



Irish Railway Factsheet: Ulster Transport Authority



UTA crest and logo (1959 / 1961)

The White Paper published by the Stormont Government in 1946 proposed the amalgamation of the B&CDR (Belfast & County Down Railway), the NCC (Northern Counties Committee) section of the London Midland & Scottish and the Northern Ireland Road Transport Board, together with the portion of the Great Northern Railway (Ireland) which lay in Northern Ireland, into a single organisation - the **Ulster Transport Authority (UTA)**.

The Transport Act (N.I.) 1948 gave force to these proposals, except those concerning the GNR(I), and on 1st April of that year the UTA came into existence. The B&CDR and the NIRTB became part of the UTA on 1st October 1948. Control of the NCC had, with the nationalisation of the railways in Britain in 1948, passed to the British Transport Commission from which it was purchased by the Stormont Government for slightly in excess of £2½ million, before being incorporated into the UTA on 1st April, 1949.

For the first year or so after its inception, the UTA continued to operate the railways in much the same manner as had been the case previously. The company's identity quickly became established with new uniforms, colour schemes, tickets etc. and the renumbering of the B&CDR's locomotive fleet. There was also a limited exchange of locomotives between the NCC and B&CD sections. However, it soon became clear that the UTA's policy was based on the complete closure of the railway system, with the exception of the main line from Belfast to Derry and the Bangor, Larne Harbour and Portrush branches, while freight would be diverted to road services.

The UTA applied to the Transport Tribunal in March 1949 for authority to proceed with large scale closures of former B&CDR lines. The proposed closures were bitterly fought by opponents of the plan, but to no avail. Part of the former main line, from Comber to Newcastle, and the branches Ardglass and Ballynahinch closed in January 1950. The Belfast to Donaghadee line closed and UTA services on the Newcastle to Castlewellaan line ceased three months later, thereby leaving Belfast to Bangor as the only part of the former B&CDR actually operated by the UTA. The Authority then turned its attention to the former NCC section and closures here were equally drastic. July and August 1950 saw the complete closure of the lines from Kingsbog to Ballyclare, Larne Harbour to Ballyclare, Macfin to Kilrea, Magherafelt to Draperstown, Ballymoney to Ballycastle and Limavady to Dungiven. There were more closures in May 1955, which saw the withdrawal of all services from

the Limavady and Magherafelt to Cookstown branches and in 1959 when the line from Cookstown Junction to Kilrea closed completely

In the meantime, the UTA, despite its anti-rail bias, initiated a number of developments on those lines which did survive which were aimed at improving the railway's economic position. The Authority had come to the conclusion that the complete dieselisation of its railway operations might solve the problem of cost cutting. The 12-mile Bangor branch, now devoid of goods services, but retaining heavy passenger traffic, was the ideal line on which to experiment with the concept. Following trials with borrowed GNR(I) railcars, the UTA constructed an experimental three-coach diesel rail car at its Duncrue Street works during the latter half of 1950 and early the following year. Converted from conventional locomotive hauled stock, the new train comprised two power cars with an intermediate unpowered trailer. Each of the power cars was fitted with two A.E.C. under-floor engines, while all three cars were heavily remodelled and power-operated sliding doors were fitted. The first of the Multi-Engine Diesel (MED) trains went into service in August 1951. Following the prototype train, the UTA built a further fourteen similar three-car trains during 1952 and 1953 and by the spring of 1954 all services on the Bangor line were covered by railcars. The power cars of these later trains were fitted with Leyland-Walker 125 h.p. under-floor engines. Speeds and timings on the branch showed an immediate improvement following the introduction of the MEDs. In 1956 the engines were updated to 165 h.p., allowing the inclusion of an additional trailer in each set. Steam working from Queen's Quay shed ceased on 12th December, 1953, when the last B&CDR steam locomotive in use, No. 229, was replaced by ex-NCC diesel shunter No. 17.

While the MED concept worked well on the Bangor line, it was considered unsuitable for the complete dieselisation of the former NCC line. Not only was there suburban traffic in the Belfast area, but there was also a 95-mile long main line with express passenger work involving running at speeds of up to 75 m.p.h. and considerable volumes of freight traffic. The result was the development of the Multi-Purpose Diesel (MPD) railcars, of which a total of thirty power cars and nineteen trailers were built between 1957 and 1962. The first ten power cars were intended for use on Derry trains, with the remainder being for local services. As was the case with the MEDs, the MPDs were converted from existing locomotive hauled stock. The power cars were originally fitted with a single Leyland 275 h.p. engine, mounted beneath the chassis and driving both axles on the rear bogie through a torque convertor. The Leyland engines were never entirely satisfactory and twelve cars were re-engined with A.E.C. 260 h.p. engines and seventeen with Rolls Royce 275 h.p. engines in the mid-1960s. The only power car not to be re-engined was No. 58 which was written-off following a collision with a motor car on a level crossing after just six weeks in service. The Belfast-Derry express services, on which the MPDs were initially used, called for a high power to weight ratio and saw trains formed of four power cars and a restaurant car. On local services the power cars operated with trailers.

The UTA's stated aim of reducing its railway network to leave just the Belfast to Derry main line and the Bangor, Larne and Portrush branches had almost been achieved by October 1958 when the GNRB was dissolved and its assets divided between the Authority and CIÉ. The UTA received 173 route miles of line, 83 locomotives and 28 railcar units and soon set about reducing its newly acquired mileage. Passenger services were withdrawn from the Knockmore Junction to Antrim section in 1960.

In 1962 the Stormont Government asked Henry Benson, a London accountant, to investigate the position of the railways in Northern Ireland and to make recommendations about their future. His report, which was presented to Parliament in July 1963, presented a bleak picture. Traffic, both passenger and freight, had been declining for many years and, with continued improvements to the road network and the growth in private transport, he anticipated that this decline would continue. Despite considerable efforts by the UTA. to make the railways pay their way losses were rising and

by 1962 were approaching £½m. Examining the rolling stock fleet, he found '..... that a large part of the railway assets is old-fashioned, of considerable age and in a deteriorated condition'. The average age of the locomotive fleet was 30 years, carriages 39 years, goods stock 34 years and service vehicles 48 years.

Benson saw no likelihood of attracting additional freight or passenger traffic to the railways, except for commuter traffic in the Belfast area. He therefore recommended the retention of the commuter lines from Belfast to Larne Harbour, Portadown and Bangor and that these lines be operated by diesel railcars. He also suggested that the Belfast Central line be retained and some Bangor line services be diverted to operate to and from Great Victoria Street (this recommendation had also been made in a report from the Transport Tribunal in 1952). The line from Portadown to the Border would also be retained, for political reasons, but would be singled south of Portadown. All other lines would close and all freight traffic would be transferred to road services. Benson was also of the opinion that the constitution of the Authority itself was not satisfactory as it consisted of only one full-time member, the chairman, and nine part-time members. He concluded that any recommendations regarding the future of the railways would be of little value if the organisation for managing them were unsuitable.

The Benson Report, despite the savage proposals in respect of line closures, can now be seen as the turning point in the fortunes of Northern Ireland's railway network. The recommendations set out in the report, in particular those concerning the structure of the UTA, soon led to the inevitable conclusion that Northern Ireland's transport needs would be better met by the dissolution of the Authority and the creation of a Holding Company with separate subsidiary companies to operate the railway, road passenger and road freight businesses. This process was soon set in motion and was to see the final demise of the UTA within five years.

Before this could take place, the UTA implemented another round of line closures. The lines from Portadown to Derry, Goraghwood to Warrenpoint and Dungannon to Coalisland closed in early 1965. The Belfast Central line, which both the 1952 Tribunal Report and Benson had recommended retaining, closed in July 1965, but was not formally abandoned, and all regular internal freight services had ceased by the end of the year. The lines from Bleach Green to Derry, Knockmore Junction to Antrim and Coleraine to Portrush were kept open for political reasons, while the proposed singling of the cross-border line south of Portadown was not well received by CIÉ and, following negotiations between the two governments, the matter was dropped. The line did in fact close for 22½ hours during 1966 on the orders of the Northern Ireland Government. Sunday, 17th April marked the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising and a large demonstration was planned for Belfast to commemorate the event with a large contingent expected to travel from Dublin by train. The Stormont Government, fearing riots at Great Victoria Street station, ordered that no trains enter Northern Ireland from the Republic between 2130 hrs on the Saturday and 1900 hrs on the Sunday.

The first half of the 1960s also saw the UTA open new commuter stations at Seahill and Crawfordsburn, install automatic train washers at Great Victoria Street and York Road stations, begin to market improved season tickets, install colour light signalling between Belfast and Lisburn and commission Northern Ireland's first automatic level crossing at Lissue, near Lisburn. The railcars introduced during the 1950s and early 1960s, while cheap to operate and making good use of readily available power units and transmissions, were noisier and more uncomfortable than conventional locomotive-hauled rolling stock and were considered unsuitable for inter city journeys.

In 1966 the first of a new generation of railcars entered service. Unlike the earlier models, which had low-powered engines with mechanical transmissions spread throughout the train, the 70 Class, as the new railcars were known, had a single English Electric 550 h.p. engine, mounted above

the underframe in a compartment between the driving cab and the passenger saloon, and electric transmission. The UTA imported underframes and body parts for eight power cars and modified fourteen coaches, six becoming driving trailers, all the work being undertaken at York Road Works. The 70 Class first saw service on the former NCC section, but were later to be found working cross-border trains. Because of their high power they were also suitable for hauling CIÉ freight services to and from Derry.

Two Transport Acts, passed in 1966 and 1967, confirmed the break-up of the UTA's structure. The supervisory role of the UTA was taken over by the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company, while road passenger and road freight services passed to Ulsterbus and Northern Ireland Carriers respectively. The railways traded as Ulster Transport Railways from autumn 1966 until June 1967 when **Northern Ireland Railways** was formed. The UTA survived until 5th April, 1968 when it formally ceased to exist.

Additional Sources:

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UTA multi-engined-diesel (MED) railcars on Bangor line services at Queen's Quay, Belfast, 19 August 1956. (Photo © Alan Sprod - IRRS Archive)



Unique UTA 'Ganz' railcar 5 at York Road depot, Belfast, 19 August 1956. (Photo © Alan Sprod - IRRS Archive)



UTA multi-purpose-diesel (MPD) railcar 36 at Limavady Junction, circa 1965. (Photo © George R Mahon - IRRS Archive)