The Hetton Dream

The story of the Hetton railway

by

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It was in the village of Hetton-le-Hole, in the County of Durham, that a group of men had a "dream" that was to revolutionise the world. The forming of the Hetton Coal Company was the beginning of that dream. Their dream was the building of a steam driven railway line to carry coals away from the Collieries that they intended sinking in the Hetton area. The company was formed in 1819 and was composed of Lord Armstrong, Messrs Cochrane, Mounsey,Burrel,Mowbray,Smithson,Dunn,Phillipson and Nicholas Wood with his sons Colin,Nicholas,John and Lindsey. Later he was to become Sir Lindsey Wood. Under the directorship of Nicholas Wood, bore holes were put down. It was decided to sink two shafts at Hetton Lyons. At the same time it was decided to employ the brothers George and Robert Stephenson two of the most prominent engineers of the day to build their railway. This was a partenership that was to change the face of England and the World.

The first Mineral Railway the world had ever seen was about to be built, using steam driven locomotives. Sunderland being the nearest port was the obvious choice, a distance of 8 miles from the proposed site to the River Wear where Coal Staithes were to be built.

The brothers began to survey the route they had to take, and quickly realised the enormity of the task they had undertaken. The contours of the land showed this to be no easy task. From the Colliery site there was a level run of about three miles to the bottom of Copt Hill, then a steep climb to the top of the hill. Another level run of about half a mile to the foot of Warden Lay, crossing Warden Lay was the highest point in East Durham. Over this point the land fell away towards the North Moor in a series of gradients. Leaving the North Moor it levelled out as it reached the river and the proposed staithes.

Hundreds of workmen were brought in, and so began the task of building the worlds first Mineral Railway Line. As the workmen began the task of clearing the land and the laying of the tracks, the area around the Colliery site was a hive of activity.

The first seam of coal had been reached on September 3rd 1822 at a depth of 109 fathoms. This was the first time ever that coal had been reached beneath the limestone rock beds that covered the areas of East Durham. This seam was 6ft thick and of the highest quality. Other seams reached were 4ft thick at 131 fathoms, and four and a half foot thick at 148 fathoms. The success of this operation pioneered the sinking of all mines on the eastern side of the country where the limestone had been a serious problem.

At the Colliery site a small community was being built. Houses for the workmen. A shop and two licensed premises. Engine sheds for building and housing the locomotives.

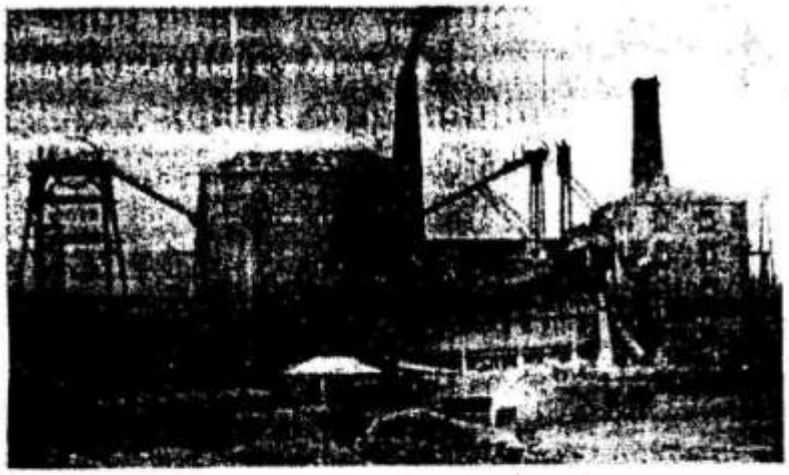
All the while the track moved forward snaking its way towards the Port of Sunderland and the River Staithes.

Five locomotives were built at the Hetton Lyons Sheds, these were called the Puffing Billies. At the top of Copt Hill was set a stationary engine with four winding drums to pull the coal trucks to the summit. From there was a series of five self acting inclines to get the full wagons to the sidings at the North Moor. From there the Puffing Billies were to take them to the River.

So on the 18th of September 1822, the first Steam Locomotive Railway in the world was opened out. There were spectators from all over Britain and the line was lined with cheering crowds as the Billies chugged their way to the port of Sunderland. In 1825 the line was extended to take in the newly sunk Elemore Colliery at Easington Lane and a branch line laid to Hetton's Eppleton Colliery.

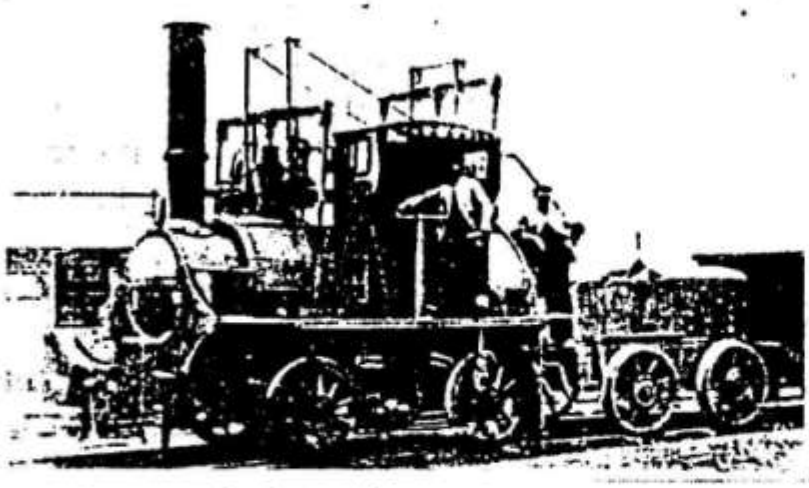
Later on a branch was laid to take in the Silksworth Colliery. So what had started as a dream of the Hetton Coal Company was now a reality. the Railways were born.

HETTON LYONS COLLIERY
Opened 1822
Closed 1950

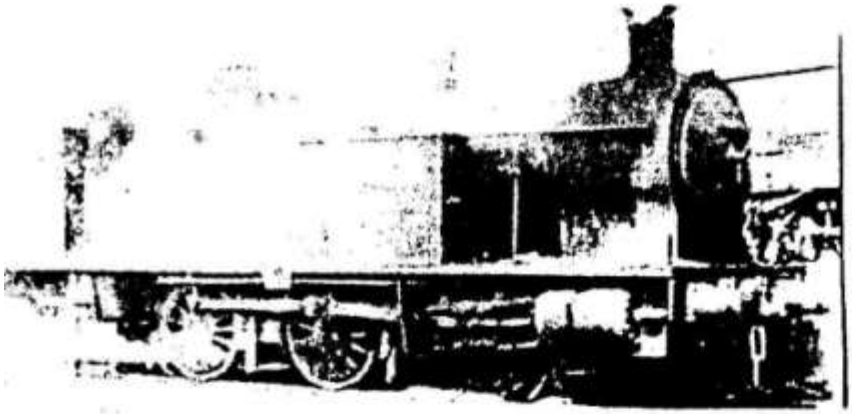


EPPLETON COLLIERY
Opened 1825
Closed 1986

ELEMORE COLLIERY
Opened 1825
Closed 1974



ONE OF THE EARLY
LOCOMOTIVES AT THE
ELEMORE SIDINGS
1902
BUILT AT HETTON SHEDS
BY ROBERT STEPHENSON
IT NOW STANDS IN THE
BEAMISH MUSEUM,



NO 41 LOCOMOTIVE AT
THE HETTON COLLIERY

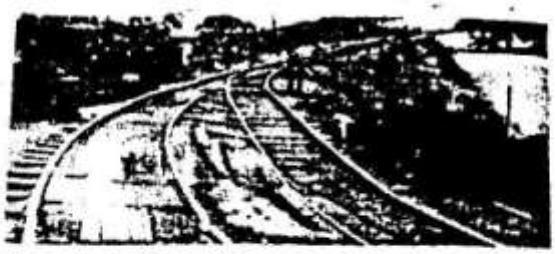
THE HETTON COLLIERY
SIDINGS.
LOOKING TOWARDS
RICHARD STREET,
HETTON LE HOLE.

Let us now take a nostalgic ride along that famous old line, on the footplate of a Puffing Billie. We start at the furthest point from the River Staithes, Elemore Colliery. From amongst the surface workings of Elemore we move off with our load, smoke billowing from the locomotive as we pass the many branch lines that lead to different parts of the Colliery. One of these branch lines led to Easington Lane High Street to where a coal depot stood just behind what is now the County Branch Library. This was used to supply the pitmen with their free coal allowance. The main line on leaving the Colliery had a very slight gradient of about half a mile to the Easington Lane to Hetton Road. Two big Crossing Gates and a Rail Guard's cabin were erected there. This point was known as the Whites Gates Crossing, due to the gates always being painted white.

On leaving this crossing we have a level stretch of about three hundred yards to the Hetton-Le-Hole to Murton Road. This crossing also had a Guard's cabin. A red flag was used at this point when the engine was passing. The line then passed a Granary, Stackyards, Stables, and the Hetton Brickworks on the left before joining the Hetton Colliery. Lyons, the small village around the Hetton Colliery, was criss-crossed with branches off the main line.These would lead to the Hetton Brickworks, The Gasworks, Colliery Blacksmiths and Joiners shops. One branch led to the Engine Repair and Wagon Sheds.This passed within a yard of the front doors of a street of houses. Another branch ran up Lyons Avenue towards Easington Lane for about a hundred yards. This was used for shunting and storing wagons.

Back on the main line a quarter of a mile of level track takes us to the village of Hetton-Le-Hole. Here the line cuts through the centre of the village, passing through Richard Street, John Street, Union Street and Pemberton Street. It also cuts through Front Street and Caroline Stree., On approach of the train red flags during the day and red lamps at night were used to control the crossing points.

LOCOMOTIVE AT THE NORTH MOOR CROSSING



THE LINE AT HETTON DENE.

AT THE BOTTOM OF ONE OF THE SELF ACTING INCLINES

ON THE SELF ACTING INCLINE TOWARDS THE NORTH MOOR

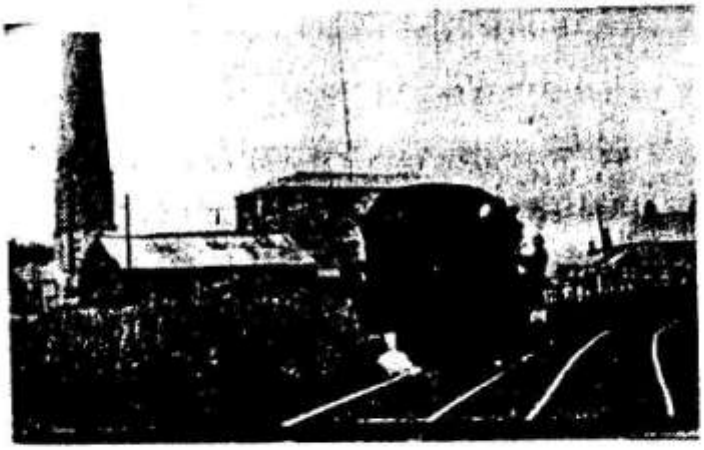
Two Guard's Cabins were built, on in Richard Street, and one at the bottom of Caroline Street. None of this part of the track was fenced. Leaving the centre of Hetton-Le-Hole the line ran level between the gardens of Back Houghton Road and Barrington Terrace, crossed an iron bridge at Regent Street and was joined a few yards further on by a branch line from Eppleton Colliery. Half a mile of level running brings us to the foot of Copt Hill. This was the terminal for the locomotives.

At the foot of Copt Hill the full coal wagons were coupled into sets of five. Haulage ropes were hung onto the front and rear of the set. The same was done with the empty wagons at the top of the hill. On the signal being given, the brakesman set the four drum engine in motion. The loaded set was hauled up the incline and the empty set descended. The sets passed each other at a loop half way up. Single track was used at the bottom half below the loop, and above the loop a three rail system was used. A level crossing was formed where the line crossed the Houghton to Seaham Road. The length of this incline was 940 yards and graded 1 in 17.

From the sidings at the top of Copt Hill the wagons were hauled in sets of ten along a slight gradient of about 1 in 50 for about 800 yards to the foot of Warden Law. The distance to the top of Warden Law was 760 yards and graded 1 in 19.

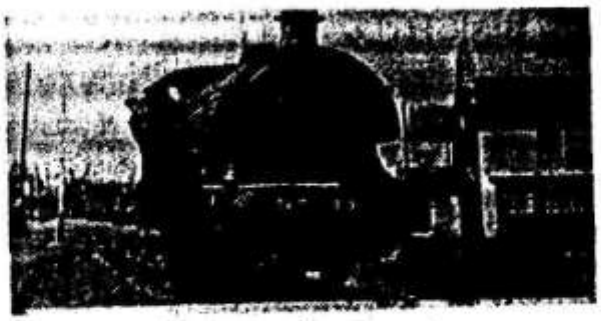
The wagons were hauled up in sets of five. Still in sets of five they were now to be transported down the self acting inclines. These were simply worked by passing a haulage rope around a single engine drum with a brake attached. One end of the rope was coupled to the rear of the loaded wagons and the other end was coupled to the front end of the empty wagons. The method was for the weight of the full wagons going down the hill to pull the empty ones up. The length of these gradients were between 1,000 and 1,300 yards and graded between 1 in 33 and 1 in 41.

THE COPT HILL SIDINGS AND STATIONARY ENGINE HOUSE



WARDEN LAW, AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SELF ACTING INCLINE

THE NORTH MOOR SIDINGS



HETTON LE HOLE. THE CAROLINE STREET CROSSING. THIS WAS AN UNFENCED PART OF THE LINE.

One of these gradients was not steep enough for the system to work properly so a horse was used to help the full wagons down the hill. Next stop the sidings at the North Moor.

At the North Moor the full wagons would be joined in sets of twenty ready to be taken by locomotive the three miles to the River Staithes. Leaving the North Moor the line crossed a bridge near Silksworth Hall. This bridge spanned the Silksworth to East Herrington Road. A short distance on and a bridge from Silksworth Colliery joined the main line. The line dipped under the road at the bottom of The Sunderland Children's Hospital Bank, and emerged opposite the Barns Hotel. Passing various streets it crossed over a bridge at Sunderland's Chester Road, then finally arrived at the coal staithes on the river.

The speed of the line was four miles per hour in 1822, by 1829 it had speeded up to twenty nine miles per hour and was capable of carrying 2,880 tons of coal in an eight hour shift. Finally in 1950 the old Hetton Colliery closed, leaving Elemore, Eppleton and Silksworth Collieries still using the line.

In 1959 the new Hawthorn Mine was opened, and the coals from Elemore and Eppleton were taken off the line and transported underground to this new mine. The last train of coals from the Hetton Colleries left the North Moor sidings at 1.40pm on Wedensday September 9th 1959 there were no spectators. The old line that had served the Hetton Colleries so well was doomed.

Dismantling of the line soon started and by the end of 1959 there was very little left. The branch at Silksworth was left open and was used until this Colliery closed in 1971, and so ended a hundred and thirty years of railway history which had started with the dream of that long gone Hetton Coal Company and was put into operation by the skill and ingenuity of the Stephenson brothers George and Robert.

THE LYONS AVENUE,EASINGTON LANE. SHUNTING AND STORE OF WAGONS WAS DONE AT THE BOTTOM HALF OF THIS ROAD. NOTE THE HETTON COLLIERY AT THE FAR END.

THE TOP RIM OF THE OLD HETTON COLLIERY PIT CHIMNEY STANDING IN A GARDEN IN LYONS AVENUE NEAR THE SITE OF THE OLD HETTON COLLIERY. THIS HAS BEEN TURNED INTO A FISH POND.

What they could not have foreseen was, that in a few years Britain and the world would be criss-crossed with railway lines taking goods and minerals to all parts.

Little now is left of this Railway that the history books tend to forget. The areas of the Hetton Colliery is now being landscaped. The oldest of the Engine Sheds is converted into the Lyons Youth Centre. Where the line ran through Hetton-Le-Hole, new houses are built. A trading estate stands where the locomotives used to shunt the wagons at the Hetton Colliery and parts of the wagonways have been turned into walkways. In a garden at the bottom of the Lyons Avenue lying unnoticed is the rim of the the old Hetton Colliery Pit Chimney, this has been turned into a fishpond. On the wall of the Corner House is a plaque with inscription Robert Stephenson the railway engineer lived here.

And so ended a chapter in railway history.