The Borders Railway at Gorebridge

A Brief History
Introduction

To coincide with the opening of the new Borders Railway this booklet offers a historical introduction to the different aspects of the railway over the past 200 years, including:

- Why build a railway to Gorebridge?
- Who would build a railway?
- Who would work on a railway?
- What happened on the railway?
- What happened to the railway?
- A new station
Why Build a Railway to Gorebridge?

The historic railway connection between Gorebridge and Edinburgh, dating from the opening of an horse drawn line in 1832 and leading to the eventual introduction of steam powered locomotives, allowed for the efficient movement of both goods and people in and out of Gorebridge. The opening of the Railway station in the town would begin an one hundred year period during which the town’s natural resources and people would readily travel to the city, the Borders and beyond.

Originally opened to connect the Marquis of Lothian’s mines at Arniston to Edinburgh City, the railway, which would eventually extend towards Hawick and Carlisle, allowed for the transfer of coal from the fully connected Gore and Emily Pits to Gorebridge Station and from Fushiebridge to the Vogrie Pits. Once production commenced, the railway provided efficient access to the Edinburgh and Leith docks, to the Borders mill towns, and as the electricity market began to dominate, to some of Scotland’s power stations.

The railway was also designed and functioned in serving the area well with passenger services. In 1900, seven passenger trains operated daily, the first service leaving Gorebridge
at 7.48 in the morning and the last returning to Gorebridge from Edinburgh Waverley at 10.57pm. A return journey to the city and back would have cost 2/6d(12 1/2p)*.

* See pricing list and timetable for comparisons between 1900 and 1923.

Who would build a railway?

The importance of the new railway systems to the quick and efficient transport of goods such as coal, cattle and produce, would ensure that leading business figures of the area had a vested interest in its construction and maintenance.

The original horse drawn line, funded by the Marquis of Lothian to serve his coal pits at Arniston Engine connected the area to the south end of the
Edinburgh and Dalkeith rail line. By connecting to the Edinburgh line, the Marquis could ensure that larger loads of goods could be transported to the city more frequently, avoiding the poor road system and the only other (more expensive) alternative; a system of canals. Such a venture ensured that the wealthy mine owners could maximise profit and exposure in a period before more efficient transport became available.

Later, the North British Railway Company (NBR) would develop the line into a double lined, steam-powered locomotive railway. It was under this programme that the station at Gorebridge would be founded in 1849. Subsuming the Edinburgh and Dalkeith Railway Company and connecting its line with the former Waggon-Way, the joining of lines and consolidation of companies was an integral part of NBR policy which sought to keep competitors out of the East Lothian rail market. Through doing so the company was able to dominate the large revenue streams which were becoming available through various coal pits which were being founded around the area.

### Who would work on a railway?

The varied nature of work and duties which were required for the efficient running of a railway line and station ensured that both skilled and manual workers of varying types were required for its successful functioning. At its height, Gorebridge Station employed a station master, two porters, three signalmen, a clerk and a lorry driver. The duties and responsibilities of each are detailed below.
**Station Master**

Personally responsible for the running, maintenance and safety of the railway station, the station master had often previously worked as a clerk, or, on rare occasions, a porter. In rural communities such as Gorebridge, the station master would have considerable social standing and would be widely recognised and respected within the community. The stationmaster at Gorebridge was comfortably accommodated in a flat above the former station entrance and ticket hall with a nearby bungalow.

**Porters**

Railway porters were fundamental to the smooth running of the railway carts and station. Arriving at Gorebridge station to meet the first train at 7am, they were responsible for off-loading the various goods which arrived to the town from the city.

Porters were responsible for the safe and comfortable transport of passengers, aware that, as a 19th century manual states, ‘Consideration of the passengers’ comfort and welfare is [of] the prime requisite. Indifference to passengers needs and grudgingly or carelessly performed duties serve only to drive away business.’

**Railway Clerk**

Often regarded as working within the ‘top tier’ of railway employment, from the late-Victorian period a railway clerk was hired for a range of administrative work including filling out traffic returns, processing correspondence, handling money and ordering stores.

From an educated background; career stability, high wages and societal standing ensured that station clerk was a desirable occupation for many - pitted above more menial railway occupations. Railway historian Frank McKenna argues that clerks had to possess a ‘sharp intelligence’ often later becoming station masters themselves.
Signalmen

A signalman’s primary responsibility was to operate a range of signals, either flags or levers which worked lights, to control the movement of trains and ensure their safe transports. A signal-box was also present at Gorebridge station, used to control the shunting (moving a railway cart from one line to another) of the main line.

John Ballantyne, former president of the Gorebridge Historical Society, recalls the story of two signalmen ‘Messrs Bertram and Firman’ who, due to the free time afforded to them by the nature of the job, used working hours to ‘put together’ bicycles - thought to have been recycled from older bikes found at the nearby dump.

What happened on the railway?

From organised protests to spontaneous riots, evening train fires to chaotic early morning arrivals, the Gorebridge community has many stories pertaining to the old Waverley Line; below is a (brief) selection of the tales of the rails.
Riot!

Perhaps the most infamous incident to befall Gorebridge and the railway line was that of 1846 riot involving a watch, the police, Irish, English and Scottish ‘navvies’ and eventually armed intervention. Instigated by the supposed stealing of a watch at a Gorebridge pub, and the arrest of two Irish railway workers, a large contingent of armed Irish navvies marched upon the local police station to ‘liberate’ their colleagues. In the ensuing chaos a police officer lost his life and the two inmates fled. Upon hearing of the incident a larger group of Scottish and English workers descended upon the Irish camps and, seeing them vacant, burned them to the ground - eventually resulting in armed forces flooding to the town to bring about order from the madness.

Protest!

Upon the closing of the railway in 1969, residents of Gorebridge and the local communities were so aggrieved at its closure that they literally took a stand - on the railway tracks. On the night of January 5th 1969 protestors lined the track and loaded a cardboard coffin, addressed to the transport minister, onto the train at Hawick - another group of villagers chaining themselves across the track at Newcastleloan. Local Minister Brydon Maben was arrested for his part in the protest, then local MP David Steel stating that ‘...in the entire history of the railway, nothing like that had ever happened.’
Early Morning Hustle!

The early morning arrivals to Gorebridge Station would have been awash with activity. From the postmen climbing and bundling over walls to meet the train and the days post, to the porters aiding in escorting bullocks, poultry and cattle on and off the train the scene would have been a vivid one. Locals often tell of bulls becoming loose and clambering up Gorebridge Main Street to the delight of local crowds.

Evening Fire!

Gorebridge local Fred Ballantyne recalls a story of an early evening train as the railway slipped into decline in the 1960s. With very little traffic on the line, a new, diesel engine train pulled into the station with wheels ablaze ‘like a Catherine wheel’. Amidst the quiet surroundings Fred recalls that confused shouting towards the driver ensued. The driver was quick to jump down from his cabin and, upon witnessing the blaze, returned to his cabin, retrieved his extinguisher, and quickly saw that the fire was dealt with. Upon having doused the flames, Fred recalls the driver swiftly retook the reins ‘and was soon on his merry way!’

What happened to the railway?

In the decades following the Second World War, much of the Britain-wide railway network began to run at an ever increasing loss. During this time, as a result of the Transport Act of 1947, nearly all forms of mass transport in the United Kingdom were nationalised and British railways were brought under the control of the Railway Executive of the British Transport Commission. Consequently, routes such as the Waverley Line and stations such as that at Gorebridge came under increased scrutiny and monitoring to ensure that they were financially sustainable.
As the post-war years passed, and by the 1960’s, Britain had fallen far behind its European counterparts in the modernization of the railway system, both with regards to using diesel locomotives and electrified lines. The continued dependence of local coal mines ensured that railways such as that which passed through Gorebridge were becoming increasingly unprofitable and unsustainable.

Inevitably, with the increased use of road and air to transport goods across the country, the lines which had lost significant traffic began closing in the 1960s. The Waverley Line was one such victim. The line closed to it’s colourful array of goods in December 1964, becoming unmanned almost three years later in November 1967. The historic line between Gorebridge and Edinburgh, which had seen both the community and town grow, was finally severed as Gorebridge Station was closed on January 6th 1969. A cut which rail expert David Spaven described as ‘a grave regional injustice’.
A new station

On the 4th of September 2015, for the first time since early 1969, a passenger service will run from Edinburgh to the Scottish Borders, passing and stopping at Gorebridge Station. The end result of decades of campaign work by groups such as the 1990’s ‘Borders Transport Futures’ which culminated in the 2006 legislative passing of the ‘Waverley Railway (Scotland) Act’, the line shall be opened with Royal assent counting the Queen amongst its first passengers.

A £294 million project envisaged to result in the continued growth of Gorebridge community both economically and physically, the railway will again connect the town with central Edinburgh and a community with its past.
The Waverley Line

Miles of track and mountains of steel, tons of ballast, nails and timbers. Spanners and spades, diggers and cranes, set squares, rulers, keyboards and ink - printing designs for the engineers. Bitumen, paint, tarmac and stone, electrics, diesel, whistles and oil. Spirit levels, hydraulics, soil and new roads, tunnelling and bridges, for people and cars. Refurbished stations of bricks and cement, substations, cables, buckets and brakes. Footpaths and viaducts, handrails and steps, parapets, embankments, red and green lights. Pumps, pipes, and platforms of stone, rock blasting, roundabouts, diversions and signs. Testing and retesting the track and the line, and that 93,000 sleepers are straight. The pristine new trains racing and dashing, clattering, rattling and rushing past rivers. From the song of the blackbird in Edinburgh gardens, to the buzzard in the Borders circling overhead. From hard hats to top hats, to bunting and flowers, the crowds are all cheering and stand seven deep. At the end, such excitement, and cheering and noise, the waving and smiling, the joking and laughs. Some raise a glass, as the roar builds up’ ‘Let’s hear it for the railway, the Waverley Line’.

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