
THE GREAT NORTHERN & WESTERN RAILWAY

WITHIN a year of the line being opened to Galway, proposals were being put forward for a line into County Mayo. A meeting was held early in October 1852 at Castlebar chaired by the Earl of Lucan and attended by *inter alia*, the Marquess of Sligo and Lord Oranmore. A resolution was passed that a committee be formed to propose and carry out the most feasible project for the immediate construction of railway accommodation in County Mayo. The *Mayo Constitution* reporting on the meeting quoted Lord Lucan as saying that 'to jump to the conclusion that we must have a railway in the county whether we can afford it or not is quite absurd and ridiculous'. Lord Oranmore said he was quite willing to grant the land free, as was the Marquess of Sligo. On the other hand, Henry Browne said 'that if you run your railway on ten yards of my land you will pay for it'.

Tennyson's poem describing the charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava during the Crimean War brings to mind Lord Lucan, for it was he who gave the fateful order to charge in October 1854. He was recalled to England early in February 1855, an action applauded by *Saunders Newsletter* which referred to his every move as being not only 'a great blunder, but productive of awful disasters . . . his Lordship has got the sobriquet in the army of 'Lord Look-on' . . . while his Light Horse Regiment was called 'Bingham's Dandies', Bingham being the family name. About this time his wife left him and for the next few years, he devoted his attentions to bringing railway communication to County Mayo.

At a subsequent meeting, the committee proposed to recommend a guarantee on the county of interest on £300,000, this being the estimated cost of a line from Dublin to Castlebar, Westport and Ballina. The Midland directors suggested that the new line might commence at Longford, powers having recently been obtained for their extension from Mullingar. In December, the Midland board received a letter from Colonel Knox-Gore enclosing a memorial from the inhabitants of Mayo to the effect that they would not guarantee any railway which did not recognise Ballina and Westport as termini.

A much more grandiose scheme was discussed at another meeting in Castlebar in April 1853. A long and ably-worded prospectus read by Mr P B Ryan proposed a railway from Dumfries to Portpatrick in Scotland and then from Clones via Carrick-on-Shannon, Castlebar and Newport to Bellport in Clew Bay, with a branch to Westport. This line was to be known as the British & Irish Atlantic Junction Railway Company. Like many grandiose schemes, this was the last that was heard of it. Meanwhile, the Midland directors were considering an extension from Athenry to Tuam, Hemans being instructed in October to carry out a survey. Also at this time, the GS&W was planning a line from Portarlington to Tullamore and thence to Athenry, Frenchpark and Boyle, to be continued from there into Mayo. This scheme had received the sanction of the Roscommon Grand Jury and the Midland board was asked for its help in assisting those in Roscommon opposed to guaranteeing this project.

Considerable discussion took place regarding the GS&W line at the board meeting on 15th December, Hemans being requested to report on the best line from Longford through north Roscommon to Mayo. The GS&W backed project was in fact the Grand Junction Railway of Ireland, whose notice of application to Parliament had been published in mid-November. On 21st January 1854, the Roscommon Journal reported on a large railway meeting at Roscommon which was one of the most respectable and influential meetings held for a number of years. It was presided over by Lord Crofton. The great advantages of a line through the west, connecting up with the GS&W were stressed and the meeting unanimously passed a resolution approving the proposed line. The Grand Junction Railway Bill passed the Commons Standing Orders Committee in February despite strong opposition from the Midland. This caused the *Roscommon Journal* to note, 'many are the ways of killing a dog without hanging him . . . just as numerous are the devices of the MGW directors to defeat the project. So far every act of open or disguised hostility has only served to increase the pop-

ularity of the new line of railway'.

Again, in March, the Strokestown Union petitioned Parliament for a quick passage for the Grand Junction Bill, but in May it was thrown out – an act described as a heavy blow and a deep discourtesy to the west of Ireland. It came to light that the scheme had been put up by six contractors and a knot of GS&W directors. Following the issue of the prospectus, no money could be raised and the GS&W stepped in with powers being inserted in the Bill for it to subscribe £260,000. It also came to light that a large part of the Grand Junction's promotional expenses had been paid by the GS&W, an action which did little to endear the GS&W directors to their shareholders. The next scheme to be put forward was the North Western Railway of Ireland, the notice of application for which was published in November 1855. This company proposed a line from Strokestown to Castlebar with a branch to Roscommon. Powers were sought for a subscription by and working arrangements with the MGW.

The Chairman of the provisional committee was Fitzstephen French, other members including the Earl of Lucan and John Ennis. The line was to serve Elphin, Frenchpark, Ballaghaderreen and Swinford. The Midland agreed to construct a line at its own expense from Longford to Strokestown. As the time for lodgement of surveys was limited, it was decided in the first instance to take powers for a Strokestown to Castlebar line. The GJR scheme was meanwhile resurrected in an amended form with a southern extension from Ballybrophy to Athlone. The Midland extension to Strokestown and the NWR schemes came before the Commons in April 1856; whilst the Midland scheme might be good in itself, it should not be permitted to interfere with any larger scheme which might in the future be submitted.

With this setback, the NW promoters, probably wisely, withdrew their scheme and once again it seemed as if the counties of Roscommon and Mayo were to be deprived of railway communication. Yet another scheme made a brief appearance in May 1856, namely the Athlone & Sligo Railway. By now the Midland had formulated its own plans for Sligo by extending its Longford