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It was at Annan, Dumfriesshire, on the 28th March 1865 that Mr. William Ewart,M.P.,cut the first sod of a railway destined to have a life of little more than half a century, although during this time its main bridge - one of the greatest engineering feats of the day - would be almost totally destroyed and rebuilt.

The Solway Junction Railway, completed in 1868, was in two portions on either side of the Solway Firth: from Brayton on the Maryport and Carlisle Railway, via junctions at Abbey and Kirkbride to Bowness, a distance of 13½ miles across Cumberland; and a further 6½ miles from Annan to Kirtlebridge in Dumfriesshire where it joined up with the Caledonian Railway. Its purpose was to convey valuable haemetite ore from the mines of West Cumberland to the Lanarkshire steel works, and this it did with satisfaction: transporting the greatest tonnage in the mines' peak year of 1882. The Railway was never remunerative, however, as a Passenger carrier,and the traffic which evolved its opening was even instrumental in its closure when it was later found that the same ore could be imported much more cheaply from Spain. Also, by 1920 the West Cumberland deposits were almost exhausted.

In 1873 the Scottish portion of the Railway was transferred to the Caledonian, and this was followed by their incorporation of the remainder in 1895.

The greatest item of engineering on the line was the Viaduct Bridge linking Bowness with Seafield across the Solway Firth, and was designed by James Bunlees; the first train - a freight - passed over it on the opening of the line in September 1869,a passenger service not being established until a year later in the month of July.

There always had been a ford across the Solway from the earliest times, which was (and still is, in fact) known locally as "Creighton's and many a bottle of whisky has been smuggled south of the Border hidden in a sack of oats, or under a kilt. But the advent of the railway era required something more stable to serve as a permanent crossing. The Viaduct necessitated the construction of a sea embankment 440 yards long on the English side, and one of 154 yards on the Scottish, which gave the foundations of the 1,954 yards-long bridge. The track was 34 feet above the sea level supported by a pillar every 30 feet, whilst cast iron used amounted to 2,900 tons together with 1,800 tons of wrought iron.

A variety of people claim to have had the pleasure of being the first to cross the bridge, but it would appear that little Elizabeth Ann Cottram, daughter of the local grocer in Bowness,actually had that distinction. The foreman in charge of the construction gang had promised her that when the job was completed she should be the first to cross, and sure enough, on the Sunday morning just before the official opening, he took her over. It is reported that she was

nervous at the time, but very happy and proud of the event afterwards. In these early days it was the regular Sunday practice for the male population to go over to the English side, since the public houses on the northern shores were closed on the Sabbath Day.

In 1866 the Solway Junction Railway Company promoted a Bill for a line from Broomfield (2 miles north of Brayton) to Maryport, where it was to join the Whitehaven Junction Railway. This would run near to, and almost parallel with, the Maryport & Carlisle Railway's existing line. This scheme could surely have only been intended as a means of forcing the M & C to offer increased facilities over its own line, and if this was the case, the S.J.R were certainly successful. for after negotiations between the two companies, an agreement was reached by which the S.J.R abandoned its proposed extension in return for full running powers over 15 chains of line between Brayton Junction and Brayton Station on to Maryport. This agreement was confirmed by the Solway Junction Railway Act of 1866.

A painful unforgettable year in the history of the Railway was that when the Viaduct was severely damaged by ice-floes; indeed, so great was the damage that it took twelve months to repair. At the end of January 1881 the edges of the Solway were frozed, as also were the rivers Eden and Esk. The high tides of the estuary lifted the ice, and jammed it into the mouths of the rivers which began to flood as the thaw came, so forcing the packed ice out to sea; "ice-bergs" 6 to 10 feet and as much as 27 yards square crashed into the stanchions of the Viaduct. It was a sorry sight after the first night, but after several days of battering the damage was even greater: two big gaps - one of 50 yards and another of 300 yards in width; whilst piles and pillars were also wrecked. The keeper of the bridge at this time was Mr. John Welch, and he, together with three stalwarts, remained in the cabin on the Viaduct whilst the supports creaked and groaned on that fateful night. They stuck to their posts until 3.0 a.m. when the disaster seemed imminent, whereupon John Welch gave the order "Every man for himself - I'm for Bowness". Forty-five pillars were smashed, and thirty-seven girders plunged into the Firth, but fortunately there was no loss of life.

A contractor was summoned to survey the damage with a view to repairs, and he arrived, with his apparatus, at low tide. Setting his instruments, etc., on what he thought to be a safe stretch of shore, he withdrew, only to find on his return the next day that his possessions were severely embedded in the wet sand. The story goes that he hired some of the local men to get them out for him, and these, after having had their contract and promise of pay signed, proceeded to join hands and dance round the buried instruments, to the very great surprise of the engineer. The reason, to them, was plain enough: before they could dig the sand, they must first of all stamp out the greater part of the moisture from it; after that, the excavation of the apparatus was comparatively easy.

Prior to the First World War, Caledonian Railway Engineers examined the bridge, and as a result, engines of lighter weight - which could haul 20 to 25 loaded wagons - replaced the standard Caledonian 4-4-0 type to suit the bridge's carrying capacity.

During the 1914-1918 War freight traffic conveyed by the Railway was greater than ever, when there was a demand by Clydeside for pig-iron which was worked by the M & C to Brayton and on to Kirtlebridge via Abbey Jct and Bowness. Passenger service during this period diminished to one coach attached to the front of a freight train, and on 1st February 1917, this ceased also, but only as a temporary War measure, it being reinstated in 1920. But the bridge in the meantime was condemned as unsafe and closed to all traffic early in 1921, whilst that portion of the line in England was closed on 1st September 1921; being opened again for goods working only between Brayton and Abbey Jct in May 1922. Passenger services were maintained between Kirtlebridge and Annan (Shawhill) however, until the autumn of 1931 when they were discontinued. The whole system was finally closed on 14th February 1933.

For over a year the Railway was in complete silence, and apart from one or two illegal entries into the neighbouring country from either side, nothing of interest occurred until 1934. In that year Arnott Young & Co., of Glasgow who had purchased the whole system began demolition work on the Viaduct; and so firm did they find the old structure that a considerable amount of blasting was necessary, in spite of its having been condemned as unsafe some 13 years ago. On 15th May 1937 the engineers commenced to lift the track between Bowness and Kirkbride Jct, and upon completion of their task 2 months later, turned their attention to the removal of the line between Kirtlebridge and Corsehill Quarry. Some of the scrap was re-smelted at Darlington and Motherwell, whilst the rest was shipped to Japan to assist in the China-Japanese War. The 2¼ miles of tract between Corsehill Quarry and Annan was still intact until the end of 1951, when it too suffered a similar fate.

A walk to-day along the path of the Solway Junction Railway would only present a story to the keen observer, for at the junction from the M & C, which is situated those 15 significant chains from Brayton, it is only with difficulty that an emerald green pathway can be discerned making its way towards the north. It is with the same unobtrusiveness that this 5¼ mile stretch emerges at what was once Abbey Junction. A link is maintained with this old station in that the tablet at present in use on the single line between Drumburgh and Abbey Town is still inscribed "Drumburgh & Abbey Junction" which is apt to be confusing to a newcomer to the Carlisle - Silloth line.

For almost the next four miles the S.J.R. runs over ex-North British metals before its path turns north at what was Kirkbride Jct, and crosses the Wampool to run into Whitrigg - the station buildings having been turned into a small-holding with a hen-run across the "track". When the railway was constructed over Rogerscleugh Moss, which lies between Whitrigg and Bowness it was necessary to sink bundles of wood, or faggots into the marsh in order that a firm bed might be provided for the line on its last two miles to Bowness.

A stone bridge carries the road from Port Carlisle over the Railway at the end of what was Bowness platform; but as the new residents at the Station House suffered great discomfort from the cold north winds which blew under it, it was decided, after the removal of the track, to fill in the bridge-hole with earth. At this station, also, was situated a pump which provided the engines with water drawn off the Moss.

The quarter-mile long embankment or "pitchin", to give it its local name, which reaches out into the estuary is in a very fine state of presenvation, giving credit to the dry stone-walling method by which it was constructed; and although now covered with bracken and brambles, it remains as firm as ever.

A little interesting local history is attached to this part of the Solway which now stretches before us. In the days when the Scots were not as friendly as the English are led to believe they are at present, a raiding band rowed across the Firth, and amongst their plunder took back with them to Scotland, the bells of Bowness Church. But the lads who lived where Hadrian began his wall did not treat this matter lightly, for they immediately gave chase and in the ensuing combat in mid-stream succeeded in upsetting their opponents' boats, and the bells sank to the bottom of the area now known as the Bell Pool. Undaunted, the English invaded the northern shores and proceeded to Middlebie; there, too, the Church Bells were removed without ceremony. But these survived the Solway crossing and were soon installed in the empty belfry across the water. The people of Annan do say, that when the wind is in the right direction and the bells on Bowness Church are rung, if you listen very carefully, you will hear them play "Take me back to Bonnie Scotland "! It is interesting to note that when a new rector is inducted at Bowness, his counterpart at Middlebie will write to him to ask for the return of their bells. To this the reply is always the same: "We will return your bells, when you return ours".

Following the path of the track in Dumfriesshire one will come upon the only stretch of the whole Solway Junction Railway which is still in existence. It is about half a mile in length and starting with a stop-block some 600 yards from the water's edge, soon makes a junction with a spur from the old G & S W Gretna-Dumfries line, before passing over that line, and runs into the sidings of the S.J.R.'s Annan (Shawhill) Station. A five or six-waggon train is still worked daily over this length from the Scottish Region via the Solway Ground Frame, on to the stop-block and thence propelled into Shawhill, returning with the empties. Caol agents find Shawhill easier for unloading.Merchandise, too, can be tipped to and from the adjoining factory over this last remaining link with 1869 which still has a Lengthman all of its own to keep it in good condition.

In conclusion, the writer wishes to record that appreciation and thanks are due to Mr. John Stafford of Kirkbride Station and Mr. William Hunter, the oldest inhabitant of Bowness, who from their vast stores of memories provided the information which enabled him to set down this story of the Solway Junction Railway.
