

# The Bagenalstown & Wexford Railway Revisited.

J.M.Feeley & J.Sheehan

As we begin the twenty first century, when new sections of rail track are being built and/or revived to cater for commuter traffic, our thoughts return to the former branch line through south Carlow.

A section of track to connect Bagenalstown to Wexford through the Barrow Valley was proposed to parliament and the enabling act passed in 1854. At that time land purchase would have been much easier than now. The landlords owned vast acres and saw the railway as a means of developing their estates and associated town or village. Landowners ceded land for the track to the crown, on the understanding that it would be returned when no longer required. At that time railways were at the cutting edge of technology and a very popular investment in Britain and Ireland. Not only was it a mode of transport for people and goods, but also an important conduit for communication by mail, telegraph and later the telephone system.

In south Carlow the Bagenal and McMurrough Kavanagh families were major backers. Col Bagenal-Newton enticed the railway through Bagenalstown (then a village) instead of through Leighlinbridge (then the major town in the area) by offering land for the track across his estate. Likewise the McMurrough Kavanagh who owned vast tracts of land in the Borris area.

The initial plan was to build a railway through the Barrow Valley to link Dublin via Bagenalstown to the south-east ports. The coastal line through Wicklow did not then exist. In those early days of railway building there was no overall plan for a national system. Companies were formed to build tracks between the main population centres and were often in stiff competition with each other. The later decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> c saw a lot of closures, take-overs and amalgamations.

The Bagenalstown & Wexford Railway was designed by William Le Fanu a Dublin based engineer. His expensive design was intended as the mainline to the southeast. The initial intention was to have a branch to New Ross from Ballywilliam and another, farther along, to Enniscorthy; but the line had got no further than Ballywilliam when the company went bankrupt in 1864. Thus a line intended to be a mainline from Dublin to the south east ports was subsequently reduced to branch line status.

*What a very fine railway it was, too, with no sharp curves, no gradient steeper than 1 : 100, and all its bridges made wide enough for double track! Indeed, had its promoters been satisfied with lower standards of construction, and had they made alterations to the route here and there, the great viaduct at Borris (which cost £20,000) and the immense rock cutting at Kilcoltrim might have been avoided, and they might quite possibly have won the race to Wexford*

*The track from Palace East Junction, was made by Mr. Motte Emmett's who, by contrast, made the railway as*

*cheaply as he could. Its contour resembles a sheet of corrugated-iron in section, and if the train is long enough, progress over it was an exhilarating experience—something between the motion of a serpent and the helter-skelter of the fair-ground.* — J.P.O'Dea

By the time that the B&WR had been revived under new ownership (D&SER) another main line had been built from Dublin to Wexford. Also the Dublin to Kilkenny section had been extended to Waterford.). A line connecting Ballywilliam to Palace East (opened 1870) with a spur to New Ross (1887) followed later. From Palace an extension to Macmine Junction connected with the Wexford to Dublin line.



**Fig 1;** Bagenalstown Station. Photo by Roger Jones

The first sod for the B.W.R was cut by Lady Harriet Kavanagh in Borris on New Year's Day 1855. The section of track (8 miles) through flat terrain to Borris was completed in the same year. This includes a slight diversion south-westwards to include a stop at Ballyellin for Goresbridge. However the next 12 miles to Ballywilliam in Co Wexford took a further nine years to construct. Beyond Borris a gorge had to be spanned by the magnificent viaduct we see today. A short distance further on a cutting was required through a long hill at Kilcoltrim. The track then meanders between several low hills to reach a stop at Ballyling near Glynn Village. At this point the track runs along an embankment for several miles. There are approximately twenty seven bridges between Bagenalstown and Ballywilliam, seven on the Borris section and twenty on the remaining 12 mile section. For the hundred years that trains were powered by steam engines, water towers were required at intervals. A turntable to turn the engine around existed at Bagenalstown and Palace East. The directors wisely decided from the beginning to use the standard gauge track of 5'-3" enabling engines and rolling stock to move between this and other railway systems

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> c and early 20<sup>th</sup> c traffic on the line was as far as we can ascertain always mixed (ie passenger carriages + goods wagons). One scheduled train out and back from Bagenalstown per day to Palace East and one out-and-back morning passenger train from Bagenalstown to Borris. Scheduled passenger services ceased in 1931 except for special trains to football matches and pilgrimages etc.

The sugar factory established in Carlow in 1926 gave the line a new lease of life. Coal for steam raising was imported through the port of New Ross. Sugar beet during the campaign was collected at Palace-East, Ballywilliam, Ballyling, Borris and Bagenalstown for transport to the factory. A spur line from Carlow Station allowed beet to be transported directly to factory input point. Cattle bought by dealers at Borris fair were transported in wagons (containing sixteen beasts) to Dublin, mainly for shipment to Britain



Fig3; Borris Station. Ticket office

During the war years this railway in common with all others within the state was starved of investment. Services were severely limited due to the shortage of steam coal imported from England. Engines and rolling stock were ancient, some dating in fact from the previous century. British railway enthusiasts loved to come to Ireland and see working engines their grandfathers had talked about. A working museum in fact !

In 1945 the railway system was nationalised under CIE. During the following years a major re-investment took place. Steam locomotives were replaced with diesels and rolling stock updated. In order to finance this massive investment Dr Andrews was given the unenviable task of closing all branch and narrow gauge lines. The result was the present system, with only main lines radiating out from Dublin to major population centres.

The little railway that had led such a tranquil life for so many years died quietly and peacefully after a century of use. The last beet special ran in January and after that only two trains ran. These were: the R.B.A.I. Enthusiasts' special of Saturday 23 March 1963, through to Macmine Junction and back to Dublin by the coastal route, drawn by No. 151; and two days later a special for Borris Fair, out and back from Bagenalstown, drawn by engine A4, which was actually the last train to use the metals of the old B&W Railway.

- J.P.O'Dea

- After line closure, the rails were lifted beginning at Palace East Junction. Rails were drawn to a collection yard next to Bagenalstown Station. Most of the rails were purchased by Keenan Brothers Ltd and used as hayshed pillars. They are now spread the length and breadth of Ireland.



The Railway House, Ballywilliam

Fig 2; Ballywilliam Station House

## The Present

During the winter and spring of this year the authors followed the original le Fanu line from Bagenalstown to Ballywilliam. A general summary of our findings follows.

**Bridges:** Where the railway intersected with a public road, bridges were provided. Bridges that are constructed completely of finely chiselled stone still remain and are maintained by the county councils as part of the public road network, though they no longer serve any useful purpose.

Between Bagenalstown & Ballywilliam there are eleven of these.

Some all-stone bridges are rail over road as at Kilcumney and Ballyling. Another bridge type had a stone abutment on each side with a steel structure supporting the track. All bridges of this type were demolished in the 1960s and sold for scrap. Examples can be seen at Philip St, Bagenalstown and near Ballymurphy.

**Embankments:** A long stretch exists between Ballyling and Glynn village, also in the town of Borris at Clonygoose Bridge. In Borris a large stretch has been removed at the Vocational School before the viaduct. At Drummin where the track ran parallel to the road a stretch has been levelled and built over

**Station Buildings:** The station buildings have been tastefully restored and are now used as private dwellings. Excellent examples can be seen at Goresbridge, Borris and Ballywilliam. The gatekeepers lodge at Inch Crossing and the stop at Ballyling are also private dwellings. As a matter of interest the daughter of the manager for the beet loading depot at Ballyling still lives in the cottage she grew up in. A sprightly lady in her 80's, still full of memories. Further on at Corraun the gatekeepers lodge is now in ruins.

**The track:** In most places the track or road as railwaymen like to call it has disappeared completely.

The land was sold back to the adjoining landowners soon after closure and has been integrated into the adjoining-field systems.

After Bagenalstown Station the trackline has been replaced with houses and gardens. Further on at Philip St Bridge a section can be seen surrounded by bushes.

Similar stretches exist along the line in several places, a 'no-mans-land' and now a haven for wildlife. However some anomalies exist here and there. A section of track still fenced off exists at Ballyine Bridge (Borris) over forty years after the closure.



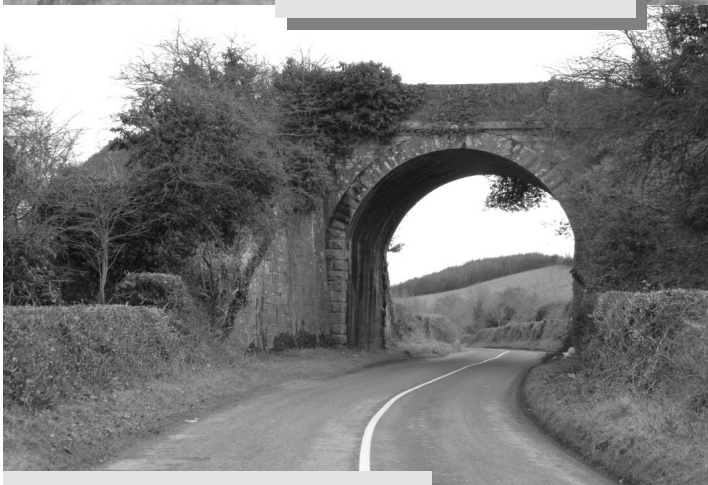
**Fig 4;** Atop the Borris Viaduct

### The Borris Viaduct.

This impressive structure is constructed of granite, both quarried and hewn from local field boulders. It took two years to build and has 16 arches towering 40' (on average) over the surrounding field. During construction an army of stone cleavers, masons and carters were employed. Two kilns nearby provided lime for the mortar.

• — M.J.Conry

This structure should last as long as the Roman aquaducts of Southern Europe, well over two thousand years



**Fig 5;** Kilcumney Bridge —Photo R Jones

### 'The Romance of Steam'

One of the last surviving engine drivers lives in Bagenalstown, namely Bertie Walsh. Bertie has no time for the 'romance of steam' ie always standing up, baked on one side and a cold breeze on the other. Trying to see ahead in bad weather with paraffin oil lamps to light the way. Not to mention reversing back from stations which did not have a turntable.

Compare this with being seated in the driving cab of a diesel engine, equipped with windscreen wipers, bright electric headlights, drive from front or rear cab. No contest!



**Fig 6;**  
Track fenced off at Ballyine Bridge, near Borris



**Fig 7;** Pretty round roofed cottage. Palace East

*'A selection of railway stories from the writings of the late E.F Byrne (Ned stones) of Kilcarrig St, Bagenalstown.*

1. One night Gus.B was on shunting duty and going round chalking up the wagons he heard the wailing of a puppy coming from under a tarpaulin. He brought it down to Hayes' where he knew it would receive a good home. Fondling the little bundle of fluff Missey asked. "What breed is it Gus?"

Like lightning came the witty retort. 'It is got by a porter out of a railway wagon..

2. One morning the early up train to Dublin was somewhat late. An irate passenger to be who had a tight schedule to make a connection to the West of Ireland was stamping up and down the platform gazing helplessly at his watch ticking away the precious minutes. Gus came out of the Signal cabin on the platform. The traveller angrily demanded 'How long will this train be Gus?'

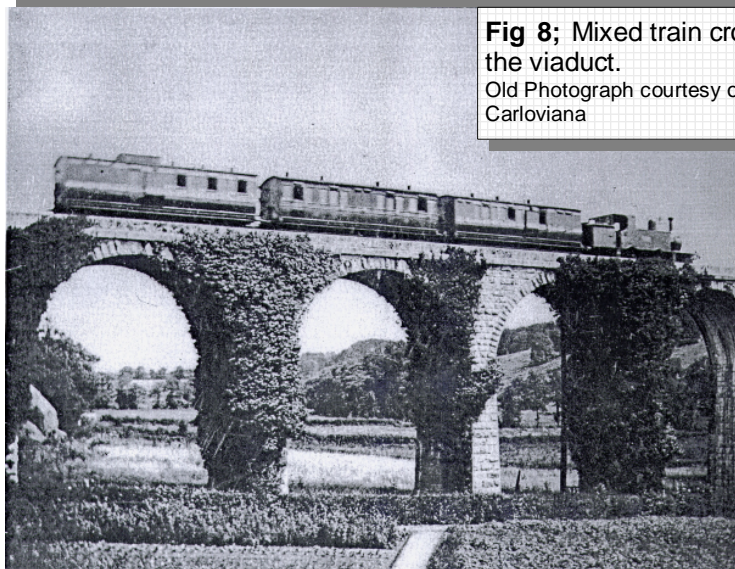
'I can't tell you that Guv till it pulls in, but yesterday morning I do know it had five carriages on it.'



3. On the train from Bagenalstown to Palace East. locally known as the Borrls Line. Well do I remember seeing Jim.F going up to the Railway with a box containing shoes or boots under his oster for someone 'down the line'. Other goods would be awaiting him also from shops in town to be delivered to clients who had sent notes or letters re what they required. These branch lines were a wonderful asset to Rural Ireland. Such items as the daily newspaper wrapped up in binding twine was hurled into the farmyard to the awaiting farmer and avidly read from cover to cover around the big open fireplace that night. On the way back the train would be flagged down for a gift of a bag of spuds, or a lump of freshly churned butter wrapped in muslin or a box of eggs to be divided among the triumvirate of driver, fireman and guard. All was done with delightful decorum. Swing-swing of services rendered kept delicately poised. Allah was praised and reappraised.

**Fig 8; Mixed train crossing the viaduct.**

Old Photograph courtesy of Carloviana



In early 2008 the authors traced the line to Palace East Junction. The site is in a very rural location surrounded by farmland. Very little remains to indicate that it was once a busy railway junction.

The OSI Historic Map ( shows two tracks entering from the NW, namely that from Ballywilliam and the spur line to New Ross. The track exiting at the SE of the map leads to Macmine Junction. The other tracks served for shunting and beet loading etc.

Below is a photograph taken on the occasion of last steam powered passenger train in 1963. The building at immediate right of photo no longer exists. However the station house, signal cabin are still extant and are used as dwellings. Note the large tree still thrives forty five years later. Behind the station house is also a pretty cottage.(Fig 7). The small girder bridge (where road traffic crossed the line to

Macmine) still stands and is maintained by Wexford Co Co.

Whereas all station buildings from Bagenalstown to Ballywilliam were constructed of stone, those at Palace are timber framed with galvanised iron external cladding and roof.

<< **Fig 9;** Photograph taken by an enthusiast when the last steam train from Dublin halted at Palace East. Inserted pictures show present day Station House, Signal cabin and section of overgrown trackline



PALACE EAST STATION, CO WEXFORD.

Photo taken c 1962

#### Further Reading

Bagenalstown to Palace East. J.P.O'Dea.  
Carloviana Vol2 , No 22 (1973)

Railways & Co Carlow. William Ellis. Carloviana.

Ask About Ireland Website. Carlow County Library

Carlow Granite Years of History written in Stone.  
Michael.J.Conry (2006)

**Fig 10-;** Section of OSI historic Map showing the junction about 1900.

