

XI

The Border Counties Railway

Sian E. Thornthwaite

This article examines the history of the Border Counties Railway, which was originally built from Hexham to the Belling, in Northumberland, to open up the rich coal and mineral area of North Tynedale. This article begins by looking at the origins of this railway, it then describes the building, its subsequent extension to Riccarton and its joining with the Border Union Railway in 1862.

The Border Counties Railway could never really be regarded as a great commercial success, with the industries it sought to serve rapidly becoming depleted and the population too small and too dispersed to support the line. As a consequence trade had begun to decline by the turn of this century, resulting in eventual closure in 1956. Yet this line was, for a time, regarded as the main line from Newcastle to Edinburgh by the North British Railway Company, and the history of this often forgotten rail link between England and Scotland serves as a good illustration of the railway politics of the day, and shows the impact the coming of the railway made upon remote rural areas such as North Tynedale.

INTRODUCTION

THE development of the railway during the early 19th century substantially lowered the costs of transporting goods, and minerals were no exception, therefore the extension of the Scottish rail system into the Borders during the 1840s was soon realized to be a threat to the North Tynedale coal and lime trade, whose markets were within southern Scotland, (Charlton 1987). Yet as early as August 1838 the value of linking the Newcastle & Carlisle Railway with Scotland had been realized when John Blackmore proposed a less costly alternative to the route to Edinburgh via Berwick, branching off near Hexham and following the North Tyne valley. He was instructed to make a preliminary survey of this line which was to

be 96 miles in length with gradients varying from 10–30 feet per mile; comparable, he said, to those found on the Newcastle & Carlisle and Liverpool & Manchester Railways. The financial depression of 1841, however, prevented progress until Autumn 1845 when applications were again made for two branch lines, from the Newcastle & Carlisle Railway, one to leave the main line at Haltwhistle and follow the river South Tyne to Alston and Nenthead, and the other to leave the main line at Warden near Hexham and follow the river North Tyne to Woodburn and Bellingham. The stimulus for both proposals was the obvious benefits to be gained from opening up the rich mineral areas of North Tynedale, South Tynedale and Ridsdale. Although there was a Parliamentary fight over the latter proposal: (see Whittle 1979, Chapter 3. The Alston Branch). Only the Alston branch line went ahead with the North Tyne branch line proposal again rejected.

By 1849 Scottish coal taken to Hawick by rail was selling for as little as 13s 4d per ton, whereas the coal carted to Scotland from the Tarretburn Colliery in Tynedale was priced at 20s per ton. As a result, several influential people who had invested in mineral mining in the North Tyne area believed that the only way to meet this challenge was to build a railway through the North Tyne valley and lower the price of North Tyne coal, (see Charlton 1987). It was also thought that a railway would stimulate the failing ironworks at Hareshaw near Bellingham, with the demand for iron rails as the iron works along the Newcastle & Carlisle Railway had benefited.

Whilst the competition from the Scottish railways for the mineral trade had been responsible for initiating ideas of a Border Counties Railway, the plans for such a railway actually originated in London in the October of

1853 when "some capitalists and gentlemen of extensive railway connections submitted plans to the landed and mineral proprietors in the districts and other interested parties". The plans were deposited on the 13th November 1853, but there was immediate opposition to the scheme from various sides. Railway politics in the area at that time meant that another company merely made the competition even more fierce and bitter. The House of Commons Select Committee on Private Bills records that there was also opposition from landowners in the area including the Baronets, Sir Matthew Ridley and Sir John Edward Swinburne. Opposition also came from the Monk Middletons of Belsay who saw the plans for this railway as a commercial threat not only to their own plans to lay a rail track through Redesdale to Jedburgh (a feat which would have necessitated tunnelling under Carter Bar!) (Charlton 1987), but also to their existing turnpike from Ponteland to Otterburn which had been opened during the 1830s.

In order to win support Mr. William Charlton of Hesleyside arranged a special meeting to be held at Bellingham to allow people to hear these gentlemen from London. Despite Charlton's efforts the Bill to establish the Border Counties Railway had a rough passage through parliament, but eventually succeeded and received Royal Assent on the 31st July 1854. The House of Commons Committee records show it as being said that the Border Counties Railway was absolutely necessary to restore the iron works to "their former advantages and that the district has been deprived of railway accommodation while other districts have been well served by railways". The case on behalf of the Border Counties Railway regarded communications between this mineral district of North Tynedale and Newcastle as being of the highest importance, not only to Tynedale but also to the port of Newcastle.

One major reason for the Bill's success was the amount of capital investment already promised by the Company's backers. Twenty-two subscribers—mainly gentlemen from London and Surrey—managed to raise £114,000 in sums varying from £200–£56,000. The 159 local

subscribers included men from Sunderland, Hexham, Carlisle, Newcastle, Tynedale and Redesdale and promised investments totalling £46,000. As Charlton (1987) records, the list of local subscribers reflected a wide social background with occupations as diverse as: blacksmiths, iron masters and ministers. The minimum, and usual subscription was £20 but there were some larger investments including those made by Mr. William Henry Charlton (who invested £3,000), Mr. T. J. Taylor the Duke of Northumberland's mineral agent, (who invested £2,000) and W. Blackett of Bywell Hall (who invested £5,000). On the 20th March 1853 at a shareholders' meeting at the Black Bull Inn in Hexham, William Henry Charlton was elected as director and chairman of the Border Counties Railway Company. John Furness Tone of Newcastle and his uncle Robert Nicholson, who had together invested £5,000, were appointed as engineers (Mr. Tone as Engineer in Chief). Tone and Nicholson were also the first lessees of the Plashetts colliery in Tynedale and as such had a vested interest in the success of the railway. Mr. Tone was also the Chief Engineer on the Blyth & Tyne Railway, and Robert Nicholson was Engineer for the Newcastle & North Shields Railway.

The 1854 Border Counties Railway Act made provision for the railway to run from the Newcastle & Carlisle Railway, at or near Hexham to or near the Belling in the Parish of Falstone, to be called the Border Counties Railway (North Tyne Section). This Act also authorized the raising of a capital sum of £250,000 from the sale of shares and £83,333 by loans, to cover the cost of building this 26 miles and 53 yards line. The House of Commons Select Committee records show that in June 1854 Robert Hodgson Esq., the Engineer responsible for the High Level Bridge in Newcastle (to Robert Stephenson), had estimated the cost of building the Border Counties Railway to be: £318,234 including £63,172 for earth-works, £62,188 for the permanent way and £55,847 14s 0d for the four viaducts.

In August 1855 tenders were invited for the contracts for work on the Border Counties

Railway, with tenders being received from William Hutchinson as follows:

William Hutchinson's Tender:

Contract No. 1

Tyne Viaduct at Hexham	£3510	0	0
Viaduct at Erring Burn	£2900	0	0
Viaduct over Countess Park Burn	£4479	0	0
Viaduct over the River Rede	£7192	0	0

Contract No. 2

Viaduct at Hexham	£4193	0	0
-------------------	-------	---	---

Source: Hutchinson's tender, August 1855,
(Northumberland Record Office)

William Hutchinson also offered that if the two contracts were amalgamated he would reduce the price from £18,081 to £16,722, with the price for the iron work for the viaduct over the Tyne at Hexham being £4,793, this would reduce the total price from £22,874 to £21,565. Hutchinson continued his tender by saying: "I beg to say that it would not be convenient for me to do the viaducts at the above prices without doing the line also and I would on or after September 1st be ready at a call to wait upon you to arrange these matters".

The contract for the Tyne viaduct was let in October 1855 to William Hutchinson specifying completion by the 31st July 1857, or payment of £30 per week to be forfeited by the contractor if this was not achieved. The contract for the works from Hexham to Dunkirk near Chollerford was also let in October 1855 and specified completion by December 1857. It was, however, not until eighteen months after the Border Counties Bill had received Royal Assent that work actually started. John Latimer's entry for the 11th December 1855 (Local Records 1857) records that the turning of the first sod took place at Tyne Green, Hexham by the chairman of the company "amidst great cheering from the multitude assembled" with a public dinner being held in the evening at Hexham in honour of the event.

With possession of a small portion of land between Hexham and Wall having been obtained, the work on the line really began in

the April of 1856 with the expectation of further land being readily obtained. It was not, however, until 16th January 1857 that the land from Wall Mill to Dunkirk was handed to the contractor and consequently the works, which when tendered for, were to have been completed by the December of 1857 were not finished until the Spring of 1861. This was the beginning of serious delays and problems which were to plague William Hutchinson's work. There are, for example, records of letters written by Hutchinson complaining about tenders being altered, and letters to him subsequently arguing about his work. Hutchinson had trouble with the viaduct near Hexham, as it required very deep foundations to withstand the periodic spating of the River Tyne, and the river itself tended to interfere with the foundation work. The plans for this viaduct were then altered with the south end of the viaduct being moved 23 feet eastward, and Hutchinson complained to Tone about this—arguing that the character of the work had been changed so much that the prices at which the work was taken on ceased to apply.

By the 5th of April 1855 Hutchinson had completed the first part of the line and the four mile section from Hexham Junction to Chollerford was opened and the stations at Wall and Chollerford were also opened. Hutchinson's account shows that he was paid £39,198 6s 9d on the 30th September 1858 for the work done on this first section from Hexham–Dunkirk. Meanwhile, Hutchinson struggled on with his contract which was well behind schedule. By the 1st December 1859 he had completed work as far as Countess Park and the eight mile section of line from Chollerford to Countess Park was opened and services extended that far. Stations were opened at Chollerton, Barasford and Wark. Although the station of Wark was built a mile east of the village and on the opposite side of the river, this station also served the village of Birtley, a mile from the station in the other direction. All these stations had just one platform.

By the end of 1859, £185,611 9s 10d had been spent on the Border Counties line including £131,026 17s 2d on the construction work

and £27,057 9s 4d on acquiring land and paying compensation. By this time subscriptions had raised £160,560 but the final sum required was revised and estimated at £188,000, to which another £20,000 had to be added for Parliamentary expenses, and other incidental expenses. By 1850 the company acknowledged that the logical step was to extend the railway from the Belling to Plashetts then on to Kielder and into Scotland to join the Carlisle–Hawick–Edinburgh line, the “Waverley Route”, at Riccarton. This involved additional expense and the Duke of Northumberland was approached, and agreed to advance £40,000 interest free for five years towards the cost of the completion of this line. The Duke had much to gain as an owner of considerable areas of North Tynedale. He also saw the benefits of amalgamating with North British Railway Company and was responsible for persuading shareholders to transfer stock.

On the 1st August 1859 the second Border Counties Railway Act was passed, entitled the *Liddesdale Section and Deviations Act*, this authorized the extension of the Border Counties line to Riccarton, 14 miles to the north in Roxburghshire, Scotland. Riccarton was the only practical location for a railway junction, being relatively flat. Eleven days earlier on the 21st of July the *Border Union Railway Act* had been passed allowing North British to extend their Waverley route south to meet the Border Counties line at Riccarton. A week later, on the 8th August 1859, the *Wansbeck Valley Railway Act* was passed extending the railway west from Morpeth up the Wansbeck Valley via Scots Gap to meet the Border Counties Railway at Redesmouth.

On the 13th August 1860, the Border Counties Railway Company was acquired by the North British Railway Company. As the additional financial expenditure incurred by the extension of the Border Counties Railway north was met by North British funds, so work on the line north of Countess Park progressed more rapidly. By the 1st February 1861, following completion of the Rede viaduct, the North British Company opened the Border Counties Railway as far as Thorneyburn, to

total length of 21 miles from Hexham. Stations were opened at Redesmouth (spelt Reeds-mouth by North British), and Bellingham. All stations along these sections of line were built of stone, apart from Countess Park station which was temporary and closed with the opening of another station near Hesleyside at this time. This station (named after Charlton, the first company chairman) was never really needed and subsequently closed on the 1st October 1862. By September of 1861 the line was open as far as Falstone, and the Liddesdale section of the line, north of Kielder was staked out ready for work, with work on the section south of Riccarton being carried out at a rapid rate. This Falstone–Kielder section was opened on the 12th May 1862 and the stations at Plashetts, and Kielder (spelt Keilder by North British until the station was renamed Kielder Forest in 1948!) were opened.

On June 21st 1862 Captain Tyler, a Board of Trade Inspector, together with Mr. John Furness Tone—the engineer of both the Border Counties and Border Union Railways, and others, inspected the Riccarton–Hawick, and the Kielder–Riccarton sections of the line and passed them fit for use. On 1st July 1862 the Border Counties Railway was opened from Kielder–Riccarton, and the Border Union Railway was opened north of Riccarton.

THE BORDER COUNTIES LINE

The Border Counties line leaves the Newcastle and Carlisle Railway a mile west of Hexham and crosses the River Tyne by the Hexham viaduct, a single track oblique viaduct, 220 yards in length. The contract specification of August 1855 records that the viaduct was to “consist of three large and three smaller openings across which the railway was to be carried by wrought iron girders supported on cast iron standards. The main girders of the large openings being 80 feet clear from support to support and those of the small openings 60 feet clear”. North of this viaduct the line followed the River North Tyne closely, winding continually for its initial 26 miles and 53 yards

Although the viaduct at Hexham was of wrought and cast iron, the Prestwick, Erring and Rede Bridges, and many of the other smaller bridges along the line, were all built of stone—predominantly sandstone. The Rede viaduct across the mouth of the River Rede, where that river joins the North Tyne, was built double track. It was also of sandstone and the contract specified that it was to consist of 13 small openings each of 20 feet and three large openings of 57 feet clear from upright, a total length of 308 yards. In fact it was actually built with a total of five arches on an oblique line to the River Rede itself.

The most outstanding piece of railway architecture associated with this railway is the Kielder viaduct which was built to carry the railway across the river North Tyne near the Duke of Northumberland's shooting lodge. The choice of crossing place meant that the viaduct had to be built on a skew with the line of the river necessitating arches of great complexity. The shape of each stone was worked individually and even today such a task would be regarded as complex. The problems that this created were solved by the Victorian mathematician, Peter Nicholson, who taught mechanical drawing at the Newcastle School of Design. As such, this viaduct rates as one of the North East's finest examples of 19th century civil engineering. The viaduct is the first crossing of the river North Tyne by the railway. It is also a sandstone viaduct, 393 feet in length with seven arches reaching 55 feet above the river. As it was built on the Duke's land and within view of his Kielder Castle, North British followed the Duke's ruling that the viaduct be suitably embellished. For this reason it has battlemented parapets of a baronial design.

From the beginning this railway was intended to be usually single track. Initially a branch from near Bellingham to the Ridsdale iron works was intended but was later abandoned. The first section of the line from Hexham–Chollerford was mainly at a gradient of 1:100 and was single track. The eight mile section from Chollerford to Countess Park was at gradients of 1:100, 120, 130 and 150. As Whittle (1979) records, the earthworks along

this section were not considerable but there were two large cuttings, one of a mile in length between Chollerford and Barrasford, and another at Chipchase. At Chipchase the owner of Chipchase Castle required the line to be screened which is reported to have increased the cost. Between Plashetts and Kielder there were over three miles at 1:100, gradients on the line from Redesmouth to Kielder remained at a ruling 1:100 but were less severe south of Plashetts than on the overall Hexham–Redesmouth section.

The initial twenty-six miles of the Border Counties Railway passed through many small farms and moorland areas, and as such the line divided up many farms along its route so necessitating a considerable number of cattle arches and sheep creeps. Between Falstone and Plashetts alone, Slade (1975) records that there were the following structures within a distance of five miles:

Structures on the Border Counties Railway Between Plashetts and Falstone:

Bridges	1
Occupation bridges	2
Cattle arches 4 ft span	5
Cattle arches 6 ft span	4
Sheep creeps 3 ft span	2
Culverts various sizes	13+
Occupation crossings remains	4
Platelayers' huts—remains	4
Pairs of platelayers' cottages	2

Source: Slade 1975

The extension of the railway north to Riccarton had several examples of heavy engineering. There were prominent cuttings at Hudshouse Rig, near a viaduct over Dawston Burn. This viaduct had five arches of stone. Near Shield Knowe there was a long embankment over the tributary of Riccarton Burn. The Railway then crossed the watershed between the Tyne and Liddle Water valleys at Deadwater. Between Kielder and Riccarton the line remained at about 1:100 gradient for several miles but there was a one and a half mile stretch at only 1:300 south of Deadwater. As a consequence of the

Newcastleton

19th March 1861

My dear sir,

Border Counties Railway

I percour that you are still very far from having a sufficient number of workmen on your contract between Riccarton and Plashetts, in order to complete your works within anything like a reasonable period. Now that the weather may be expected to improve, I really must require you to put on additional hands immediately.

The following numbers are at least required on the works viz:

Excavators.	From Riccarton to Dawston Burn	295 men
	,, Dawston Burn to Caddroun Burn	70 „
	,, Caddroun Burn to Kielder	41 „
In	Kielder Cutting	65 „
	From Kielder to Plashetts	57 „
	Total Excavators	528
Masons.	At Catscleugh Culvert	18 masons
	,, Dawston Burn Bridge	18 „
	,, Caddroun Burn Culvert	10 „
	,, Tyne Viaduct	30 „
	,, Small Bridge and Culverts	32 „
	Total Masons	108

The above numbers are exclusive of artisans, horse drivers and agents.

You appear to have only 400 excavators and 40 masons at work, there are plenty of masons to be had in Edinburgh during the present strike if you will take measures to get them.

I will endeavour to get to Kielder on Thursday morning or Wednesday evening, if possible, when I hope to see you. I shall expect you if convenient to accompany me over the works on Thursday morning.

I am dear Sir,
Yours truly
John F Tone

Mr William Hutchinson

Source: Northumberland Record Office

Fig. 1.

line being predominantly single track, trains had to be timetabled to pass at Redesmouth, there was also a turntable at Redesmouth to enable locomotives to be turned.

For the construction of the Border Counties Railway numerous men were required, as the returns made by John Ridley and letter by

John Tone show, Figs. 1 and 2. Between 1855 and 1862 there was a large influx of navvies and their families and the population census for the area shows a large increase in population, attributable to the railway. Two thirds of these incomers were in Plashetts and Tynehead townships based at Kielder where the only

25th June 1861: Return by John Ridley for the line from Plashetts to Riccarton.

Records the number of men employed on the Border Counties Railway Extension.

	<i>last month</i>	<i>this month</i>	<i>Required by engineer</i>
Excavators:			
from Junction to Dawston Burn	320	320	295
„ Dawston Burn—Caddroun Burn	61	16	70
In Kielder Cutting	95	112	65
Total	476	493	430
Masons:			
Catscleugh Culvert	11	10	18
Dawston Burn Bridge	12	13	18
Caddroun Burn Culvert	8	8	10
Tyne Viaduct	12	26	30
Total	43	57	76

The following is the additional number of men employed since the 14th of May at the places stated:

	<i>Additional men</i>	<i>Total no. now employed</i>
Excavators:		
Geddes Syke		60
Kielder Cut	17	112
Dawston Rig		61
Riccarton Cuttings	—	300
Total	17	533
Masons:		
Kielder Viaduct	14	26
Dawston Burn Bridge	2	13
Total	16	39

Total number of men of all descriptions are 989.

Source: Northumberland Record Office

Fig. 2.

buildings were the castle, the Duke's shooting box, and a few cottages, so it is likely that the majority were housed in railway huts, and the remainder with local agricultural workers. In many instances the railway housing appears to have been preferable to that of the local

farm workers, or of the workers of the iron-works. Double platelayers' cottages were built by the Railway Company at Donkleywood, Falstone, the Belling and Plashetts at a cost of £360 each. These were built of stone with slate roofs, they had one room downstairs with a

kitchen extension and one room upstairs. They had a detached stone built netty or privy outside. At the Belling there was the additional luxury of running water which was piped from a nearby spring! (Charlton 1987).

Platelayers' huts were a feature of all 19th century railways, but they tended to vary considerably. The Border Counties Railway Company appears to have allowed a certain degree of freedom in the planning of individual line-side huts allocating a given number of second hand sleepers, a door, wood and corrugated iron sheeting to make a pitched roof of given dimensions, and sufficient wood strips to cover the gaps between the sleepers. Whilst the dimensions of these huts remain constant, determined by the dimensions of the roof, the position of the door, chimney and the windows vary so much that no two huts appear to be exactly alike (Slade 1975). Most of these line-side huts are now in ruins or gone, but most of the stone cottages and the stations still remain.

RAILWAY POLITICS—THE BORDER COUNTIES' ROLE

As early as 1867 the North British Railway Company had extended southwards from Edinburgh through Galashiels to Hawick. By the mid 1950s this company was increasingly focusing attention on reaching the centres of Carlisle and Newcastle. The Newcastle & Carlisle Railway Company had been running trains between Newcastle and Carlisle since 1839, and had itself planned a branch line from Hexham to Scotland, but these plans lapsed during the 1840s and the independent Border Counties Railway Company was formed in 1845. By the winter of 1857, the North Eastern Company directors were approached by those of the North British Company with a view to a possible amalgamation in order to prevent any further competition. The North British Hawick–Carlisle line was not only a measure against the Caledonian's Company's route to Carlisle via Teviotdale, but also a means with which the North British could influence North Eastern over amalgamation. By having a foot-

ing in Carlisle North British was therefore in a better position to bargain with North Eastern and an amalgamation appeared beneficial to both sides resulting in a meeting in the winter of 1857 to decide upon such amalgamation's terms and conditions (Tomlinson 1967, p. 579). Negotiations were, however, brought to an abrupt halt and a subsequent meeting in March 1858 had no better result leaving North British determined not only to reach Carlisle but also to extend its influence as far as Newcastle.

The rest of North British's plans then came to light a few months later. They launched a scheme under the auspices of the North British Co. to connect the Border Counties and the Blyth & Tyne Railway by means of a railway along the Wansbeck Valley. As Tomlinson points out (1967, p. 580) few could doubt the real objective of such a line which passed through a sparsely populated area, which had no manufacturing industry and few mineral resources. Its role was to complete a new route between Morpeth and Edinburgh, enabling North British to coerce the North Eastern Co. into paying them a greater share of any joint revenue, so improving North British's terms in any amalgamation. North Eastern however, viewed this as being hostile action from a company from which they expected co-operation, and as such they prepared to resist this threatened incursion, with their first objective being to gain possession of the then independent Newcastle & Carlisle Railway Co. (see Tomlinson 1967, p. 580).

At Westminster the North British Co. then had a series of successes. They successfully defeated the Caledonian Bill backed by the North Eastern Co. and on the 21st July 1859 they had the Border Union Railway Act passed permitting an extension of their Carlisle–Hawick line as far as Riccarton. On the 1st August 1859 the Border Counties Railway Extension Act was passed extending the Border Counties Railway north from Plashetts to Riccarton. This Liddesdale section of the line was necessary to complete the connection between Hexham and Edinburgh. The very title of the railway—the Border Counties line—suggests that there was always the intention

that the line should go beyond Northumberland. It is difficult to say whether the North British Railway Co. were behind the Border Counties Railway from the outset, but it is possible. How early Mr. Charlton envisaged a northward extension of the line is unknown, but Charlton was no stranger at Carham Hall (Carham Hall was the home of Richard Hodgson the chairman of the North British Railway Co.), and "it was natural that the railway promoting border squires got their heads together" (see Whittle 1979, p. 53).

The extension of the Border Counties Railway north of Plashetts necessitated additional capital, and the Duke of Northumberland, realizing the advantages to be gained from amalgamation, persuaded shareholders to transfer their shares, and the Act of Amalgamation was passed on the 13th August 1860, with the North British Company obtaining powers to absorb the Border Counties Company—well before the completion of the connection of the two railways on 1st July 1862. During this time the North British Railway Co. had also piloted the Wansbeck Valley scheme, from Redesmouth to Morpeth, and they endeavoured to get a company formed with the Wansbeck Valley Railway Act being passed on the 8th August 1859. The line had reached Scots Gap by 1862 and by 1863 it was also purchased by the North British Railway Company, on the 21st July. By 1865 the North British Co. had completed the extension to the junction with the Border Counties Railway at Redesmouth.

The next move on the part of North British was to secure access to Newcastle (Tomlinson 1967, p. 583). With their allies the Border Counties, Wansbeck Valley, the Carlisle & Silloth Bay, and the Port of Carlisle Companies, they entered into traffic agreements with the independent Blyth & Tyne Railway Company. For many years, the Blyth & Tyne had been regarded as a negligible factor in the railway politics of the north east, and in 1855 the line was little better than a waggonway carrying few passengers; but with the pressures of competition the Blyth & Tyne Railway Co. had been forced to adopt a policy of improve-

ments and extensions. They cut down Prospect Hill, double tracked 6 miles of line, built additional shipping staiths on the Tyne, purchased two short colliery lines that formed portions of their main line between Seaton Delaval and Hartley, and Bedlington and Newsham. They also extended a branch line to Morpeth to link with the main North Eastern line, and took preliminary steps towards extending their line to Whitley Bay and North Shields. Their new coal shipping staiths at Northumberland Dock on the Tyne were opened on the 22nd October 1857, giving additional value to the railway as it offered an outlet for the minerals of the Northumberland coal districts. By October 1857, the Blyth & Tyne's branch line was opened to Morpeth for mineral traffic and on the 1st April 1858 for goods and passenger traffic (Tomlinson 1967, p. 579). Therefore by securing traffic arrangements with the Blyth & Tyne Railway Company, Hodgson had achieved his ultimate aim of securing an independent route, albeit a lengthy, circuitous and steeply graded one, from Edinburgh—Newcastle via Hawick, Redesmouth and Morpeth.

By this time the North Eastern Railway Co. had amalgamated with the Newcastle & Carlisle Co. This amalgamation was passed on the 17th July 1862 and was not opposed by the North British Co. on the condition that it was permitted running powers from Hexham—Newcastle. The North British Co. had envisaged such an amalgamation and therefore realized the importance of the junction at Redesmouth to enable independent access to Newcastle. As part of the same amalgamation agreement, North British granted North Eastern running powers on its line between Berwick and Edinburgh. Thus both companies were operating trains between Newcastle and Edinburgh by different routes, the North British advertised its route as the main line despite its heavy gradients and it being single track for much of its length. The east coast route was by contrast double track throughout and had easier gradients.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

Initially the Border Counties Railway carried only minerals—limestone, freestone, ironstone and undressed materials for road repairs, and coal. Plashetts Colliery was an important contributor to the railway from the outset, and, as shown, coal from Acomb was also significant.

Coal Traffic

<i>Station</i>	<i>1873/4 tons</i>	<i>1909/10 tons</i>
Riccarton	30,129	6,940
Plashetts	44,611	23,185
Wall	65,868	10,199
Hexham	7,811	30,625

Source: Whittle 1979

(Coal from Acomb went via Wall.) But although the original intention had been for the railway to open up this mineral area, it soon became apparent that there could be greater profits made if the company extended the range of goods it carried; so compost, dung, manure, agricultural supplies, groceries and passengers were added to the list. From the 1860s the traffic of feed, corn, potatoes, flour and sugar was also gradually transferred to the railway and the importance of non-mineral goods traffic is shown below:

Goods Traffic Excluding Minerals *1/8/1874–31/7/1975*

<i>Station</i>	<i>Tons</i>	<i>Station</i>	<i>Tons</i>
Riccarton	5893	Saughtree	0
Kielder	327	Plashetts	735
Falstone	470	Tarset	581
Bellingham	1572	Redesmouth	2363
Wark	1820	Barrasford	616
Chollerton	1095	Chollerford	1885
Wall	1326	Hexham	5387

Source: Whittle 1979

Livestock traffic was also important as it was easier for North Tyne shepherds to drive their cattle and the annual crop of lambs to the nearest station to be taken to the marts at Bellingham. Milk traffic from Bellingham to Tyneside is also reported to have been of

reasonable importance. The scale of livestock traffic was such that by 1910 it represented an eighth of goods traffic receipts—worth £2,875.86p.

Passenger traffic was also important, by 1869 the railway had three passenger trains daily in each direction running all the way from Newcastle–Riccarton. Most stations benefited from all the trains stopping. The exceptions were Saughtree which had only one train from Newcastle–Riccarton and two from Riccarton–Newcastle stopping. Plashetts had one train stopping on the journey from Newcastle–Riccarton and Thorneyburn had only one train in each direction on market day (Tuesday). The Wansbeck Railway also ran three trains each way from Redesmouth to Morpeth, and at Morpeth the Blyth & Tyne Railway gave access to Newcastle's New Bridge Street Station. Although the Blyth & Tyne Railway was acquired by North Eastern in 1874, North British still had access to Newcastle via the Newcastle and Carlisle under the terms of amalgamation.

On March 1st 1880 Deadwater Station on the Scottish border (the border crosses the line at the north western end of the platform and runs parallel to the track for 500 yards) was officially opened although an unofficial halt had long existed there.

During the 1890s there was an expansion of passenger services and in 1891 North British adjusted its timetables so that some trains travelling in each direction no longer required passengers to change at Riccarton. Of the 6 trains in 1891 3 had Galashiels, 1 had Hawick, 1 Edinburgh and 1 Riccarton as their northern terminus. There were also additional trains on Saturdays and Tuesdays for market, all of these trains running between Bellingham and Hexham. In the years preceding 1910 it was also common for trains to terminate in Edinburgh itself. In 1913 trains for Newcastle left Riccarton at 6.40 am, 10.00 am and 7.10 pm with the trains crossing at Redesmouth or Hexham, but locomotive failures or other problems could throw this into disarray. There was a notable absence of Sunday trains on this line (see Whittle 1979, p. 96). This minimum of

three passenger trains in each direction was maintained until 1914, but after the war some northwards trains recommenced.

The population of the North Tyne Valley was however low, and passenger traffic in terms of local use was therefore limited. North British promoted the line as a main line from Newcastle–Edinburgh, but with its steep gradients, its single track and, more importantly, because of its slowness, this was never really a realistic notion. The journey time for the Hexham–Riccarton trains was 1 hour 50 minutes, and from Riccarton–Hexham about 2 hours for two trains and 1 hour 47 minutes for the third train. Despite this the railway was important as a means of transport for residents of North Tynedale and provided useful income for the railway as shown:

Station Passenger Receipts (1st August–31st July)

Station	1874/1875	1899/1900
	£	£
Hexham NB	1344	1386
Wall	190	164
Chollerford	823	1083
Chollerton	323	421
Barrasford	394	470
Wark	976	1023
Redesmouth	683	453
Bellingham	1338	1612
Tarset	401	519
Thorneyburn	6	74
Falstone	372	366
Plashetts	458	278
Kielder	284	250
Deadwater	64	60
Saughtree	127	77
Riccarton	638	256

Source: Whittle 1979

The line was not, however, really a commercial success, its route although scenic could never be described as speedy! Excursion tickets were on sale from as early as 1865, but the line attracted few tourists. The railway, moreover, encouraged people to travel away from North Tynedale. It provided the first real opportunity for shopping trips to Hexham and Newcastle, reducing local retail trade. This weakening of

lower order settlements was common with the advent of the railway as people travelled to larger settlements that had previously been inaccessible. It also meant that the young could escape the traditional life style and occupations of the area enabling them to move to the then booming industrial area of Tyneside. The rural industries for which the line was built were also short lived—e.g. the Plashetts coal field although rich was soon exhausted, and the rural communities were too small and too dispersed to make the railway a viable proposition, and, as with most rural lines, declining revenue and increasing costs led to its demise.

But whilst it was not a commercial success, this railway was a success in other ways. It was important to the local community bringing much needed material and educational benefits to an extremely isolated area. As Whittle (1979) records, the line also employed many locals—particularly at Redesmouth which with its sidings, important signal box, locomotive shed and associated permanent way staff, had employed several dozen men at its peak, seven of whom in 1875 were employed for the station alone. In 1874 Wark and Bellingham stations had three permanent staff and other stations usually had one excluding signal-men. Riccarton station employed fourteen men in 1875 and as a result of the railway had a school, church and club facilities, to serve its railway community. Riccarton, at 850ft above sea level, had no road access, the nearest being 2 miles away, and the community was completely dependent upon the railway. Yet at its peak the village had a population of over 100 (Peacock 1985). In 1875 there were also six goods clerks employed by North British at Newcastle Forth Station, reflecting the importance of goods traffic at that time. The railway community also encouraged others to move into the area, people such as teachers, tailors etc. and as Charlton (1987) notes, whilst such incomers were not numerous their importance, in terms of the skills and services they brought, should not be underrated.

The lines also employed English drivers for the trains from Hexham to Riccarton. From Riccarton the Scottish drivers took over. There

was one exception to this—that of the “Dipper”, the engine which had taken 80 people to their death in the Tay Bridge disaster of 1879. The Tay Bridge had collapsed in a December storm only a year after being opened, but the engine was lifted from the river and restored at Cowlairs near Redesmouth for use later on the Border Counties Railway. It is said that the Scots were superstitious and refused to drive it again, though through trains were later driven by Scottish drivers, local trains remained driven by English drivers. The railway also gave support to many services—prescriptions and medicines were carried, it was used for school services in Bellingham and some of the stations such as Chollerton and Tarsset also doubled as post offices.

DECLINE

By the turn of this century receipts on the Border Counties line were falling, as shown in the trade figures above. The line had never been easy to operate—its long single line stretches, a ruling gradient of 1:100, limited passing loops, occasional severe curves, and weight restrictions, all placed limitations upon the operation of locomotives along the railway. Redesmouth was the only point along the line where two normal length passenger trains could pass one another, and consequently timetabling had to allow for the meeting of down and up bound passenger services at Redesmouth. The formation of the London & North Eastern Railway in 1923 unified the North Eastern Railway & North British Railway; and under the auspices of the LNER Company the long fostered North British Company notion of the Border Counties Railway being a main line into Scotland was discarded with the Border Counties and Wansbeck lines becoming regarded as being merely rural byways.

In 1910 the station at Riccarton was renamed Riccarton Junction, and in August 1919 Chollerford Station was renamed Humshaugh—after the nearby village. This was presumably to avoid confusion with the station names of

Chollerford and Chollerton (Peacock 1985).

One of the more interesting and noteworthy trains to use this line for many years, at this time, as Whittle (1979) records, was the nightly beer train from Newcastle–Edinburgh, which was reportedly derailed one frosty night in 1923 near Acomb colliery junction, with the barrels bursting and with sunrise its melting allowed local men to fill their bait cans! One Billy Niven is also reported to have driven this train and as it passed through Bellingham in the early hours of the morning he would toot the whistle several times for the benefit of his sweetheart in the town!

During the inter-war period one of the most important changes to occur in the North Tyne area was the afforestation around Kielder. Planting by the Forestry Commission started in the area on 45 acres at Smales Farm, with the afforested area being extended after the death of the 8th Duke of Northumberland in 1930 with the sale of his land to the Commission. In Autumn 1933 a new halt, Lewiefield Halt, was opened one and a half miles north of Plashetts. This was designed to serve the new forestry housing and consisted of a wooden platform and waiting “shed”. Between 1st December 1944 and the 23rd August 1948 the bleak hillside station of Saughtree was closed as an economy measure. During the second world war, Wall station suffered severe fire damage and wooden buildings were erected to replace those burnt down (Peacock 1985). In 1947 the station at Bellingham was officially renamed Bellingham (North Tyne)—it is said that this was to avoid confusion with the London suburb! (Whittle 1979).

Although the forestry development in the area helped to ease the burden of the run down of the Plashetts coal mines which were by this time uneconomic, the line suffered a severe loss of trade. The other colliery served by the line at Acomb was to last longer as it was within easier reach of markets but the railway still lost traffic to road. Similarly, although stone from the quarries in the Chollerton–Humshaugh area was significant, especially from the main quarries at Barrasford, Swinburne, Brunton, Fallowfield and Black Pas-

ture, this trade also increasingly moved from being carried by rail to road.

By the early 1950s heavy operating costs and low revenue, together with costly repairs to Hexham viaduct following floods in 1948, made British Rail announce the closure of the Border Counties Railway and the line was closed to passengers and most goods in 1956. The Wansbeck Valley line had been closed to passengers on the 15th September 1952, but it remained open for goods traffic for several years more. There was a local outcry when the closure plan was published, especially from the local people of North Tynedale. Car ownership was not high and local bus services minimal, but the British Transport Commission thought that buses could easily replace the railway, particularly for carrying school children to and from Bellingham. By 1952 the passenger receipts from Bellingham and Redesmouth (the two busiest stations) had been £1,011 and £224, 4,630 and 3,541 passenger bookings respectively. Falstone had 2,588 bookings worth £538, and Kielder had 2,528 passenger bookings and receipts of £660. Despite all the objections the line closed on Saturday 13th October 1956. On this day the trains were full as both railway enthusiasts and locals travelled the line for the last time. The locomotive—a class K1 2-6-0 No. 62022 was said to be clean and adorned with a wreath on its smokebox as it led the 11.10 am bound for Riccarton Junction out of Newcastle Central Station. BR 2-6-0 No. 77011 headed the 10.22 am southwards from Riccarton Junction and arrived at Hexham station more than one and a half hours late. Peacock (1985) suggests that this delay was due to an unfortunate failure of the single line tablet apparatus in the signal box at the Border Counties Junction. As a result of this breakdown the signal man was unable to release the

tablet to allow the departure of the 10.39 am Saturdays only service from Hexham to Kielder Forest. This then eventually departed with the aid of hand signals from a pilotman some 50 minutes late. This meant that the 10.22 am train from Riccarton had to be held at Redesmouth until 1.05 pm, (enabling the 11.10 am from Newcastle to cross it), reaching Hexham at 1.38 pm.

A short stretch of the Border Counties Railway from Redesmouth to Bellingham was kept open for goods traffic, with the outlet from Redesmouth to Morpeth via the Wansbeck line having been kept open. This last short length of the Border Counties Railway was closed, with the withdrawal of goods services west of Woodburn on the 11th of November 1963. During the last few months of the Border Counties Railway being kept open, the temporary repairs to the viaduct at Hexham had reduced the clearance there and prevented the use of the D30 locomotives, for this reason the 4-4-0s associated with this line never saw out its final weeks.

After the closure of the line it took several months for the furore to die down and it was not until it was seen to be “fait accompli” that British Rail could lift the tracks. Today much of the line remains visible, although the Tyne Viaduct has largely gone, and the River Rede viaduct has been replaced by a lower road bridge. The stations, bridges and viaducts elsewhere, however, largely remain. The decision to create a reservoir in the North Tyne Valley involved the flooding of an area from Kielder south eastward between Emmethaugh and Falstone, and has submerged the former section of the Border Counties Railway from Plashetts Station to Falstone Station but elsewhere much remains as a lasting reminder of the Border Counties Railway.

Border Counties Railway – Relevant Dates

	1845	North Tyne branch line proposal
4th August	1853	Blyth & Tyne Railway Act—railway extended to Morpeth
13th November	1853	Plans for Border Counties Railway deposited with the Clerk of the House

31st July	1854	Border Counties Railway Bill receives Royal Assent
11th December	1855	First sod cut by Mr. William Henry Charlton, at Tyne Green Hexham
5th April	1858	Hexham–Chollerford section opened Chollerford and Wall stations opened
21st July	1859	Border Union Railway Act passed Hawick–Carlisle line extension to Riccarton
1st August	1859	Border Counties Railway (Liddesdale Section and Deviations) Act— extension north to Riccarton
1st December	1859	Chollerford–Countess Park section opened Chollerton, Barrasford, Wark and Countess Park stations opened
13th August	1860	North British acquired Border Counties and Border Union Railways
1st February	1861	Countess Park–Thorneyburn section opened Redesmouth, Bellingham, Charlton, Tarsset and Thorneyburn stations opened
September	1861	Thorneyburn–Plashtetts section opened Falstone and Plashtetts station opened
12th May	1862	Falstone–Kielder section opened Kielder station opened
1st July	1862	Kielder–Riccarrton section opened Saughtree and Riccarton stations opened Hawick–Riccarrton section opened
1st October	1862	Charlton station closed
	1862	Wansbeck Valley Railway reaches Scots Gap
21st July	1863	North British acquired Wansbeck Valley Railway
1st May	1865	Redesmouth Junction opened Wansbeck Valley and Border Counties Railways linked
1st March	1880	Deadwater station opened
	1910	Riccarrton renamed Riccarton Junction
August	1919	Chollerford station renamed Humshaugh
Autumn	1933	Lewiefield Halt opened, one and a half miles north of Plashtetts
1st December	1944	Saughtree station closed as an economy measure
	1948	Kielder station renamed Kielder Forest
23rd August	1948	Saughtree reopened
15th September	1952	Wansbeck Valley Railway closed to passengers
13th October	1956	Border Counties Railway closed apart from Redesmouth–Bellingham section for goods going via Wansbeck Valley Railway

Autum	1960	Border Counties Railway—track lifted from all but Redesmouth–Bellingham section
11th November	1963	Redesmouth–Bellingham section closed—(B.C.R.) Wansbeck Valley Railway closed to all traffic between Redesmouth and Hexham
2nd October	1966	Wansbeck Valley Railway closed to all traffic between Woodburn and Morpeth
6th January	1969	“Waverley Route” closed by British Rail Riccarton Junction closed—becomes ghost village
	1974	Work started on Kielder Water
15th December	1980	Flooding of Kielder Water begins Falstone–Kielder section flooded

REFERENCES

- ALLEN, C. J. (1964). *The North Eastern Railway*, Ian Allen.
- CHARLTON, B. (1987). *Upper North Tynedale*, Northumberland Water.
- FORDYCE, T. (1876). *Local Records: or Historical Register of Remarkable Events*, Vol. 4, T. Fordyce, Newcastle.
- HOOLE, K. (1965). *Regional History of the Railways of Great Britain Vol IV North East England*, David and Charles, Newton Abbot.
- HOOLE, K. (1985). *Railway Stations of the North East*, David and Charles, Newton Abbot.
- LATIMER, J. (1857). *Local Records Northumberland and Durham etc. 1832–1857*, Chronicle Office, Newcastle.
- MACLEAN, J. S. (1948). *The Newcastle and Carlisle Railway*, Robinson & Co.
- PEACOCK BILL (ed.) (1985). *Border Railway Portfolio*, Cheviot Publications.
- SLADE, J. & M. (1975). “Railway Structures Near Falstone on the Former Border Counties Railway”, *Archaeologia Aeliana* Vol. III, pp. 195–203.
- TOMLINSON, W. W. (1967). *Tomlinson’s North Eastern Railway*, David and Charles, Newton Abbott.
- WHITTLE, G. (1979). *The Newcastle and Carlisle Railway*, David and Charles, Newton Abbott.

