

FEATURES SECTION

MEMORIES OF THE WIRRAL OF YORE : HOOTON - WEST KIRBY:

Twenty years ago the Hooton-West Kirby line closed to passengers Here we print a press report written the day before closure of the line. How many members remember the "Hooton Jogger"? This was a Great Western Auto train consisting of an Auto coach pulled or pushed by 1417 or 1457 ex GWR 48XX 0-4-2 Tanks. The "Hooton Jogger" made several trips between Birkenhead Woodside and West Kirby each day. Rails have once again been laid at the restored Hadlow Road station which contains relics of the branch line. On that last day of service in 1956 I remember seeing a green 2-6-2 ex GWR 41XX tank pulling a packed train of GWR coaches into West Kirby station. Although the line was to live on beyond the passenger closure it was never the same again. What a shame it was not electrified and so formed a Wirral "Circular" loop line (although in the post war plan for Cheshire it was proposed):-

"It's Goodbye To The 9.14" Nearly a century ago, when Birkenhead was a baby and the peninsula of Wirral little more than a strip of tiny villages, the Great Western Railway opened a railway line between Hooton and Parkgate. This year was 1866. For the first time, deep sea sailors and local fishermen from the old port of Parkgate had rail access to the bustle of city life in Chester. Twenty years later in the year Mr Gladstone's Government collapsed over the defeat of the Home Rule Bill, the railway company took the line down the coast through Heswall and Thurstaston, past green fields and clay cliffed beaches to Caldy and West Kirby.

Tomorrow, nienty years after the first excited passengers boarded the Hooton train on its maiden trip, the line closes to passengers. The final timetable passenger train leaves Hooton at 9-14 pm to arrive in West Kirby (Joint) station at 9-48 pm.

A special passenger-carrying train, which will not stop at intermediate stations is to leave West Kirby at 9-55 pm to return to Hooton. Thus will be enacted the closing scenes of a tragi-comedy which played to indifferent houses for the first eighty-nine years of its run. Tragic because Wirral loses a valuable asset.

We'll Fight - Comic because more than a score of trained railway men have for years tended trains whihe often carried only a solitary passenger. For eighty-nine years the Hooton line was

taken for granted. Then a year ago, the Transport Commission broke the news that it was to be closed. If the Mighty Commission had imagined that the apathy in Wirral would remain unstirred they were wrong. Angry passengers prepared for action. Businessmen bound for the city on the 8-25 am out of West Kirby discussed plans to fight the closure. As they boarded the train at Neston, Parkgate and Hadlow Road, the passengers realised that they were few in number and their case would have to be good. So, with the little urban councils who sat at Neston, Hoylake and Heswall, strong cases were drawn up to take into battle. Mainly the arguments were: The line is an essential service. It is not a good service, but with re-timing of trains it could attract more custom Abolish six coach steam trains and substitute diesels. Treat the line as a business, increaseits efficiency and make it pay.

By the end of October last year, Wirral was ready. Hoylake and Neston Councils were united in opposition to the Transport Commission. Councillors at Heswall could not support their neighbours because they felt their case was not strong enough but at Willaston a fighting city merchant Mr T.S. Bigland, had roused his friends on whose behalf counsel was briefed to speak.

Meanwhile, at railway H.Q. in London, the Transport Commission prepared a meeting place for the objectors to state their case. On December 8, 1955, the scene was set. A body with the helpful title of "North West Area Transport Users Consultative Committee" met in a sedate hotel in Manchester (owned, like the Hooton line, by British Railways) and over tea and plain biscuits, the fate of the Hooton line was discussed. Unlike a prisoner in British law, the Hooton line was unhappily, guilty before trial, and it was left to the objectors to show the "Court of Appeal" reasons why it should not be closed. The objectors did, it seems, tell the committee things which were new to them.

The commit se met again in January and decided "the line should not be closed". A Ministry of Transport inquiry is urged as soon as possible". The men on the 8-25 the next day w re glooful smiles. But they should have waited. Bad news came four months later when a Very Important Body sat in secret in London.

The Central Transport Users Consultative Committee - with powers superior to the North-West Committee - sent the following message to Manchester: "We have decided to ask the North-West Committee to reconsider their recommendation in the light of new circumstances. We think the line should be closed." On June 14, in Manchester hotel, the North-Western area committee withdrew from the fight. They decided that they could not, in the light

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of "further information" reaffirm their recommendation. They joined with the Central Committee. So the Hooton line was doomed

Tomorrow, after a bitter struggle, the travelling public of sire

Wirral bid farewell to the line.

Many harsh words have been spoken during the battle. Cllr. K.E.O. Griffiths of Willaston, a Neston councillor, said this: "The meeting between our officials and myself and the Consultative Committee was a mock tr il".

The further information which confronted the Central Committee when they decided to disagree with the Northern Committee's recommendation was not balanced by new representations from the objectors. The objectors were not invited! It is felt that British Railways had what might be called the "drop" on the objectors in that the Railways were represented at all Manchester meetings and at the London meetings and most important at all stages of the meetings. It seemed that the Transport Users consultative committees were not as generous as they might have been with the facilities they allotted to transport users.

However, when the shouting and the tumult died the local authorities applied themselves to the job of seeking better alternative transport facilities, both by road and on the Seacombe-Wrexham passenger train service which passes through Central Wirral. They have met with partial success only. Nothing has been done to improve the Seacombe line although arrangements have been made to take parcels at new points when the Hooton line closes. Buses will be available from Neston for early morning workmen, for boys of Calday School, West Kirby and girls attending West Kirby High School. Businessmen in south-west Wirral will have to use existing buses. So, until there is proof of additional demand, will casual passengers during the day.

Crosville Motor Services Ltd. promise to "Watch the position" Ghost Line - Goods trains will still ply between Hooton and West Kirby. R.A.F. men will continue to start their leaves and their training through the ancient portals of West Kirby joint station, but havened that it will be a chart line.

but beyond that, it will be a ghost line.

Parkgate and Hadlow Road (Willaston) stations will close, so will Neston South, Heswall and Thurstaston; Kirby Park and Caldy saw their last passengers a long time ago.

There will be no redundancy of personnel or stock. This will be absorbed elsewhere in the area. But there are still many, many regrets. Mr Bigland has this to say: "We have tried to save what could have been a national asset. Properly run this line could have made money for the nation. We have tried and failed.