

Sidelights on the Cromford and High Peak Railway.

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THE Cromford and High Peak Railway, according to F. S. Williams the Author of *Our Iron Roads*, was at one time one of the thoroughfares of England. Travellers and merchandise came on to it from the Manchester district at Whaley Bridge, were conveyed down to the Cromford Canal and were thence carried by the various navigations of the Erewash valley and the Soar to Leicester and the South. Its course of roughly 30 miles can easily be traced on the 1 inch Ordnance Map of the Peak. Although it cannot claim to be the oldest railway in England it has the distinction of being the highest. It had been proposed in 1824 by Josias Jessop¹ and the success of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway in 1829 gave great impetus to projects for linking Manchester with other centres. In a letter written by John Dixon in 1829, describing the Rainhill locomotive trials, he says that George Stephenson "is now going on with an extension of the Way to Derbyshire and I am to begin on Monday to survey, etc. from Manchester to meet the others."

For its period it must rank as a remarkable engineering feat. One writer on Peak scenery describes it as "the skyscraping High Peak railway, with its corkscrew curves that seem to have been laid out by a mad Archimedes

¹ Priestley, *Navigable rivers, canals 1831*, p. 189, gives full particulars.

endeavouring to square the circle." Jessop and Stephenson must have felt complimented by this description of the "layout."

Beginning at the Whaley Bridge or northern end of the line, after leaving the Goyt Valley it rises abruptly up a sharp incline to 1,000 ft. above sea level. This incline was worked by a stationary engine with ropes. For a distance of close upon 25 miles to Cromford, its southern terminus, it never falls below this level. Its summit level is 1,254 ft. above the sea. Before it reaches Cromford it descends other inclines, one of which at Middleton has a beam winding engine, worked at 5 lbs. pressure, still in use after over 100 years service. In 1932 North London Railway 0-6-0 locomotives worked 1 in 14 and 1 in 20 inclines (Hopton Plane). There seems to be some doubt as to the date of its opening. Some writers say 1830¹ but a stone over one of the tunnels is dated 1825 with Josias Jessop as engineer, while a High Peak Railway warehouse at Whaley Bridge bears the date 1832.

Although Baddeley describes the country traversed by the line as "of unmitigated bleakness," lovely views of the valleys below are obtained *en route*.

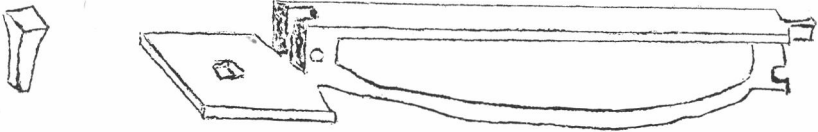
At the foot of the Middleton incline ramps are set for straight runs into pits sunk for runaways. The rails in these pits are of the original cast iron fish-bellied type on stone sleeper blocks. The chair is cast in one piece with the rail as shown in illustration.²

An iron pin fits into a wooden dowel driven into the stone sleeper. Although apparently a simple method of holding the rail down, careful workmanship was necessary. An old field survey book dated 1815 which was used in the surveying of an adjacent tramroad, recently passed through the writer's hands and has the following notes about this fixing of tram-rails. ". . . One hole in each

¹ See p. 41.

² A specimen rail is preserved in the Derby Museum—Ed.

block about 6 inches deep, and a wood peg driven in first and cut off even with the block, then lay the rails on it and drive a nail through into the plugs, the wood must be perfectly dry and not too large or it will swell and split the stone. George Middleton of Hollow Gate, Bradwell, stone borer for tram-roads charges 3 shillings for 22 holes 6 inches deep and would like to undertake the job." It seems likely that the original track was laid to a similar specification.



The line has undergone many vicissitudes. About the year 1877, a traveller on the line was killed and the Company decided to close it for passenger traffic. The northern portion is now disused and grass-grown; its tunnel $\frac{3}{4}$ m. long is boarded up at each end. The portion near Buxton is used to connect various limestone quarries with the old L. & N. W. Rly. which completed in the 90's the linking of Buxton with the South via Parsley Hay. This line absorbed part of the old High Peak Line between Parsley Hay and Buxton.

John Ruskin wrote scathingly of the spoilation of Derbyshire by railways. "Derbyshire is a lovely child's alphabet. On its miniature cliffs a dark ivy leaf detaches itself as an object of importance; you distinguish with interest the species of mosses on the top, and you count, like many falling diamonds, the magical drops of its petrifying well; the cluster of violets in the shade is an Armida's garden to you. It was a meadow a minute ago, now it is a cliff, and in an instant it is a cave; and here was a brooklet, and now it is a whisper underground; . . .

and half a day's work of half-a-dozen navvies and a snuff-box full of dynamite may blow it all into Erebus and diabolical night for ever and ever . . ."

The southern portion of the line is still in use linking up quarries and brickworks and joining the L.M.S. Railway near Cromford.

The writer has walked along most of the route of the old railway and is much impressed by the many engineering feats of the contractors who built the line more than 100 years ago. There are about 60 bridges crossing highway paths and streams, a few tunnels, many cuttings and embankments of limestone. The embankment at Mininglow becomes a thing of beauty in the afterglow of a summer evening's sun.

An old railway worker who lives near the track swears that a Trevithick locomotive ran on the line and that he has seen a photograph of it! It is known that horse-drawn carriages were once employed.

There is an amusing account of a journey on the railway from about Cromford to near Buxton (c. 20 miles) in William's *Our Iron Roads*:

"It was in August, 1877, and thinking I should like to see the country through which it passed I went to Stonehouse, generally called 'Stonnis,' just by the Black Rocks, where the railway crosses the Wirksworth Road, and inquired of a man in the office for the train. 'Do you mean the "fly?"' was the reply. 'Yes.' But the official not knowing whether the 'fly' had passed or not, went out to enquire, and brought back word that it had gone, but that if I followed it up the line, I might catch it at the siding; and if not, I should be sure to overtake it at 'Middleton Run.' I accordingly gave chase, and at length caught sight of it being drawn up the incline by a rope and a stationary engine. A man at the bottom inquired if I wished to catch the 'fly,' and added 'I will stop it for you at the top,' which he did by a signal. A

quarter of a mile ahead I joined it. My fellow travellers were then a young woman and a child, and the vehicle in which we sat was like an old omnibus. The guard stood in the middle and worked the brake through a hole in the floor. A locomotive now drew us 3 or 4 miles to the foot of another incline, up which we were drawn by a rope. When reaching the summit the guard remarked: 'We may have to wait at the top.' 'How long?' I enquired. 'Oh, it may be for five minutes,' he replied, 'or a few hours. It all depends upon when the engine comes to take us on. Yesterday,' he added, 'it did not come at all.' To while away the time I walked along the line, and my fellow-passengers went mushrooming. In about 3 hours an engine came from Whaley Bridge to fetch us, and after the driver, fireman and guard had refreshed themselves at a little public-house not far away, and had freely commented on their 'horse,' they went back along the line, brought up the 'fly,' and having refreshed themselves again we started. At one point of the journey a flock of sheep were quietly feeding or resting on the line. 'Just see them,' said the guard as we approached, 'jump the walls'; and they did it like dogs. We reached Park Gates, about a mile from Buxton, at seven o'clock, after a journey of about 20 miles in six hours."