Lines in Lancashire

LINES IN LANCASHIRE

Although Liverpool obtained its charter in 1207, it was only much later that it became large and wealthy. When the first Queen Elizabeth came to the throne the population was still no more than about 500. Over the following century the port expanded, developing both coastal and international traffic and largely replacing Chester as a port for Ireland, and before the end of the seventeenth century Liverpool was trading with the West Indies. Completion of a new enclosed dock in 1715 stimulated rapid further growth. Liverpool had a substantial interest in the slave trade until 1807, its ships being said to account for more than 40% of the European slave trade from Africa to North America and the Caribbean. "Triangular trade" saw manufactured goods taken from Liverpool to West Africa to be exchanged for slaves. The slaves were carried across the Atlantic – the infamous "Middle Passage" – and traded for sugar and rum, tobacco and raw cotton. These goods came back to Liverpool.

Manchester was not enfranchised until the Reform Act of 1832, but the town has a very long history indeed, and unlike Liverpool it does receive a mention in the Domesday Book. The cotton industry that gave it its "Cottonopolis" nickname developed in Tudor times, and by the start of the nineteenth century Manchester lay at the centre of a cluster of towns where cotton was processed, all of them relying on imported raw material. Manchester was linked to its neighbours – and further afield to Yorkshire, the Midlands, and Liverpool – by a network of canals. It looked principally to Liverpool for the import of the raw cotton and other raw materials it needed and for the worldwide export of its finished goods. Both towns had populations of some 55,000 at the start of the last decade of the eighteenth century and both saw the figure more than double over the next thirty years. As for that cotton trade between them, in 1792 just 503 bags of raw cotton reached Liverpool from the United States of America; in 1823, by which time a railway was actively being planned, the figure was 412,000.

Liverpool and Manchester needed each other, and they needed good transport links. By the end of the eighteenth century the roads between the towns – never particularly good – had become hopelessly overcrowded and really could not cope with the traffic on offer. An Act for the Mersey & Irwell Navigation Company in 1720, authorising improvements which dramatically reduced the amount of time needed for the journey by water between the two towns, had launched the expansion and improvement of waterway facilities. In 1791 the Bridgewater Canal was opened. Extended later west to Runcorn Gap, this gave another Liverpool–Manchester route. During the nineteenth century, four railway routes were created, and then, in one of the boldest strokes of Victorian engineering, the inland city of Manchester was turned into a port for ocean-going vessels by the building of the Manchester Ship Canal. The twentieth century saw the turn of the roads, with the construction in the 1930s of the East Lancs Road and then forty years later of the M62.

The Liverpool & Manchester Railway

The first survey for a Liverpool to Manchester railway was made in 1821 and 1822 by William James, who chose a route very similar to that eventually built. Joseph Sandars, a Quaker partner in a firm of corn merchants, was the man responsible for drumming up support for the idea and for setting up committees in both towns to press the case for a railway. The summer of 1822 saw the formation of a provisional committee, and this committee on 20 May 1824 passed a resolution calling for the creation of a joint-stock company named the Liverpool & Manchester Railway Company. The construction and opening of the railway would be financed by the issue of 3,000 shares of £100 each. George Stephenson was named the engineer. Plans were to be developed to be taken to parliament in the 1825 session. Stephenson came up with a line significantly to the north of that proposed by James, crossing the estates of the Earls of Sefton and Derby. Both of these peers proved fierce opponents of the railway.

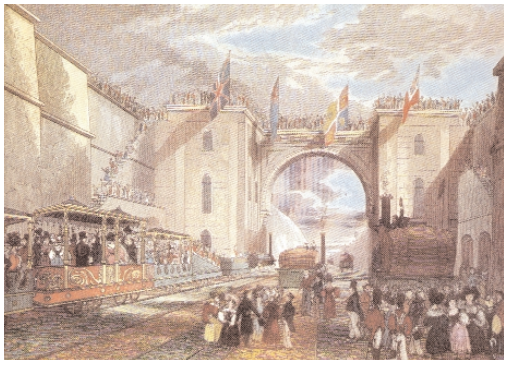
In parliament there was strong opposition, and under examination Stephenson proved not to be master of the detail of his plans. The promoters withdrew their Bill rather than see it thrown out, but they pressed on with their project. (In passing, it is worth noting that the engineering case for the opposition in parliament was put by William Cubitt, later to be one of the engineers to the Great

Northern Railway, which is now the southern end of the East Coast Main Line.) The Liverpool & Manchester appointed new engineers, choosing John and George Rennie. The Rennies employed C B Vignoles as their principal surveyor, and the new team set about their work energetically, knowing that they were working to a very tight time-scale. A new line was set out, taking essentially the same direct course between the two towns that James had chosen earlier. This was the line eventually built, with its dramatic entry into Liverpool. Everything was ready in time, and a Bill went to parliament for the 1826 session. The Bill passed through all its stages, and the Liverpool & Manchester Railway obtained its Act on 5 May 1826.

The directors of the newly-constituted company appointed George Stephenson as their engineer. The Rennies left the scene, and J U Rastrick did not come into the picture even though his name had been mentioned. The position of Vignoles was never made completely clear, and he left eighteen months later, not an entirely happy man. Stephenson brought in three of his pupils, Joseph Locke, William Allcard, and John Dixon, as well as Thomas Gooch. (It is to be noted that the recital of the names of the engineers involved with the Liverpool & Manchester project is a roll-call of some of the most important figures of the early main-line railway age.) Construction began, with particular stress on the three biggest works: the tunnels in Liverpool, the Olive Mount Cutting, and the crossing of Chat Moss. George Stephenson may not have been master of the detail of his plans before parliament, but he proved outstanding in running the construction of the line, and all went smoothly.

The company obtained further Acts in 1827, 1828, and 1829. The last of these was particularly interesting, for as well as allowing the line to be taken right into Manchester it authorised £127,500 to be raised for the establishment of a Carrying Department with all the necessary equipment. As we have seen, the early railway legislation was modelled on canal legislation, and a feature of this was that the canal company was seen as the provider of an infrastructure on which others would offer carrying services. To allow the infrastructure-owner to exploit the infrastructure for himself was a major step towards the development of the railway as a vertically-integrated transport undertaking.

In October 1829, as the construction works approached their end, the directors staged the Rainhill Trials, in which, as everyone knows, Stephenson's *Rocket* won the £500 prize. The question of motive power on the line had been open, but it was now clear that locomotives were the way forward. On 15 September 1830 the Liverpool & Manchester Railway was opened – and the first notable fatal accident of the railway age occurred, when *Rocket*, driven by Joseph Locke, ran down William Huskisson at Parkside when he foolishly stepped into its path. The next day there was excursion traffic on the line, and then on 17 September a full commercial passenger service began. The Liverpool & Manchester Railway was in business. Its Manchester terminus in Liverpool Road still exists, the world's oldest passenger station.



A replica of 'Rocket' at The National Museum, York.

The Warrington & Newton Railway

Why does an account of the origins of the West Coast Main Line include details of the west–east Liverpool & Manchester line? Because the Lancashire section of the West Coast line was built up piecemeal and includes two branches from the Liverpool & Manchester, one south and one north, which were linked by running over a short section of that line itself. There were three early branches. The first was the Kenyon & Leigh Junction Railway. Authorised in 1829 and opened in 1831, this joined the old Bolton & Leigh Railway and thus gave through rail communication with Bolton. It does not figure in the West Coast story. However, on the same day in 1829 the Warrington & Newton Railway also obtained its Act, with Robert Stephenson as the engineer. The line was also opened in 1831, on 25 July. As we have seen, this line was absorbed into the Grand Junction Railway in mid-1835 in the first take-over of one railway company by another. It duly became a part of Britain's first trunk railway when the line from Birmingham was opened in 1837. It is interesting to note that the original shareholders in the Warrington & Newton company included Joseph Sandars, George Stephenson, Joseph Locke, Benjamin Hick – and Edward Pease, perhaps better known for his involvement with the Stockton & Darlington company.

An early view of Warrington.

Wigan Branch Railway

A year after the Warrington & Newton Railway began to carry traffic the Wigan Branch Railway was opened. This was another short line projected mainly by local interests: coal-owners in the area wanted better facilities for the conveyance of their products towards Liverpool and Manchester than the canals were offering. However, the commercial interests in Liverpool involved in the Liverpool & Manchester Railway were amongst the shareholders in this small company, and they quickly managed to take control of the board. An Act was obtained in the 1830 session. The engineer was C B Vignoles, and after two years' construction the new line was opened on 3 September 1832, from a junction at Parkside, a little to the east of the original station and facing towards Manchester, to Wigan. When their railway was nearly complete, the proprietors approached the Liverpool & Manchester to see if that company would work it. Terms were agreed, so here too there was a first: the first working arrangement between two railway companies. When it joined the Preston & Wigan Railway on 22 May 1834 to form the North Union Railway the Wigan Branch line was involved in the first-ever railway amalgamation. And on the engineering side this is said to have been the first company to establish the "six-foot" between the two running lines.

Preston & Wigan Railway

The Preston & Wigan Railway was early on the parliamentary scene, obtaining its Act in 1831. However, in a story that was to be echoed many times in many parts of the country over the years to come there was a shortage of money to carry the plans into effect. Eventually, a way forward was found: the company was amalgamated with the Wigan Branch Railway. Perhaps this was not so surprising, as there were already directors common to both boards and the two companies employed the same man as secretary! A month later Vignoles was appointed engineer. The line was eventually opened on 31 October 1838.

Preston Station in 2002.

Lancaster & Preston Junction Railway

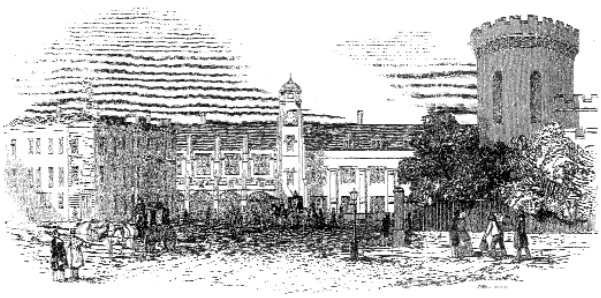
The route north out of Preston in steam days (c.1950).

A piece in Lancaster's local newspaper, the *Lancaster Gazette*, in the autumn of 1832 seems to have been the first public suggestion that there could be merit in a rail link with Preston. However, it was Joseph Locke's ideas for a railway from Preston to Glasgow, developed in late 1835, that led to movement. Promoted by Lancaster interests, authorised in 1837, and engineered by Locke, the Lancaster & Preston Junction Railway was opened on 26 June 1840. Of the five trains daily in each direction, two conveyed through coaches to and from London, 240 miles away. In Preston the North Union company and the Lancaster & Preston company managed to squabble with each other over station access and make life difficult for their passengers! The parallel Lancaster Canal competed hard for traffic, and the combination of an excellent waterway service, the problems with the North Union, and less traffic in total than expected made life very difficult for the Lancaster & Preston. In a most unusual development, the railway company was leased in 1842 to the canal company, which undertook both not to oppose the making of a line from Lancaster to Carlisle and also to pay an increased rental if such a line should be built within 21 years.

Later development of the trunk line

The original connection of the Warrington & Newton line with the Liverpool & Manchester faced towards Liverpool, but an eastern curve was opened when the Grand Junction line from Birmingham was brought into use, thus allowing through running from the south to Manchester as well as to Liverpool. Traffic for locations further north, however, had to reverse at the junction at Parkside, for a planned western curve had not been built. On 1 January 1847 the infant London & North Western Railway, formed just the previous summer, opened such a curve – which was planned mainly to expedite the working of traffic between Wigan and Liverpool rather than improve long-distance services between the south and the north. But less than a month earlier the railway had reached Carlisle, and the Caledonian main line from the Border City on to Edinburgh and Glasgow was very much under construction. Far from being just a short curve to speed the Liverpool–Wigan trains, this little piece of line was very soon to become the route of the first through Anglo-Scottish services.

There were to be only two more significant changes to the string of short lines that make up the West Coast Main Line through Lancashire. On 1 August 1864 a short piece of new line was opened leaving the Warrington & Newton line at Winwick, diving beneath the Liverpool & Manchester line, and joining the Wigan Branch at Golborne, thus allowing the majority of trains on the north–south main line to avoid having to use any part of the east–west main line. Thirty years later, just south of Warrington, a deviation line was built to take the railway high over the newly-built Manchester Ship Canal. Otherwise there have been no changes, and the railway still shews in its layout all the signs of the piecemeal way in which it came into existence. Even the mileposts betray the fragmentation! As far as Golborne Junction they read from a zero-point at London Euston. From Golborne to Preston they read from a zero at Parkside West Junction. From Preston to Lancaster the zero is Preston. And then yet another sequence begins, to lead on from Lancaster to Carlisle ...



The central Station, Court-Square, Carlisle. Illustrated London News 1847

Crossing the River Mersey at Runcorn.

Runcorn Bridge in steam days.

Shortening the route to Liverpool

As we have seen, the Liverpool-orientated promoters of the Grand Junction Railway did consider a more direct route from Hartford to Liverpool which would have involved a crossing of the Mersey at Runcorn Gap, but in the end they settled for their take-over of the Warrington & Newton Railway which gave them a connection roughly to the mid-point of the Liverpool & Manchester line and thus the ability to serve both great Lancashire towns reasonably, albeit with a route that was rather indirect in both cases. As explained below, within five years Manchester trains had ceased using the indirect route and were on the Crewe–Manchester line that they have been using ever since. Liverpool's situation was more difficult, for any shorter route was going to require a major river-bridge. A quarter of a century later, in the 1860s, the London & North Western Railway finally grasped the nettle and built its Aston & Ditton line. This short new railway, opened for passenger traffic on 1 April 1869, ran from the location we now know as Weaver Junction to Ditton Junction, where it met lines that provided a route to Edge Hill, on the old line. The $7^{1}/_{2}$-mile line saved almost exactly the same distance, reducing Crewe to Liverpool from 43.8 miles to 35.65 miles.

Of the opening of this line a long-standing senior employee of the London & North Western, G P Neele, writes: "Two important openings took place in April, one of which gave rise to many train schemes before finally coming into operation. This was the establishment of the new route to Liverpool across the River Mersey by the noble bridge which ranks as one of Mr. Baker's masterpieces. The distance between London and Liverpool was considerably lessened, but the fares were not touched as a "pontage" allowance of equal distance was authorized by Parliament. All the trains between Crewe and Liverpool were affected by the opening, which while improving the train service to and from Liverpool and the South, had the effect of placing Warrington on the North route irrespective of the Liverpool service." (The "pontage" allowance permitted the owning company to charge the fourteen chains actual distance over the Runcorn high-level bridge as nine miles under the distance-based tariff-structure then universally in use, and it was confirmed at Grouping by the Railways Act 1921.) Neele continues, "The up line from Liverpool to the South, at Birds Wood Junction, was carried over the main North-Western Line by an overhead line, avoiding all intersection of trains there—the first instance of the system on the London and North-Western, though subsequently adopted at Rugby, Edge Hill, and other places in numerous instances, sometimes as "flying" junctions and sometimes as "burrowing" junctions." It will often be seen reported that this was the first British non-conflicting junction (nowadays often called "grade-separated junction"). It certainly seems to have been amongst the earliest, though it was probably not actually the first.