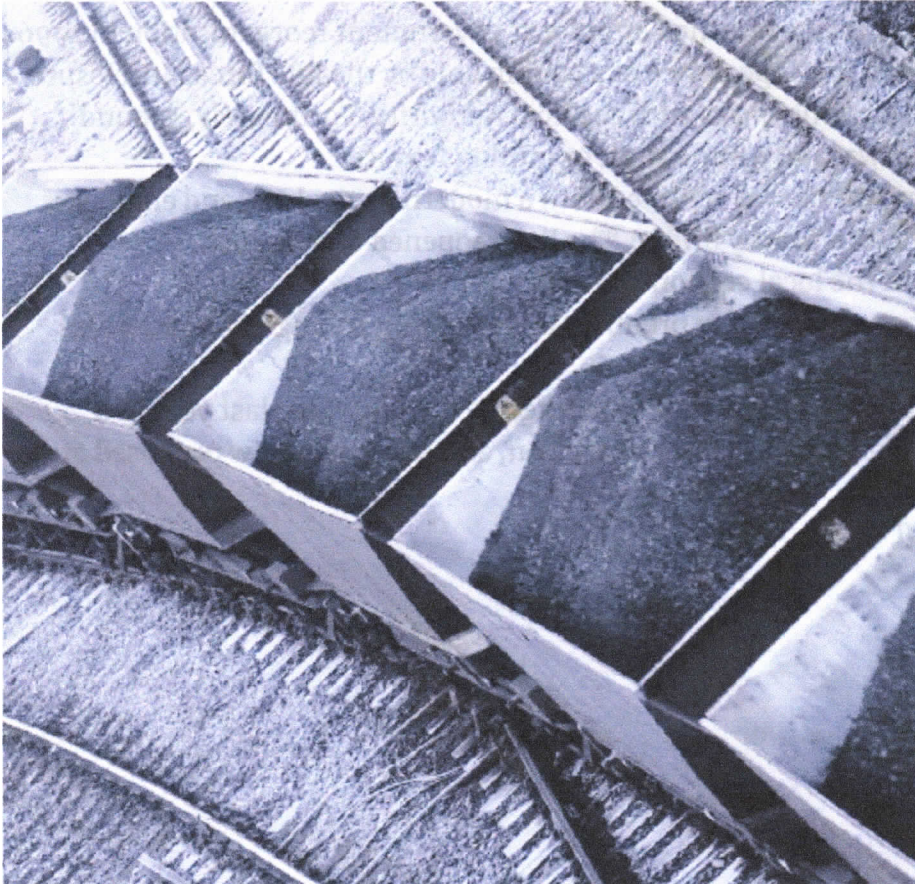


Coal that fuelled a passenger service

The Kilmarnock–troon line played a pioneering role in the development of our rail network, writes John Yellowlees

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The railway linking Kilmarnock with Troon today carries modest passenger numbers, including students bound for Ayrshire College's new campus adjoining Kilmarnock Station. However, once it played a pioneering role in the development of Scotland's rail network after the future fourth Duke of Portland inherited collieries around Kilmarnock in 1795.



Promoted by the Duke to convey coal for export from Troon Harbour mainly to Ireland, the line opened in 1812, and was the first in Scotland to obtain an authorising Act of Parliament. Its four-arch Laigh Milton Viaduct built of local freestone with sandstone ashlar facings across the River Irvine became the earliest railway viaduct in Scotland and the first on a public railway.

The line was engineered by William Jessop, who had built the Surrey Iron Railway as a plateway with L-shaped wrought iron rails. The wagon wheels did not have flanges, which enabled them to be easily moved to and from locations further from the railway. The gauge was 4ft, and the route was nine miles six furlongs in length.

Passenger traffic had not been contemplated when the line was conceived.

However William Wright of Kilmarnock operated an initially thrice-weekly passenger service with fares as low as one shilling single by paying the Railway Company a toll based on tonnage of passengers. Others too obtained permission to run their trucks, making it perhaps the first example of openaccess operation.

Around 1816 the Railway acquired a locomotive named The Duke, which marked the first use of steam locomotive power in Scotland. Its use had to be discontinued in view of the frequent breakages of the cast-iron rails. However the impact that it had on public imagination is shown by a silver model

presented to the 6th Duke in 1914 on the occasion of his silver wedding.

With incorporation into the wider network as steam displaced horses elsewhere, an easier alignment was required for steam, so the Laigh Milton Viaduct was superseded – and left to decline until miraculously restored in 1995 during a project inspired by Professor Roland Paxton. It can still be seen from today's trains, and now awaits repurposing by the Ayrshire Roads Alliance as part of an active travel network.

The realigned route settled down as part of a network of branches radiating from Kilmarnock and at first escaped the Beeching closures, being reprieved in 1964 along with the routes to Kyle of Lochalsh, Thurso and Wick. Perhaps this was just for geographical balance since it was soon proposed again for closure which took place in May 1969 with loss of both intermediate stations, only the mainline platforms at Barassie being saved. However later the then Stranraer Sleeper train was diverted this way, and local passenger trains returned after local government reorganisation in 1996. Fast forward to June of this year, when the appearance of a gaping hole by the line forced its closure while Network Rail investigated the circumstances with the Coal Authority. Fortunately, ground examination confirmed that the void was not a mine shaft or mining feature.

Excavations uncovered an old culvert which was replaced with a modern equivalent, and engineers took the opportunity also to do work on a nearby bridge. The line reopened on 1 August.

A sign of the continuing role of rail in the local economy is that on leaving Kilmarnock trains pass between the two premises of expanding rolling-stock business Brodie Engineering Ltd.

The line's significance as a site of transport heritage was marked by the unveiling last year of a National Transport Red Wheel at the present Kilmarnock Station, and another is now proposed at Troon.

John Yellowlees, Scottish chair, CILT