



Irish Railway Factsheet: Great Northern Railway (Ireland)



GNR(I) and GNRB crests (1955 / 1959)

The war years had seen traffic on the **Great Northern Railway (Ireland)** in common with most other concerns, rise dramatically, more than doubling in some cases. However, by 1946 competition from road vehicles was eroding traffic and, while rates and fare increases managed to maintain receipts at around the £3½ million mark, expenditure was rising steadily. In the midst of this worsening financial situation the company suddenly faced competition from a new source - air services.

In 1947 Aer Lingus started operating services between Dublin and Belfast which posed a serious threat to the railways traffic, in particular first class business. The GNR(I) responded by introducing Ireland's first regular non-stop rail service of over 100 miles in length, the 'Enterprise' express. The first service departed from Belfast at 1030 hrs, hauled by Class V locomotive No. 83 'Eagle'. A special train of the GNR(I)'s most modern coaches was made up for the 'Enterprise'. Normally seven the train was composed of seven coaches, but this could increase to ten during the summer. The timing for the 112½ miles between the terminal stations was 135 minutes and while this was a comparatively easy schedule compared to pre-war days, the service proved so popular that the air service was withdrawn after only a short time. The return working departed from Dublin at 1730 hrs. In 1948 a second 'Enterprise', based in Dublin, was added, departing Dublin at 0930 hrs and returning from Belfast at 1715 hrs.

Also in 1948, but towards the end of the year, the last GNR(I) steam locomotives entered service. These were the five 4-4-0 VS Class locomotives, numbers 206 to 210 which were built specially to operate the 'Enterprise'. Based on the 1932 built compound locomotives of Class V, the VS Class had three-cylinder simple propulsion with Walschaerts valve gear. The Belpaire boilers were identical to those fitted to the V Class and certain other parts were interchangeable. The wheel arrangement used on these locomotives was dictated by the cramped layout of the erecting shops at the company's Dundalk works which precluded the use of locomotives larger than 4-4-0 or 0-6-0.

By 1949 the financial situation of the GNR(I) had worsened considerably. Expenditure exceeded revenue by £118,000 and it had become clear that the end of the company as a private concern was fast approaching. The summer of 1950 saw the introduction to traffic of the first of twenty diesel mechanical railcars ordered from A.E.C. Ltd. of Southall These cars, developed from a pre-war A.E.C./Great Western Railway design, were powered by two A.E.C. 125 h.p. under-floor engines,

each one driving the inner axle of one bogie through a five-speed, pre-selective epicyclic gearbox. Bodywork was by Park Royal. A full-width cab occupied one end of the car and there was a guards compartment at the other end. Accommodation was provided in two saloons for 12 first-class and 32 third-class passengers. The first-class saloon was located immediately behind the driving cab, giving the passengers a clear view forward onto the line ahead. The power cars could operate with up to two unpowered intermediate coaches, these being built by the GNR(I) at its Dundalk Works. One of the first duties of the A.E.C. cars was working the Dublin based 'Enterprise' express. While the restriction of the train size to four carriages proved something of a drawback, these units did have the distinction of being the first successful main line diesel railcars in either Ireland or Britain.

Also in 1950, in conjunction with CIÉ, the Belfast based 'Enterprise' was extended to run to and from Cork. Two sets of coaches were used, one GNR(I) and the other CIÉ, working Belfast-Dublin-Cork and Cork-Dublin-Belfast on alternate days. GNR(I) VS Class locomotives were used between Belfast and Dublin, with CIÉ locomotives, either 400 or 800 Class, being used between Dublin and Cork. The southbound journey took 6¾ hours and the northbound one 6½ hours. This working lasted until June 1953, but a through coach from Belfast to Cork was included in the 'Enterprise' set until September of that year, being handed over to CIÉ at Amiens Street, worked round to Kingsbridge and attached to a service to Cork.

In November 1950, the directors announced that the company had reached the end of its financial resources and the following month the shareholders authorised the Board to close the line as soon as possible. This decision caused great concern to the two governments who entered into negotiations with the company with a view to its acquisition. On 6th January, 1951 the GNR(I) announced its intention to discontinue all services in Northern Ireland within five weeks. Two days later, one week's notice was given to approximately 1,200 employees. This was withdrawn the following day when it was announced that the governments would meet the deficit. An offer of £3,900,000 was made to the company by the governments, but this was rejected by the shareholders. Following protracted negotiations the offer was increased to £4½ million and this was accepted. Pending the formal acquisition of the company, the governments agreed to finance the operating losses and to fund the purchase of materials and equipment. By the end of 1952 the growing deficit had reached the alarming total of £1,900,000, whereupon the two governments passed legislation in the following year bringing to an end 78-year existence of the GNR(I) as a private concern and establishing the **Great Northern Railway Board**.

The **Great Northern Railway Board (GNRB)** commenced operations on 1st September 1953. The Board consisted of ten members, five appointed by each Government, with the Chairmanship and Vice-Chairmanship alternating each year between A. P. Reynolds and G. B. Howden. Apart from a small number of vehicles introduced during the last years of its predecessor, the GNRB inherited an old and obsolete fleet of locomotives and rolling stock. The average age of the 194 steam locomotives was 37 years, with 33 being over 55 years old. Of the 329 coaching stock vehicles some 127 had exceeded their economic life of 45 years and only 14 were under 10 years old, while nearly half the wagon fleet was over 35 years of age. The Board felt that the continued use of this equipment was not only uneconomic but would also lead to further reductions in the volume of traffic with consequent worsening of the railway's financial position and concluded that diesel haulage should replace steam traction as soon as possible. Accordingly the Board sought approval from the two governments, in March 1954, for the purchase of an additional twenty-four diesel railcars at a cost of slightly over £½ million. The difficulty of reporting to two masters with differing views on the future need for railways soon became apparent and it took nine months before both Governments agreed to the Board's request.

The GNRB's modernisation plans also included the introduction of diesel locomotives. In April 1954

the Board sought tenders for the supply of three types of locomotive; 350 to 400 h.p., 800 h.p. and 1,000 h.p. The German company Maschinenbau A.G. Kiel (MAK) offered to construct and ship at its own expense an 800 h.p. diesel hydraulic locomotive for trial on the GNRB. This offer was, naturally, accepted and the locomotive arrived at North Wall on 14th December, 1954. Five days earlier the Tolka bridge had been washed away by floods resulting in an unplanned journey over CIÉ metals from North Wall to Navan, via Clonsilla, before continuing over GNRB tracks to Dundalk. The locomotive, which had a D wheel arrangement, was fitted with a Voith hydraulic transmission and its centre cab gave it a decidedly continental look. After successful trials with heavy goods trains on the Dublin - Belfast and Belfast - Derry lines and on local services out of Amiens Street, the Board purchased the locomotive for £29,500.

The main line from Dublin to the north crosses the River Tolka about half a mile outside Amiens Street. The destruction of this bridge by floods on the night of 8th/9th December, 1954 isolated the Board's Dublin passenger and goods termini and the locomotive shed from the rest of the system. It took nearly a month before a temporary bridge was in place, normal working resuming on 4th January, 1955. In the interim, passenger services worked to and from Clontarf station, while goods trains operated from Drogheda to Dublin via Navan and Clonsilla. A permanent concrete bridge was constructed during 1955 and was brought into use on 12th January, 1956.

During 1955/56 the Board closed the Scarva to Banbridge, Goraghowood to Markethill and Knockmore Junction to Castlewellan sections, the last mentioned resulting in the ending of workings over the former B&CDR line into Newcastle. Serious differences between the two governments became apparent in 1956 when the GNRB was instructed by the Northern Ireland Minister for Commerce to close 115 miles of line in the province; Omagh to Newtownbutler, Bundoran Junction to Belleek, Portadown to Tynan and the Fintona branch. The Dublin Government and the GNRB were vehemently opposed to these proposals, the latter arguing that if diesel traction was employed there would be a net loss to the Board of nearly £70,000 as a result of the closures. This opposition proved to be of no avail and the closures went ahead on 30th September, 1957. The Dublin Government felt it had little choice but to legislate for the ending of passenger services on the portions of the lines which lay in the Republic; Dundalk to Clones, Cavan to Glasslough and the Carrickmacross and Belturbet branches. this taking place on 14th October.

The order for the twenty-four diesel railcars placed by the Board at the end of 1954 had gone to the British United Traction Co. (B.U.T.). Delivery of the underframes and unassembled structural sections of the bodies to Dundalk Works commenced in September 1956, with construction being undertaken by the GNRB. The first cars were ready for service in June 1957 and the programme was completed in October 1958. There were two distinct types of car ordered; eight were similar to the earlier A.E.C. cars, with a full width cab at one end and accommodation for 12 first and 40 third-class passengers, and sixteen 56 seat third-class only cars with a half-cab and corridor connection at both ends. All twenty four cars were fitted with 150 h.p A.E.C. engines, driving through a four-speed non-pre-selective gearbox. The double ended cars could be marshalled as intermediates in sets, allowing eight-car trains to be formed. The B.U.T. cars took over the working of the Belfast based 'Enterprise' in 1957 and the Dublin based set in the following year.

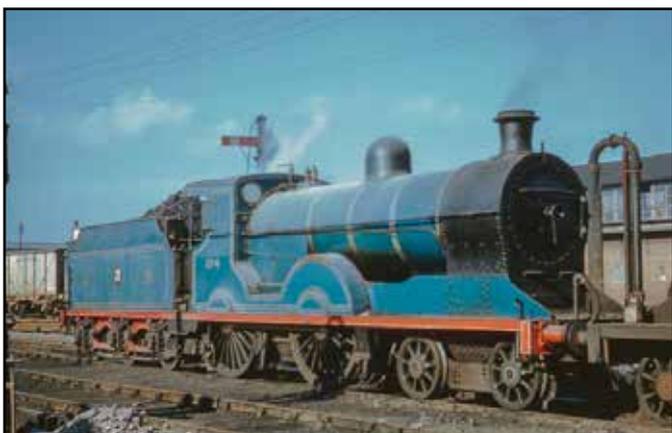
By this time the process which was to lead to the dissolution of the Board had already commenced. In June 1957, the Stormont Minister of Commerce announced his intention of terminating the joint agreement for the operation of the GNRB, adding the Portadown to Derry line had no long term future. In Dublin, the Minister for Industry & Commerce gave similar notice and it was agreed that the Board's assets would be divided between CIÉ and the UTA. The Great Northern Railway Act and the Transport Act (N.I.) were passed in Dublin and Belfast respectively during July 1958 and the GNRB ceased to exist at midnight on 30th September of that year.



GNR(I) Railbus 1 at Navan on an IRRS outing, circa 1950. (Photo © John Macartney Robbins - IRRS Archive)



GNR(I) AEC engine railcar 607 passing Rogerstown Estuary, Co. Dublin, circa 1951. (Photo © John Macartney Robbins - IRRS Archive)



GNR(I) steam locomotive No. 174 'Carrauntoohil' in the company's sky-blue livery at Amiens St shed, Dublin, 18 September 1960. (Photo © Graham Hoare - IRRS Archive)



GNR(I) Hill of Howth Tram No. 2 near Baily Post Office, Howth, 23 May 1959. (Photo © Tom Davitt - IRRS Archive)