

The Old Station



The terminus of the Kendal to Windermere Railway proposed in 1844 was to be near the eastern shore of the lake at Low Wood near Ambleside. Opposition from affected landowners and William Wordsworth and, as importantly, the high cost of engineering the line across the Troutbeck valley soon persuaded the promoters to terminate the line at the hamlet of Birthwaite. The company realised the promotional value of the lake's name and so the town of Windermere was born. After 170 years "Where is the lake?" is still a frequently asked question!

From the start a terminus at Low Wood or even further north at Ambleside, or - by tunnelling under Dunmail - even Keswick or Penrith, was always considered a possibility. Thus, Windermere Station was designed as a 'through' station with the buildings alongside the line and not across the end. It was built by Abraham Pattinson in 1847, along with the Windermere Hotel across the road and, later, many other local buildings.

The railway was a success from the start and the station grew over the coming years to meet the demands of ever-increasing numbers of passengers and of the town which grew to accommodate them. The town's first post office was established in the station. A bookstall and other retail outlets followed along with waiting and refreshment rooms. Platforms were added and extended and multiple coach sidings were built to store the many excursion trains; a turntable and engine-shed were needed to handle the locomotives. There was also a smithy and farriers to maintain the horses needed for delivery work and some of this building still exists as the Golf Shop.

On the opposite side, on land now occupied by Lakeland Ltd, were warehouses for dry goods and sidings to handle the huge amounts of coal demanded by the local dwellings and the gas-works. Local agriculture

and industries used the facilities to import fertilizer, livestock and machinery and to export farm produce, slate, gunpowder and timber.

As many as 17 excursions would arrive on a Sunday and others on weekdays along with scheduled daily services to major cities. At one time this included four through return trains from London 'The Lakes Express', and as many as 14 local return shuttles between Windermere and Oxenholme. As early as 1885 some 800,000 people were estimated to have passed through Windermere station in the year. The larger hotels in Bowness had horse-drawn buses to collect visitors and tout for customers.

Many passengers were Lancashire cotton workers who filled the day excursion trains or came to stay in the hotels and guest houses or in private houses offering Bed & Breakfast. Some of the cotton magnates built luxury homes on land around Windermere and commuted to work in Manchester or other towns on the daily 1st Class 'Club' train paying a fare supplement to travel in a specially adapted coach with armchairs and other comforts.

The station was lit by gas until 1974 when the large, clerestory roof and the canopy over platform 2 were removed. The porte-cochère was, until 1978, the main entrance and booking hall. A large relief map of the Lake District was a popular feature. Its current whereabouts are unknown.



The station is at the bottom of a downhill gradient and this feature was used to "gravity shunt" coaches and goods wagons. After arrival locos would back their trains uphill out of the station, uncouple and run down to the turntable and water column. Passenger coaches controlled by brakesmen were then rolled back downhill into sidings or platforms. Goods wagons were uncoupled one or two at a time and directed by pointwork to the appropriate siding where they were stopped by shunters running alongside to "pin down" the brakes. This was not without risk and in the 1920s a rake of coaches crashed through the end of a siding into the disused stables. Also in the 1920s an out of control train broke the buffers at the end of the then platform 3 and emerged through the end wall into the station approach! This disaster was

repeated in 1962, again without casualty other than the wrought iron canopy then sporting the London and North Western Railway title.

Fire was an ever-present risk especially in the days of steam. In 1853, the joiner's and blacksmith's shops were badly damaged but the station itself was saved by the Kendal Fire Brigade brought in by train! More recently in 1978 a huge blaze engulfed the area around the old goods warehouse which by that time had been leased to Lakeland Plastics. Again there were no casualties.

From the 1960s railways nationally were in decline and the Windermere Branch was no exception. Passenger numbers fell and goods traffic dwindled as the motor car and lorry took the railways' place. The Windermere goods yard closed in 1969. Steam gave way to diesel traction and loco-hauled trains were replaced by multiple units. In 1973 the rails from Oxenholme were reduced to single track laid, with remarkable foresight, in the centre of the trackbed to allow clearance under bridges for possible conversion to electric power, an option currently being debated. To allow a more frequent shuttle service a passing loop at Burneside has long been an ambition of the flourishing Lakes Line Rail User Group.

The sale of the Windermere station buildings was announced in 1980 and they form the core of the present supermarket. When work started the tracks were removed but not the platforms. There was little provision for passengers until the present station was built on a shortened platform 2 in 1986. The new arrangement is still not without risk and in 2010 a track maintenance train overshot the buffers in a rumoured, but unsuccessful, attempt to breach the wall of the wine and spirits department of the supermarket which has occupied the site since 1985.

Bibliography

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