



Irish Railway Factsheet: Northern Ireland Railways



NIR logo (1981)

Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) was incorporated under an Act of 21st April, 1967 and its formation did indeed mark the turning point in the fortunes of Northern Ireland's railway system. The new company was able to shed the road-bias of the UTA and concentrate on the running of the railway system. The system was divided into four regions; Down (Belfast-Bangor), Southern (Belfast-Border), Midland (Belfast-Larne Harbour and Ballymoney) and North-Western (Ballymoney-Derry and the Portrush branch). During the first years of its existence, NIR undertook the refurbishment of many of its stations, including those at York Road and Larne Harbour, introduced the system's first modern track maintenance machines, opened a new station at University and restored year-round operation to the Portrush branch. In 1969 the company introduced one of the most radical changes from traditional railway practice - the issuing of tickets on trains by conductor-guards. Not only did this allow further reductions in staff numbers, but it also led to the demolition of many obsolete vandal-prone buildings at now unstaffed halts.

In August 1969 the first of three 0-6-0 diesel hydraulic locomotives arrived in Belfast. These were built by the English Electric Co. and were fitted with Dorman 620 h.p. engines and hydraulic transmission. They were principally intended to work engineering trains and shunting duties at York Road, but it was also originally envisaged that they would work some stopping trains on the Larne line. Also in 1969, NIR placed an order with the Hunslet Engine Co. of Leeds for three 1,350 h.p. main line diesel electric locomotives to work a revamped 'Enterprise' service. Hunslet, in turn, sub-contracted part of the work to British Rail Engineering and to English Electric/A.E.I. Traction in order to meet the tight delivery deadline of 10 months. This was achieved and the three locomotives were shipped to Belfast in June 1970. Mechanically similar to BR's Class 20 locomotives, they had a Bo-Bo wheel arrangement, were double cabled and could run at up to 80 m.p.h. Not only were the locomotives numbered, 101 - 103, they also received names; Eagle, Falcon and Merlin respectively, recalling the GNR(I)'s V Class locomotives of some forty years earlier. To work with the new locomotives, NIR ordered eight coaches from BREL in Derby. These were based on the BR Mk11b design, but with certain modifications to suit NIR's requirements. The summer make-up of the train was seven coaches, with a locomotive at each end, while during the winter this was reduced to five coaches and a single locomotive, a driving trailer being provided at the opposite end of the train to the locomotive. On 3rd July, 1970 a demonstration run for invited guests operated from Belfast to Dublin in 2 hours 4 mins., and the new train entered public service the following day.

The 1970s saw a complete reversal of the previous policy of sacrificing railway facilities to make way for new road schemes. This was witnessed by projects such as the realignment of lines at Hollywood and Seagoe, new stations at Larne Town and Portadown, the new workshops at York Road, the new freight terminal at Adelaide and the replacement of level crossings by bridges. But it was one project more than any other which exemplified the new attitude of the Government towards the railway. This was the rebuilding of the Belfast Central Railway.

The 1952 Report of the Transport Tribunal and the 1963 Benson Report had both recommended that the Belfast Central Railway be retained and the feasibility of diverting Bangor line trains to Great Victoria Street be examined. However, no action was taken by the UTA, the line fell into disuse and was closed in 1965. However, also in 1965, consultants were engaged by the Northern Irish Government to prepare a comprehensive plan for the future development of all modes of transport in the Belfast region. Their findings, published in 1969, concluded that a scheme which would involve the closure of both Great Victoria Street and Queen's Quay stations and their replacement by a new station at Maysfields on a revamped Belfast Central line would provide undoubted economic benefit to the region. However, a further two years were spent on additional studies before the announcement of the Government's decision to proceed with the project was made on 10th February 1972.

Contracts for the construction of two new stations, at Maysfields (Central Station) and Botanic, and the rebuilding of the trackbed, bridges etc. were signed in October 1973. Work undertaken included the virtual rebuilding of the trackbed from the drainage up, the widening of one $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile section from single to double-track and the refurbishment or construction of five bridges, including the replacement of the Lagan viaduct with a new double track 440 feet long six-span bridge. Bangor line trains started using Central Station on 12th April 1976, while those formerly operating out of Great Victoria Street were diverted to the new station on 26th April, thus bringing the Bangor-Central-Portadown link-up into full operation and providing Belfast with, for the first time, a 'cross-town' suburban service. A new Central Services Depot was built on the site of the Queens Quay depot as part of the project. A new halt at Bridge End was opened on 9th May, 1977.

Part of the plan was the diversion of Derry services from York Road to the new Central Station, which involved upgrading the Antrim-Knockmore junction section. Passenger services were restored to this section in January 1974. Following the construction of the 'third road between Knockmore and Lisburn, Derry line services were finally diverted to Central in 1978. The new route taken by Derry line trains added 20 minutes to their running time. This disadvantage was offset by the advantages gained by connecting with the rest of the system, including cross-border services at Central Station and by serving Botanic station, which is closer to the city centre than York Road station.

During 1974/75, NIR placed nine new 80 class diesel-electric trains in operation, four 3-car and five 2-car which had been built by BREL, Derby. Mechanically and electrically they were similar to the 1966 built 70 class, but structurally they were based on the British Rail MK 11b bodyshell, already used by NIR in its 'Enterprise' stock. The power cars were fitted with an English Electric 560hp diesel engine, with electric transmission to two traction motors mounted on the rear bogie. Accommodation was provided for 45 passengers. Unlike previous occasions the 1972 order also included intermediates and driving trailers. The intermediates were basically a standard MK 11b coach, but with an additional door on each side to speed up passenger flow and 87 seats were provided. The driving trailers are similar, but have a small cab at one end, at the expense of six seats. All three types are integrally constructed, but the power cars, because of their weight, also have an underframe. The 80 class was introduced to replace ageing MED, MPD and ex-GNR railcars on suburban workings to Bangor and Portadown. The railcars proved so successful that a second series was ordered in 1975 and entered service in 1977/78.

The NIR system suffered greatly from terrorist activity after 1970, with CIÉ cross-border services not being immune from attack either. Bomb attacks and hoax warnings caused severe damage to stations, rolling stock and trackwork and much disruption to services. The three Belfast termini, Great Victoria Street, Queen's Quay and York Road were wrecked a number of times by bombs, as were Lurgan, Portadown and Derry. Rolling stock was damaged, fortunately without loss of life on most occasions, either through vigilance on the part of passengers and staff or good luck. While there were bomb attacks and hoaxes throughout the system, the worst affected section of line was in the Newry area of south Armagh. The line through this area was closed on countless occasions, many of the incidents being centred on the now infamous Kilnasagart bridge, just on the northern side of the border. Freight trains were targeted on many occasions being either blown up where they were hijacked or sent running away down the gradient towards Portadown.

The first direct attack on a passenger train occurred on 6th February, 1976, when a 5 lb bomb exploded under the 1730 hrs CIÉ 'Enterprise' service from Belfast. The entire train derailed, coming to rest against the side of a cutting. On this occasion there was no loss of life and damage to the train was relatively minor. The first fatality to a passenger occurred on 21st May of the same year, when a bomb exploded on a Bangor-Portadown local train near Broomhedge killing one passenger. On 12th October, 1978, three devices exploded on the 0800 hrs ex-Dublin as it neared Central Station in Belfast. One passenger was killed and several others were seriously injured.

Early in 1979 it was announced that NIR was to purchase two new locomotives and twelve second hand carriages to up-grade the 'Enterprise' service. The order for the locomotives went, surprisingly, to General Motors in the U.S.A. and not to a British company. The new locomotives were identical to CIÉ's 071 Class and were delivered to North Wall on 16th December, 1980, before being hauled to Inchicore for testing. Two days later they travelled to Belfast under their own power. The coaches, from British Rail, had arrived in York Road during the spring of 1980 and had largely been refurbished by the time the new locomotives arrived. Some of the stock from the 1970 'Enterprise' set was modified to work with the new train. Following testing and driver training, the inaugural run of the new 'Enterprise' took place on 2nd February, 1981, with both the new locomotives double-heading the train as far as Portadown. Initially the make-up of the train was 7 bogies, but this was later increased to 8 - 10 bogies as more stock became available.

Up grading of the company's rolling stock continued with the decision to replace the ageing 70 Class railcars in 1984 and an order for nine 3-car railcars was given to BREL. The bodywork, which has power operated sliding doors, was based on the BR Class 455 electric units and, on the power cars, was mounted on Mark I underframes. To save costs, a decision was taken to use, after they had been heavily refurbished, engines, generators and traction motors, recovered from the 70 Class as they were withdrawn. As there were to be nine new sets, but there were only eight 70 Class, the ninth set of equipment was recovered from a withdrawn 80 Class power car. Each 3-car set can accommodate 227 passengers. Officially the new sets are designated 450 Class, but as the power cars are all named after notable Northern Irish castles, they are commonly referred to as the 'Castle Class'. The new trains entered service in October 1985. At about the same time as the Castle Class was being ordered, NIR instigated a programme of strengthening the 2-car 80 Class set, using modified inter city stock made redundant by more recent acquisitions.

With the re-opening of the Belfast Central Railway in 1976 two of the three routes out of Belfast were connected. The third, the line to Larne, was left virtually isolated at York Road. In the 1960s York Road station had been on the periphery of the city centre. But during the following two decades, with developments in the Great Victoria Street area, the city centre effectively moved southwards, even further away from York Road, further deterring commuter traffic. There was, of course, still

the link between Bleach Green and Antrim which was used for rolling stock transfers, engineering works trains and special passenger traffic. NIR felt that the construction of a line linking York Road with Central would offer significant advantages; Larne line commuter services could penetrate the city centre, thus boosting traffic and Derry line services could be returned to their original route via Bleach Green, thereby saving up to 20 minutes running time, while still serving Central and Botanic stations. Significant savings would also be made in the reduction of terminal stations and maintenance facilities. Detailed market research, as well as financial and economic analysis was undertaken into the proposal before approval to proceed was received from the Government 1989.

Part of the 'Cross-Harbour Link-Line' project entailed the replacement of the Central Services Depot at Queen's Quay with a new facility at York Road. To free the site of York Road terminus for the construction of the new maintenance depot, a half-mile section of new line was laid, connecting the Larne line, north of York Road Works, to a temporary terminus at Yorkgate, located slightly to the south of the existing station, the new line and station being brought into use on 17th October, 1992. Work on the construction of the section from Yorkgate to Lagan Junction, on the Central-Bangor line, began in 1991. This section includes a 1,425 metre long viaduct with 45 spans, including a 3-span crossing of the River Lagan, the centre span of which is 83 metres long. At the Lagan Junction end of the viaduct is a 400 metre embankment. The viaduct carries single track with a passing loop about midway along it at the site of the future Donegal Quay station. The line opened on 29th November 1994, with Larne line trains operating through to Central Station and beyond.

To achieve full city centre penetration, without bus links, NIR proposed the re-opening of the former GNR(I) terminus at Great Victoria Street. Approval for this project was granted in January 1993. The work entailed the relaying of a double line from Central Junction, the building of a modern four platform station on the site of the original terminus and the construction of a new double track spur to allow trains operate directly between Great Victoria Street and Central stations. The new station and its associated trackwork came into use on 30th September, 1995. Amongst other proposals considered by NIR during the early 1990s were the construction of a freight link to Belfast docks and the reopening of part of the B&CDR main line as part of a wider LRT scheme.

During October 1995, the Government published proposals for the reorganisation of transport services in Northern Ireland. While the report, Transportation in Northern Ireland, The Way Forward, was not specific on future developments, some of the proposals contained therein seemed to bode ill for the railways; there is unlikely to be a transfer of freight traffic from road to rail, improvements in public transport services outside the existing rail network are most likely to be delivered by bus based measures, co-operation and co-ordination of road and rail services and the sale of non-core activities. It was announced in January 1996 that work on the upgrading of the Bleach Green to Antrim section was to be postponed due to expenditure restraints imposed on NIR.

It was realised by both **Northern Ireland Railways and Iarnród Éireann** that considerable new investment would be required to bring services on the cross-border line, the island's prime inter city trunk route, up to the standard that would be demanded in the 21st century and to compete with the developing road network. After considering seven options, it was decided that the best financial case was for the upgrading of the track to 90 m.p.h. standard, to introduce new train sets of the highest European standard and the operation of nine services in each direction. Approval was sought from both governments and its granting was announced at the Anglo-Irish conference meeting of 27th April, 1992. Work commenced in March 1993 and has involved the replacement of the original jointed track on timber sleepers with continuously welded rails on concrete sleepers, the raising of overline bridges to accommodate larger freight containers, the replacement of a number of underbridges and the remodelling of station layouts at Drogheda, Dundalk and Portadown.

To operate the new services 28 vehicles, four driving van 1st class trailers, four 1st class trailers, four catering trailers and sixteen standard class trailers, were ordered from DeDietrich in France. Based on the successful 'Eurostar' trains operating through the Channel Tunnel, the new coaches are 23 metres long, fully air-conditioned and feature external sliding plug doors, but unlike the 'Eurostar', the cross-border trains are not articulated. It was originally envisaged that these vehicles would be formed into four 7-car trains. However, the dramatic increase in traffic on the cross-border route following the paramilitary cease-fires in Northern Ireland, rising from 535,000 passenger journeys in 1993 to 832,000 in 1995 has resulted in a re-evaluation of the proposed train consists.

By June 1996 nearly 100 miles of track and 40 bridges had been upgraded, and delivery of the first of the new coaches had taken place. On completion of the project it is envisaged that the journey time between Belfast and Dublin will be reduced to 100 minutes non-stop and 105 minutes with four stops.

Additional Sources:

Allen, Jonathan M, 2003, "35 Years of NIR 1967 to 2002", Colourpoint Books, Newtownards, Northern Ireland (ISBN 1 904242 00)

McMillin, Edwin, 2016, "Dark Days and Brighter Days for Northern Ireland Railways", Colourpoint Books, Newtownards, Northern Ireland (ISBN 1780730942)



NIR Hunslet built locomotive 101 'Eagle' on an 'Enterprise' train at Great Victoria St, Belfast, 12 September 1970. (Photo © James Russell Currie - IRRS Archive)



NIR 80 Class railcar set 93 at Belfast Central, 21 May 1983. (Photo © Norman E Gamble - IRRS Archive)



NIR 111 Class locomotive 113 'Belfast & Co. Down' at Drogheda, May 1985. (Photo © Pat McQuail - IRRS Archive)



NIR General Motors built locomotive 209 on trial at Kildare on the Dublin-Cork main line, circa 1995. (Photo © Pearse Mckeown - IRRS Archive)