by descending and ascending waggons regulated by drum and brake; for the opening, a waggon loaded with about three tons of stone was brought to the head of the incline, when by some mismanagement it was started down the hill before the chain had been attached. With unchecked velocity the waggon left the rails, and bounding against a tree was wrecked: huge stones, rolling helter skelter across the high road, just escaped bombarding the church door. Fortunately the chief damage was to the waggon; and just as the first accident was also the last, it was perhaps a case of "felix culpa", insuring a greater caution. No doubt the position of the line was dangerous, as it crossed the public road; but whenever stone was lowered, there was a man on guard to see that no-one passed".

Of this tramway there is now no trace but the source of the stone is now known as the Monks' Wood.

Turning back to the later tramway, the T&M branch was opened as a single line in May 1853. There were stations serving both Gilling East and Ampleforth. In 1870 the Prior of Ampleforth, C.W. Prest, applied to the NER for passenger trains to be stopped at Ampleforth College Gate, and for a siding to be laid down there, in order to save the long cartage between Gilling Station and the College. The NER's Traffic Committee agreed to the principle of the station at College Gate, but subject to the College providing both a platelayer's cottage and an access road. Neither of these, it was stipulated, should be on NER land, in case the Company wished to double its line at some time in the future. It is clear from the Committee minute that it was for the College to make the necessary arrangements with the landowner, Mr. Fairfax of Coxwold, for the land and road.

The station was never built. The reason is not completely clear, some 115 years later, but it appears that neither the College nor Mr. Fairfax were keen on a public road crossing the College playing fields. The NER being unwilling to

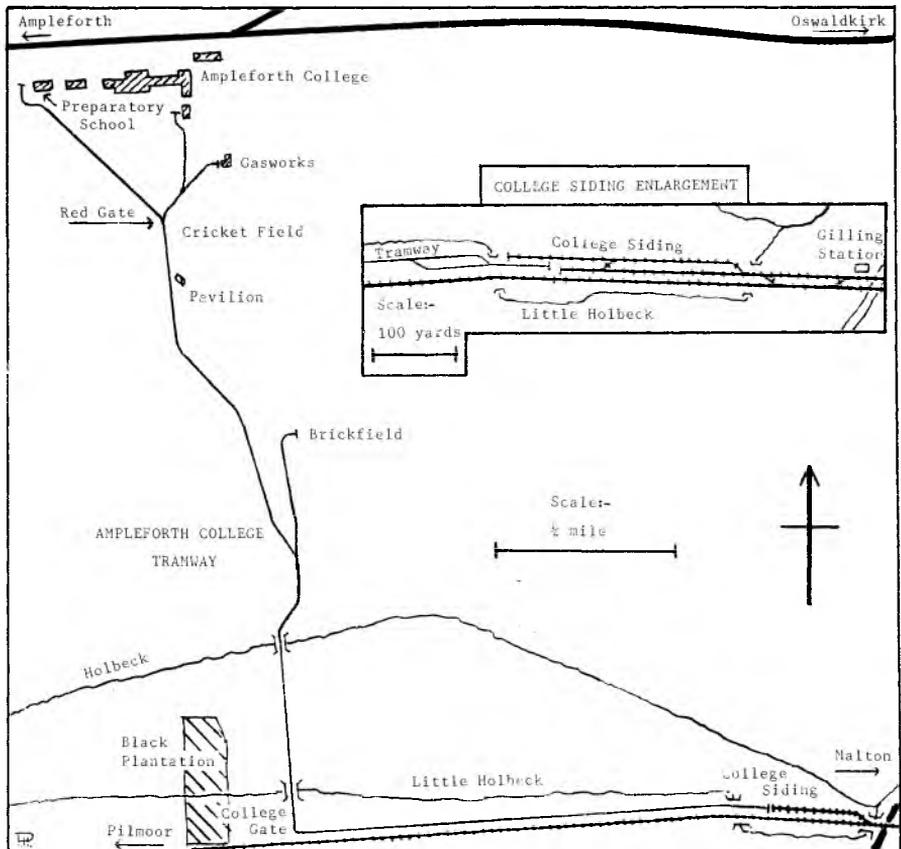
have the road in its property, impasse seems to have been reached.

The Traffic Committee was of the opinion that the request for a siding should be declined, mainly on the ground that an additional opening in the main line was undesirable.

In the 1890s the College started to produce its own gas, consuming about 500 tons of coal per annum in its own gasworks. About 200 tons of goods were also sent to the College annually and, periodically, building materials too. Even the conveyance of visitors was seen as a probable use of the tramway that was now proposed.

Another approach to the NER was made in 1893. Mr. George Gibb had been appointed General Manager of the NER in 1891 and was sympathetic to the idea of a tramway being laid from Gilling station to the College. An agreement was signed on 3 August 1895. It provided for the College to lay the tramway at its own cost and to pay the NER an annual rent of £5 for the use of the Company's land.

At Gilling station, unlike other stations on the line, not only was there a goods yard, with crane, warehouse and sidings, but a separate pair of sidings at



MAP OF AMPLEFORTH COLLEGE TRAMWAY

the opposite end of the station level crossing. This was known as the “College Siding”. The NER agreed to extend the College Siding at its own cost, for £39.

The track was to be laid along the edge of the T&M for 1,000 yards west from Gilling station, and then to turn away and climb the hill to the College. Under the agreement the College had to provide a fence on each side of the tramway, where it was on NER land, and a substantial gate at the point where it diverged. This stipulation later provided a bone of contention between the NER and the College.

The divergence was at College Gate, near Park House. Here the tramway turned to the north and began to climb up the hillside, initially at a fairly gentle gradient but more steeply as it approached the College. For the first section, between College Gate and the Little Holbeck, a swathe of land ten feet wide was rented from Mr. Wilson of Grimstone Manor, for 50 years at £10 per annum.

College records show that work on laying the tramway started in May 1894, more than a year before the agreement with the NER was signed. Despite delays due to bad weather, it was in full working order up to the gasworks, by Christmas that year. It seems that the agreement with the NER was to formalise an arrangement that had already been acted upon.

The tramway was laid by a man — or a firm — called White: the identity is a mystery. Mr. White was paid a total of £685 12s 10d (£685.64) for the work. Other costs were:

	£	s	d	
Wages	253	3	2	(£253.16)
Law expenses	4	9	11	(£4.50)
Wages to Mr. Lowry	9	18	10	(£9.94)
Leading	10	15	0	(£10.75)
Sleepers	35	2	6	(£35.12)
Turntable	5	16	0	(£5.80)
Fencing	12	16	0	(£12.80)
Tip wagons	36	6	6	(£36.32)
Bogie wheels	10	14	3	(£10.71)
NER law expenses	4	4	0	(£4.20)
NER foreman	1	0	0	(£1.00)
Lengthening girders	2	9	7	(£2.49)
TOTAL, including Mr. White	1,072	8	7	(£1,072.43)

The term “leading” is taken to refer to leading horses, presumably wages to the men who actually had to lead the horses used for moving materials. The turntable was bought from a Mr. Hudson.

There were six tip wagons, bought from Alexander Penney and Sons, Engineers, of London. These wagons were simple V-section skips with round-cornered frames. The identity of the builder of the wagons is not recorded.

The tramway was three feet in gauge, and built using Decauville track. The rails were fixed to steel sleepers, and used in units, or panels, of track. Additional wooden sleepers were also used, as indicated by the inclusion of ‘sleepers’ in the list of items tabulated above, some of which were from the NER.

From College Siding, at Gilling station, the tramway ran parallel to, and on

the north side of, the T&M line, on a rising gradient of 1 in 308, changing to 271. At College Gate it turned abruptly away from the main line, through the required gate. It crossed Little Holbeck and Holbeck and began to climb away from the valley. No records exist of the gradient but it was gentle enough for one horse to pull three loaded wagons of coal. About 1,100 yards from College Gate there was the Red Gate, where the gradient steepened for the final approach to the gasworks.

At Gilling College Siding goods could be transhipped direct from the larger wagons to the smaller using the siding specially extended by the NER. The tramway was single at College Siding but there was an 80 feet double section a short distance to the west, near a bridge over Little Holbeck. The remainder of the tramway was a single line.

At the gasworks the rail layout is now unknown, but it is said that there was a turntable there, no doubt the one supplied by Mr. Hudson, for the movement of wagons to the two or three sidings in the gasworks yard. The site of the gasworks later became hard tennis courts.

The tramway was in full use in 1895, serving both the gasworks and the building of the new monastery. The Ampleforth Journal of December 1895 recorded that:

"The basement and ground floor (of the new monastery) are all but completed The tramway has been prolonged to the works and the heavy goods can be sent up on trucks from the station. A winch attached to the steam-engine that drives the mortar-mill saves the horses the cruel task of dragging the waggons up the hill-side. A wire rope will do the hauling from the cricket ground to the new building."

In April 1896, the Journal reported that:

"The new Monastery is more than half completed The tramway to the station is in constant and successful use, and the brickfield is untiring and satisfactory in its production."

A short branch led to the brickworks, with a junction between College Gate and Red Gate. Even today the field is known as "the brickfields". This branch was closed and removed before 1914.

In 1896 a dispute arose with the NER. Under the terms of the agreement the College had erected the required fence between the tramway and the T&M line. In 1896, the NER sent an account for £57 for maintaining the outer fence, that separated the tramway from Mr. Wilson's neighbouring field. A pained correspondence between Father F.A. Crow, College Procurator, and the NER took place, in which the salient point was:

"The inducement to use your land instead of Mr. Wilson's was to save fencing on both sides of the tramway. If we laid down the tramway on Mr. Wilson's land it was stated that we should be required to erect fences on both sides of the line. By using your land it was understood that we should be responsible for the erection of only one fence This was done by us, while the Railway Company erected the fence on the boundary of their property. The idea naturally never occurred to us that the Company's fence would be charged to us, and not until a year and a half after the erection of the fence was any charge or account sent to the College for such fence"

Father Crow ended with the pointed comment:

"I am anxious that this letter should not be looked at in any way as a charge against Mr. Copperthwaite or any of the Company's servants Mr. Copperthwaite's chief difficulty seems to be of dealing with the correction of the Company's accounts"

Mr. Copperthwaite was the former Chairman of the Malton and Driffield Junction Railway, by then a director of the NER. The upshot was that the College agreed to pay £15 to discharge the account.

During the early years of the present century two College employees played a key role in the life of the tramway: Bill Preston and Jim Wright. Bill Preston was in charge of the gasworks, transferring the coal from the wagons into the gashouse. He had a reputation for being very strong. There were frequent derailments on the tramway which he dealt with single-handed. One of the monks recalls that derailments would happen while boys were being carried: "Bill Preston was as strong as a lion. The thing would come off the rails but, without our getting out, he'd heave it back on again. This fellow would also pick up a red hot coal — at the black end — and light his pipe with it."

Bill Preston's counterpart, in charge of hauling the coal up from the station, was Jim Wright. Horses were the main form of haulage, except when a contractor for one of the building projects brought in a petrol-driven locomotive. College coal traffic was horse-drawn until the final years when a locomotive was acquired. Two horses were used, working in tandem. One would have been sufficient for the haul from Gilling station to the Red Gate but the final climb up to the gasworks demanded two. They hauled three wagons, walking up the inside of the track.

Jack Watson remembers that: "It was a rotten job for the horses, not because it was steep but because a lot of the sleepers were metal, not wood, and they used to jar their hooves if they caught them. It wasn't good going for the horses unless they were on a length that had wooden sleepers. Every now and then they would take cinders down and fill up the middle of the track, for the horses to walk on." Between College Siding and College Gate, "for the horses it was miserable when a main line train was coming past. They were just the width of a rail away."

There was a shaft horse and a trace horse. Shafts were used so that, going down the hill, a horse could control the wagons' descent. On each end of a wagon there was a ball; like the modern caravan, a socket on the shafts fitted over the ball. Jack Watson again: "Jim Wright had a short board about 18 inches long. It fitted in between two wagons and he used to ride on that. He didn't have to hold the reins of the horses because they did it automatically. If he got a fresh horse he'd have to ride it, but after it had been on the job a month it knew the route. They knew where they were going."

Each day the horses went down to the station twice in the morning and once in the afternoon. In the afternoon the gasworks yard was cleared up. There was no signalling and, if horses were seen going down to College Siding, any contractor that was also using the line had to wait until they returned. However it was possible to go down to the station in front of the horses and use the short double track section there to keep out of the way.

None of the wagons had brakes. A sprag, shoved through the holes in a wheel, was used to stop it from turning, either in the gasworks yard or as a train was going down the hill. A skid was also used. Not surprisingly this crude method of braking was not always successful. There are no records of the number of runaway wagons but evidently such occurrences were not unusual, as witness the following gleeful account from the Ampleforth Journal of July 1909:

"Three times this term has the gate near the old cricket ground (Red Gate) been completely shattered by runaway trucks. On one occasion only has the whole school witnessed this thrilling sight — for such it really was. A large iron truck heavily laden was seen bearing

down at full speed upon the closed gate. The momentary excitement turned to entire surprise when it passed through the five bars and crossbars as though it had encountered no obstacle. It was as well for the horses approaching from Gilling with more trucks, that it soon left the lines and rolled over into Mr. Perry's hayfield. The spectacle was quite entertaining and well worth a gate. History is but repeating itself, for it is narrated that the frequent occurrence of this event, and the short lives of the gates at this spot when the new Monastery was being built, were the source of merry-making to the small boys whose perennial pleasure is the discussion of the procuratorial purse".

Jack Watson recalls how, on another occasion, "three wagons got away from the gashouse yard. Someone let them get away full of coal. They tipped over when they got to the first corner at the cricket field, where the line turned left before turning to the right again towards the beck. They tipped over and there was coal scattered all over. When wagons ran away it was no good rushing after them."

Not all runaways were accidental, however. Young lads from the valley would date the girls who worked at the College as maids. One of them relates how "once we all got into a truck and let it go. We got down to the beck — Holbeck — and instead of taking the turn there, we went straight on. We were going too quickly and were all thrown into the beck."

The steepness of the hill down to the Red Gate was attractive, not only to the boys who watched the "thrilling sight" of a runaway wagon or two, but to those who enjoyed winter sports. F.M.D. Stanton recalls that "our ambition used to be sledging: if you could get through the gasworks gate there was a depression below that, which was always full of water and ice. If you got onto the tracks and if the Red Gate was open, you could sledge right down the track on the inside."

Several references have been made to contractors. During these years a succession of building projects was being undertaken: in the 1890s the new monastery, consecrated in 1899; from 1914 the Preparatory School (now the Junior House), completed in 1916; and, in the early 1920s, a new Abbey.

In 1914 work started on the new Preparatory School. Because the building site was at the extreme west end of the College complex, some distance from the gasworks, it was decided to lay a branch. This diverged from the Red Gate and ran in a straight line towards the site. The contractor was Messrs. Lumsden, of Newcastle. A petrol engine was brought in, and the firm's own wagons. Nothing is known of this locomotive, which was removed upon the completion of the work. When work on the new Abbey started in the 1920s, the contractors for this work again brought in a locomotive.

It is known that the College used a locomotive during the early 1920s; this is recalled by several contemporaries. There are no recollections, however, of the locomotive brought in by the contractor for the Abbey. It is possible that they were one and the same, and that, upon the completion of the building work, the College bought the locomotive that would otherwise have been removed. Some doubt exists and it has not been possible to establish the identity of the builder of either machine. Descriptions agree that the College locomotive had a transverse engine and that the driver was seated sideways. F.M.D. Stanton recalls it well: "The College locomotive was flat with very curved corners. There was a very large radiator with expanded metal across the front. The back was cowed down, covering the fan. The engine was transverse and the driver sat sideways. There may have been a platform at the back; the edge of the chassis was H-section. The wheels were very small, of cast iron and had holes in them."

Mr. Stanton also recalls, apropos of the building work that took place at this time, that: "When they started to build the new church in the 1920s they used the petrol-driven engine for carting stone and stuff up to the west end of the Preparatory School, where there was a builder's dump. In front of the Preparatory School there were several terraces: at the bottom there was the track that came up from the Red Gate to the dump. There was another railway track along the top of the terrace from the builders' dump to the new church."

Mention has been made of passengers on the tramway, either stealing rides or being warned off by Jim Wright. As has been mentioned, at the start of this article, carriage of passengers was one of the uses envisaged when the tramway was first proposed, and this was normal for some years. There was even a special passenger wagon, which Jack Watson remembers well: "The College had a great long wagon that used to take the boys to Gilling station sometimes. It was more like an open charabanc with railway wheels. It would have been made specially for the job. About 20 boys would go in this vehicle, but there were only about 100 at the College then." But wagons were also used, as related by Father Ainscough: "We used the tramway for the transference of boys to Gilling station. The youngsters certainly went this way. There was a wagon for travelling in and they also went in the metal trucks; they put sacks in to stop all the coal dust getting on their bottoms."

An article in the Ampleforth Journal of January 1915, while the Preparatory School was being built, illustrates the wry sense of humour of the writer, the state of the tramway at the time and the consequence for a group of hapless passengers:

"The accidental discovery (has been made), by one of the JOURNAL committee, of a speech in verse on the nationalisation of railways, in which the youthful poetaster, after advocating their nationalisation, turns — apparently with some trepidation — to the light railway from Gilling, which does such sterling service to the cause of building at Ampleforth.

'Now I wonder if I dare
To say this railway needs repair,
Or to suggest it's in decay!
For what would then the owners say?
But if the government would only
Nationalise this railway lonely,
Oh! Far better would these trucks be
Which convey both you and me.

"We hasten to add that the general sentiment is one that would be enthusiastically re-echoed and endorsed by the members of the 12th Reserve Cavalry Regiment, who on their return journey by 'this lonely railway' found themselves precipitated in the dark into the hinterland of the 'rigger' field. We offer them our apologies and sympathy."

In F.M.D. Stanton's time, however, "when I was there in the early 1920s, the tramway was a goods line and it was absolutely forbidden to have anything to do with it." Jack Watson: "The boys wouldn't ride in the wagons, officially. They would get a ride if they could, but Jim Wright was a bit of a martinet and he would have shifted them! If anything had happened he would have been blamed."

This article has dwelt mainly on the use of the tramway by both the College and the various contractors for hauling coal, building materials and people. At the time that all this took place, the present College playing fields did not all exist. Instead the sloping land was a series of undulating fields, including "Mr. Perry's hayfield", mentioned earlier. As the school expanded more playing

fields became necessary and the tramway took on another role.

The fields had to be levelled. Branches were thrown out to different parts of the grounds and soil was loaded into skips and moved to other parts. The Decauville nature of the track certainly helped in this work but, as can be seen from the accompanying illustrations, extra wooden sleepers were also used, as was a turntable. The photographic evidence does not indicate whether the branches were connected to the main line, but this is probable. There is no record of these branches, other than to look today at the level playing fields on the gently sloping hillside and to acknowledge the role played by the tramway.

On Armistice Day 1919 the tramway was the scene, but not the cause, of an unusual mishap. Two ex-College members of the Royal Flying Corps flew in, in a two-seater bi-plane. In those days, it seems, the pilots had more freedom than one can now reasonably expect the R.A.F. to give. When they came to take off disaster struck: the aeroplane crashed on the east side of the cricket field 100 yards away from the tramway. Both men fortunately were unhurt. The next day two more two-seaters were flown in to fly the two stranded men out. When one of these was landing or taking off, it collided with the railings surrounding the cricket field, crashed and broke its back, finishing up on its nose next to the tramway.

The date of closure of the tramway is not recorded. Formally it was when the agreement with the Railway Company — by this time the LNER — was terminated, on 25 April 1929. However, it fell out of use some years before. The College switched to electric lighting in 1923 and, later, the gasworks was closed. The track was scrapped, except for some sections and a few wagons that were transferred to Gilling Castle, by this time used by the College as its preparatory school. All the wagons and the locomotive have now completely disappeared, although it was possible to see the odd pair of wheels, or wagon body, until recent years. Pieces of rail remain, mainly down by Holbeck.

The section alongside the T&M railway is now indistinguishable from the main line itself, closed in 1964 and lifted a year later. From College Gate up the hill to the College itself, the route of the tramway is now used as an unmade road. The section from the Red Gate (which itself is no more) to the gasworks is just, but only just, visible as a relatively level section among the surrounding undulations. For many years the route of the branch to the Preparatory School was visible, as a long gash extending north-westwards from the Red Gate. No doubt, in the right conditions, it still is.

That the tramway served a useful purpose for 30 years is beyond doubt. Now remembered only by older members of the Community and former College pupils, its existence has to be acknowledged and recorded before it slips into legend and half-remembered fact.

The Author asks for any reader who has memories of using the Thirsk and Malton Railway to write to him at 14 Alwquire Grove, York YO3 6RT. He is currently writing the history of the line.