



# THE FULL HISTORY



## INTRODUCTION

Today's East Lancashire Railway, (ELR), is a heritage railway operating over two contrasting sections of line. Both were originally built in the 19th century to serve separate routes, each of which passed through the important mill town of Bury. The two routes were promoted by different companies, each with the objective of securing traffic for differing destinations. It was not until 1859 that amalgamation of both companies led to both routes being operated by the same successive companies until final closure in the early 1970s.

Passenger services were an important part of early railways, with local stopping services, services to Manchester and many other principal towns in the north, and of course the special Wakes Week services which transported a whole town's workforce to seaside holiday resorts, which had developed thanks to the influence of the railways. It was however the benefits to industry that enabled promoters to raise the necessary funding to build their railways. Quarry, mine and mill owners were keen to see railways serve their locality as the arrival of the railway improved both the supply of raw materials and the despatch of finished materials and goods.

The opening of railways immediately led to a significant increase in the speed of transport in Britain. The ever expanding railway network also quickly covered more of the country than the canal network which it superseded. As time progressed, locomotives and rolling stock improved in design enabling faster and heavier trains to carry more and more goods and passengers.

## THE NORTH – SOUTH ROUTE

In 1844 the Manchester, Bury and Rossendale Railway promoted the north-south route, leaving the Manchester to Bolton line at Clifton Junction and running via Radcliffe before reaching Bury, some 6 miles to the north. The line continued north along the Irwell Valley, passing through the villages of Summerseat and Ramsbottom before entering Rossendale and reaching Rawtenstall via Ewood Bridge. Before it had even opened in 1846 the line had become part of the original East Lancashire Railway from which today's heritage railway gets its name. An "extension line" from Stubbins Junction (just north of Ramsbottom) to Accrington opened in 1848 whilst the Rossendale branch was extended in stages, eventually reaching Bacup in 1852.

## THE EAST – WEST ROUTE

The first section of the east-west route opened in 1841 as a branch of the Manchester and Leeds Railway from Blue Pitts south of Castleton to Heywood but it was not until May 1848 that the line was extended to Bury. In November 1848 it reached Bolton, and on to Liverpool via Wigan, but not before the Manchester and Leeds Railway had in 1847, amalgamated with various other railways on both sides of the Pennines, to become the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway.

Eventually in 1859 the East Lancashire Railway also amalgamated with the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway after only 13 years of existence. It is ironic that the present ELR has been in existence over three times longer than the original company!

## LANCASHIRE & YORKSHIRE RAILWAYS TO BRITISH RAILWAY

The Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway fared better, lasting a further 63 years until it merged with the London and North Western Railway in 1922. A year later the Grouping took place which was to create "The Big Four" railway companies, with the London and North Western Railway becoming part of the London Midland and Scottish Railway, just twelve months later. The London Midland and Scottish Railway along with the other "Big Four", the Southern, Great Western and London North Eastern Railways remained in existence for twenty five years, until in 1948, nationalisation amalgamated them to form British Railways, (BR).

The early years of British Railways saw rail services paying their way but by 1950 they had slipped into the red and as the 1950s wore on increased competition from road transport led to ever greater operating losses. An early casualty

on 5th May 1952 was the former Bury and Tottington District Railway which had opened in 1882 and been absorbed into the Lancashire & Yorkshire Railway in 1888. Only 3¾ miles long this line to Holcombe Brook left the Bury to Ramsbottom route at Tottington Junction.

## **THE BR MODERNISATION PLAN**

In 1945, the railways had emerged from the Second World War, with high traffic levels, but in run down condition. They were able to pay their way, because road transport facilities were still limited. By 1952 however, as lorries, buses and the motor car began to make serious inroads into British Railways' traffic, urgent action had to be taken in an attempt to make the railways profitable once again.

In 1955, a modernisation plan was embarked on in the hope that the substitution of electric and diesel haulage for steam, automation of marshalling yards, mechanisation of goods depots and re-signalling would reduce costs and increase traffic. This resulted in the withdrawal of steam hauled trains on the Manchester Victoria via Moston and Heywood to Bacup service with the introduction of Metro Cammell Diesel Multiple Units in 1955.

By 1960, however, it was apparent that the effects of modernisation were neither so rapid nor as pronounced as had been forecast, and that the downward trend in some categories of railway traffic would continue whilst operating losses were likely to go on increasing unless radical changes were made.

## **OH DR, BEECHING!**

Then chairman of the British Transport Commission, Dr. Richard Beeching published his infamous "Beeching Report" or to give it its correct title, "The Re-shaping of British Railways" on 27th March 1963. It contained details of passenger services he proposed should be withdrawn or modified, together with lists of stations to be closed, across the length and breadth of Britain, the scale of which had never been seen before in the history of Britain's Railways.

To the complete amazement of the local population, the report proposed that Bury lose all three of its direct passenger services to Manchester with the closure of Bury Bolton Street Station and the withdrawal of all services between:

Manchester Victoria and Bury Bolton Street (Electric Service via Prestwich)

Manchester Victoria and Bacup (via Moston, Heywood, Bury Knowsley Street, Bury Bolton Street and Ramsbottom)

Manchester Victoria and Colne (via Clifton Junction, Bury Bolton Street, Ramsbottom and Accrington)

The only passenger services through Bury would run between Bolton Trinity Street, Bury Knowsley Street and Rochdale, and these would be "modified" resulting in fewer trains.

## **THE BEECHING AXE FALLS**

Whilst the Manchester – Bury Electric Service was eventually reprieved, 5th December 1966 saw the end of services from Manchester Victoria via Bury to Bacup and to Accrington. The railways between Clifton Junction and Radcliffe North Junction, between Stubbins Junction and Accrington and between Rawtenstall and Bacup were all closed. This left Bury served by the electric service from Manchester, a curtailed service to Rawtenstall and the Bolton – Rochdale service.

## **EARLY PRESERVATION ATTEMPTS AT HELMSHORE**

Based at Helmsore Station, the Helmsore & District Railway Preservation Society was formed in 1966 with the objective of re-opening the former East Lancashire Railway route between Stubbins Junction and Accrington. After less than two years the Society disbanded and the East Lancashire Railway Preservation Society, (ELRPS) rose from its ashes. The ELRPS had a more realistic objective to preserve and operate a shorter section of the route, between Stubbins Junction and Haslingden. By 1970 the society had set up the East Lancashire Light Railway Company, (ELLRCo), as British Rail would only deal with an organisation to which it could permanently transfer its liabilities, an obligation which the society could not fulfil. The route had numerous structures in poor condition and the local authorities of the day had no appetite for tourism projects, so this plan also failed to come to fruition.

## **RATIONALISATION**

1969 saw the singling of the Bury – Rawtenstall line and demolition of many of the station buildings and footbridges including those at Summerseat, Ramsbottom, Stubbins and Rawtenstall to reduce maintenance liabilities. The single track in best condition was chosen to remain but at stations the track serving the platform with the most straightforward access was chosen. This explains why the remaining single line changes between the up and down formations at various points along the route to access platforms or better condition track.

## **AN UNFORTUNATE RAILWAY ACCIDENT**

In 1970 some runaway wagons on the Castleton – Bolton line were diverted into the short trailing siding off the down line which terminated in a buffer stop immediately to the west of Bury West Signal Box. As any railwayman will tell you buffer stops are only there to mark the end of a siding, and not to stop wagons. The set at the end of this siding lived up to that tradition by gracefully collapsing and allowing the miscreant wagons to take out the ground floor of the signal box, resulting in its immediate closure.

The box was replaced by a temporary Ground Frame at Knowsley Street, which enabled trains to continue to reach Rawtenstall, and the 5th October 1970 saw the Bolton – Rochdale service cease with the closure of Bradley Fold, Broadfield and Heywood Stations.

## **A NEW BEGINNING?**

The Bury – Rawtenstall line continued to carry passengers until the service was finally withdrawn on 5th June 1972, at which point, the opportunity to try and acquire the route as a preservation project came a step closer. Conveniently Castlecroft Goods Yard and its 1848 former East Lancashire Railway goods shed became available for lease from Bury Council following its period of use by contractors building the Peel Way town centre by-pass. Both the ELRPS & ELLRCo and the railway assets they had already collected duly transferred from Helmshore to Bury and on 26th August 1972, Castlecroft Goods Shed opened its doors to the public as Bury Transport Museum. The museum housed both road and rail exhibits and enabled vital funds to be raised to help the re-opening of Bury – Rawtenstall line become a reality.

On 17th March 1980 Bury Interchange opened, and the Manchester – Bury Electric service transferred from Bolton Street to the new Bus – Rail Interchange. Bolton Street became eerily quiet except for the twice weekly coal trains to Rawtenstall. December 1980 saw the end of the coal traffic and the way was finally clear for serious negotiations with BR and the local authorities to begin.

## **LOCAL AUTHORITIES GET INVOLVED**

Initial discussions were held with Greater Manchester County Council, (GMC), and Rossendale Borough Council, through whose areas the Bury – Rawtenstall line ran. With GMC taking the lead role, and technical input from the ELLRCo, the two authorities were able to purchase the track bed, remaining track and infrastructure from British Rail, largely financed by Derelict Land Grants.

14th February 1981 saw the privately organised Rossendale Farewell Rail Tour run from Manchester Victoria to Rawtenstall via Heywood returning to Manchester Victoria, later in the day. The success of this venture led the ELLRCo to charter an 8 car Diesel Multiple Unit train and organise three return trips between Bury and Rawtenstall on 27th March 1982. The three excursions each carried a headboard aptly named the “East Lancashire Phoenix”, providing further publicity and enabling invited guests from the local authorities to see the potential of the project first hand.

On 20th November 1984, the East Lancashire Railway Trust, (ELR Trust), was formed, as a formal partnership between the two local authorities and the East Lancashire Light Railway Company to take forward the re-opening and ongoing development of the railway. In addition to the ELR Trust partners the role of the East Lancashire Railway Preservation Society has been essential, in providing the volunteer workforce who undertake many of the tasks involved in re-opening, maintenance development and day to day operation of the railway.

With the demise of GMC on 31st March 1986 Bury Metropolitan Borough Council. (Bury MBC), took over GMC's role and became members of the ELR Trust in place of GMC.

## **REACHING RAMSBOTTOM**

The first success of this partnership came on 25th July 1987 when the first four miles of line were reopened for regular passenger services between Bury and Ramsbottom. In the first short season 35,000 passengers travelled on the railway, a figure which increased to 60,000 in the first full year of operation. On 19th June 1989 the new station buildings on the down platform were opened, based on examples of East Lancashire Railway architecture which had survived at Summerseat and Helmshore, until their demolition in the early 1970s.

## **ON TO RAWTENSTALL**

On 27th April 1991 the ELR was extended by a further four miles from Ramsbottom to Rawtenstall following completion of major works including re-decking three river bridges and one road under bridge, re-signalling Ramsbottom to allow two trains to cross, and the re-grading of Rawtenstall Station site to allow its use as a terminus. Following re-grading of the site, a new platform was constructed and the track relaid to suit the station's new role. Almost a year later, the present East Lancashire Railway style station building was opened to the public, providing much greater passenger facilities than the original portacabin transferred from Ramsbottom could provide.

## **AN EXTENSION TO HEYWOOD SEEMS OUT OF THE QUESTION!**

After the last coal train ran to Rawtenstall the line through Heywood to Bury also fell silent, but BR had plans for freight traffic to serve a new warehouse at Broadfield, on the western outskirts of Heywood. In readiness for the new traffic, Heywood Green Lane Level Crossing was converted from hand operated gates to an Automatic Open Crossing when Green Lane was widened and improved over much of its length to form a Heywood Town Centre avoiding route. As BR had no requirement for the route west of Broadfield they recovered the temporary bridge spanning Pilsworth Road. The temporary bridge had replaced the original brick arch bridge in the mid 1970s following repeated damage by high vehicles. The prospect of ever extending to Heywood looked remote.

## **THE IMPACT OF METROLINK**

The conversion of the Manchester to Bury Interchange route for the new Metrolink tram system dealt the ELR two further blows. Metrolink advised that they could not allow ELR to use the flat rail crossing on the site of Knowsley Street Station for future services between Heywood and Bury. Since the opening of the Interchange in 1980 this relatively unique piece of railway infrastructure had allowed Rawtenstall coal traffic to cross the passenger route into Bury Interchange on the level. In addition, the installation of overhead electrification on the Manchester to Bury route for the new trams meant reduced headroom beneath bridges and in tunnels prevented further access to the ELR from the national network by via this route.

## **THE NEW CHALLENGE**

If the ELR was to continue to attract visiting engines and excursion traffic it was essential that a route to the national network be re-established. Permanently reduced clearances ruled out the Metrolink route, leaving the problematical Heywood route as the only option. The acquisition of the Heywood line could not be justified on access grounds alone, and it was essential that the heritage railway operation be extended to Heywood. The Heywood extension brought Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council into the ELR Trust and the long battle to reach Heywood began.

In order to reach Heywood a new bridge and approach embankments were required to carry the Heywood extension over the Metrolink line at Bury and at Broadfield a replacement bridge was required to cross Pilsworth Road. Bury MBC's Engineers managed to design and construct the new bridge over Metrolink before trams started running between Manchester and Bury on 6th April 1992, and the bridge over Pilsworth Road was also completed in time for the ELR to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the End of Steam on BR, in August 1993, with visiting engines using the newly reinstated route via Heywood.

## **PASSENGERS TO HEYWOOD**

With the ELR once again connected to the national network no one would have imagined that it would take a further 10 years before the ELR could operate passenger trains over the Heywood extension. In addition to the repairs to the track and structures, re-signalling at Bury Bolton Street and construction of the new station at Heywood, the re-opening to Heywood involved a far more complicated set of legal and statutory hurdles to get over in the wake of

new legislation passed in connection with Railway Privatisation. Finally on 6th September 2003 the Bury to Heywood section of the railway opened to regular passenger services, leaving the short 500 metre section of line beyond Heywood Station, over Green Lane Level Crossing to our boundary with Network Rail at Hopwood, used for locomotive and stock interchange with the national network.

## **A PERIOD OF CONSOLIDATION**

Whilst the re-opening to Heywood took place in 2003, it was not until the following year that Bury re-signalling was sufficiently advanced to allow the majority of the facilities controlled by Bury South Signal Box to be brought into use. Since then, at Rawtenstall the Clock Tower has been renewed and a Café facility opened within the main station building. At Ramsbottom, the level crossing has been reconstructed, CCTV installed and a new awning has been constructed on the down platform, funded by an anonymous benefactor. At Bury the Waiting Room and Buffet erected on Platform 3/4 has been enlarged and enlarged toilet facilities have also been built.

## **THE FINAL EXTENSION?**

Castleton Long Welded Rail Depot ceased rail welding operations in December 2006 and closed in March 2007. The cessation of conflicting traffic movements into and out of the depot presented an opportunity for the ELR to reach Castleton on the Manchester Victoria to Bradford and Leeds route via the Calder Valley. At the time of writing, (December 2010), Rochdale MBC have ambitious plans for the regeneration of Castleton, and the extension of the ELR to arrive at a platform at the back Castleton down platform.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is doubtful if in the railway mania of the 1840's anyone could have foreseen that less than 120 years later, many lines promoted at that time would have fallen into disuse. In 1846 the Directors of the original East Lancashire Railway could have no idea that the name of their railway would disappear in 1859, only to reappear 110 years later first as a preservation dream and 18 years later as a heritage railway reality, operated by volunteers. Since the original re-opening in 1987 the extent of the days when the railway operates has grown. The railway runs every weekend and Bank Holiday throughout the year, other than Christmas Day. Midweek the railway runs on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays from May to September, at Easter and at October half-term.