



THE NARROW GAUGE

No. 120

WEST DONEGAL CONGESTED?
GOVERNMENT-BUILT RAILWAYS IN CO.DONEGAL
BY GORDON TUCKER



NARROW GAUGE RAILWAY SOCIETY

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Government-built railways in Co. Donegal

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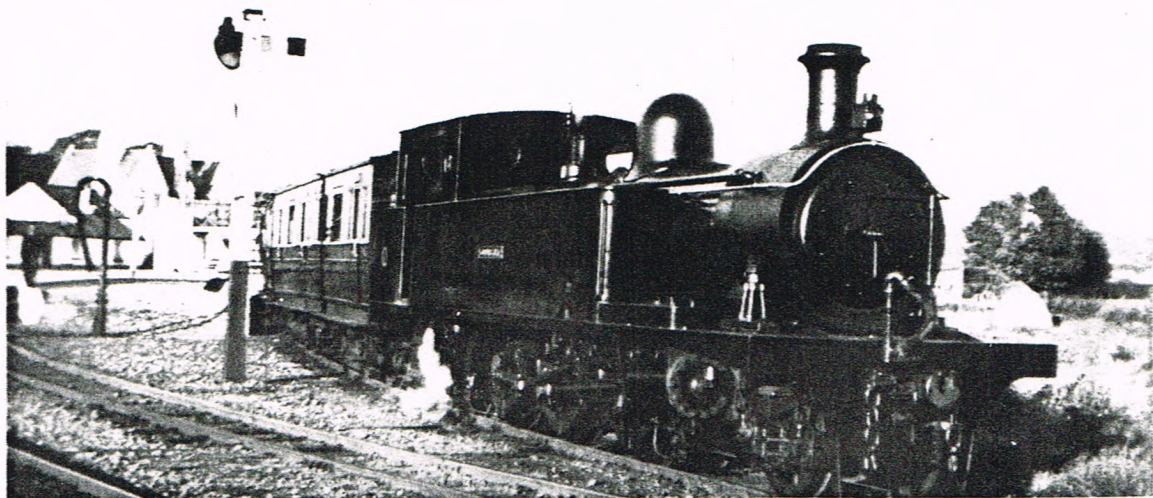
West Donegal congested! That seems a silly remark considering it's as barren a land as one could find anywhere in the British Isles. When I took that photograph of the 3-ft. gauge Burtonport line of the Londonderry and Lough Swilly Railway near Gweedore in 1938, running through a rocky wilderness, I just couldn't understand how it could be called a Congested District. In most of the West Coast parishes, the Census Returns for the second half of last century showed an average of 5-8 acres per person.

But it was under the Congested Districts Acts of 1891 onwards that the nearly-50 miles of the Letterkenny and Burtonport Extension Railway, running through often difficult country, was built by a contractor and stocked with locomotives and rolling stock under the direct supervision, and at the expense, of the British Government (Board of Trade). It was completed in 1903 and given to the L & LSR to operate.

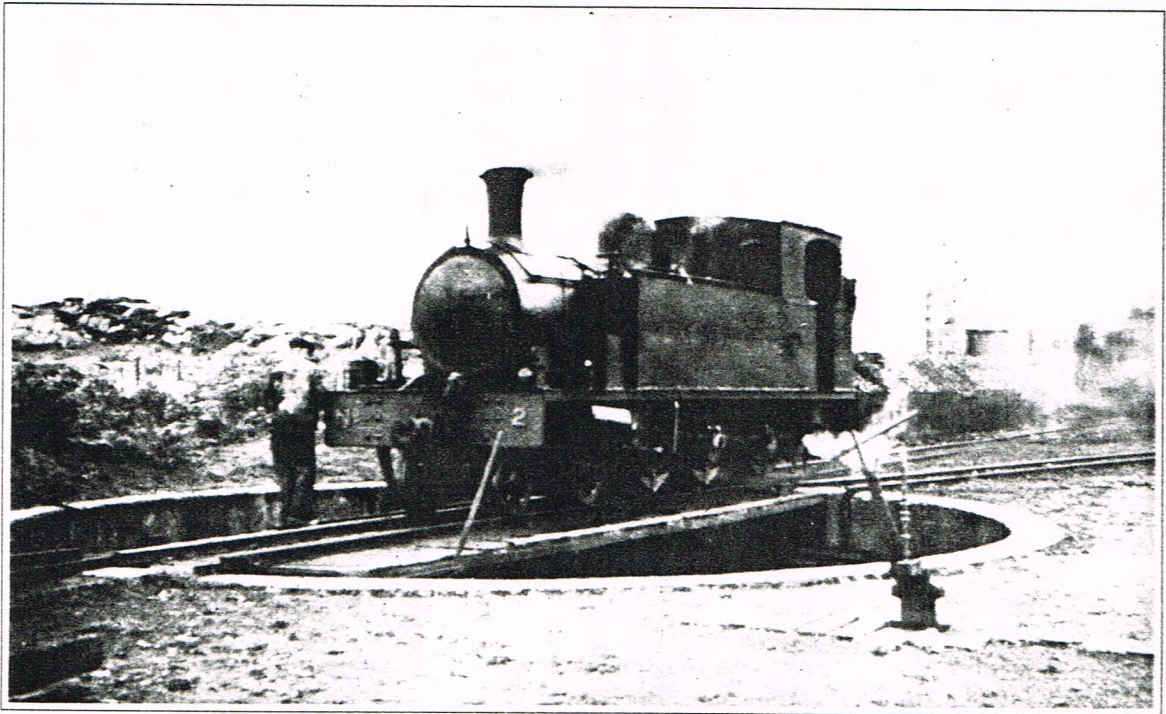
The explanation was that it was the very poorness of the soil that made the district 'congested'. This was official terminology for having too many people for the land to support, or perhaps we might prefer to say, for having too little good land to support the people who chose (or had) to live there. Under successive Acts from 1891 the Government, then the British Government, had set up a Congested Districts Board to operate over such poor parts of Ireland (mostly in the West) and empowered it to spend money purchasing estates in order to redistribute the land into larger tenancies or holdings, and generally to improve the economic condition of the poorest areas by, for example, building fishing harbours and encouraging the fishing industry, and by improving communications, including the building of the Burtonport Railway already mentioned.

The harbour at Burtonport had been improved into a good fishing harbour, and to get the industry working, a means of getting its fish to the markets was needed; the railway was to be the means of this. It only lasted until 1940; no doubt wartime difficulties in what was by then the Republic of Ireland hastened its demise.

The L & BER was provided by the Government with four very good 4-6-0T locomotives, built by Barclays in 1902. Two of my 1938 photographs show No. 2 in the rocky environment of Burtonport station. This locomotive survived

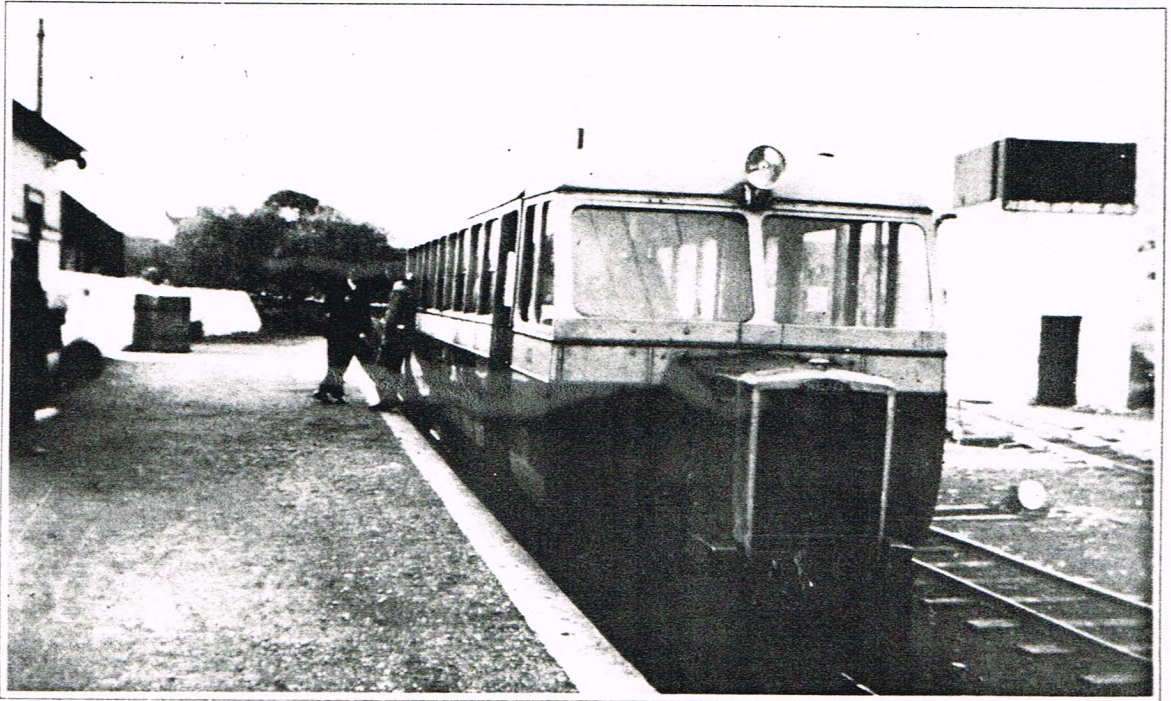


County Donegal Railways 2-6-4T No. 6 COLUMBKILLE at Stranorlar station in September 1938, with Strabane to Killybegs train. (Charles Bayes)



L & BER 4-6-0T No. 2 on turntable at Burtonport in September 1938.

(Gordon Tucker)



Railcar No. 15 at Glenties station in September 1938.

(Charles Bayes)



*L & LSR 4-6-2T No. 14 on mixed train at speed near Gweedore on Burtonport extension in September 1938.
(Gordon Tucker)*

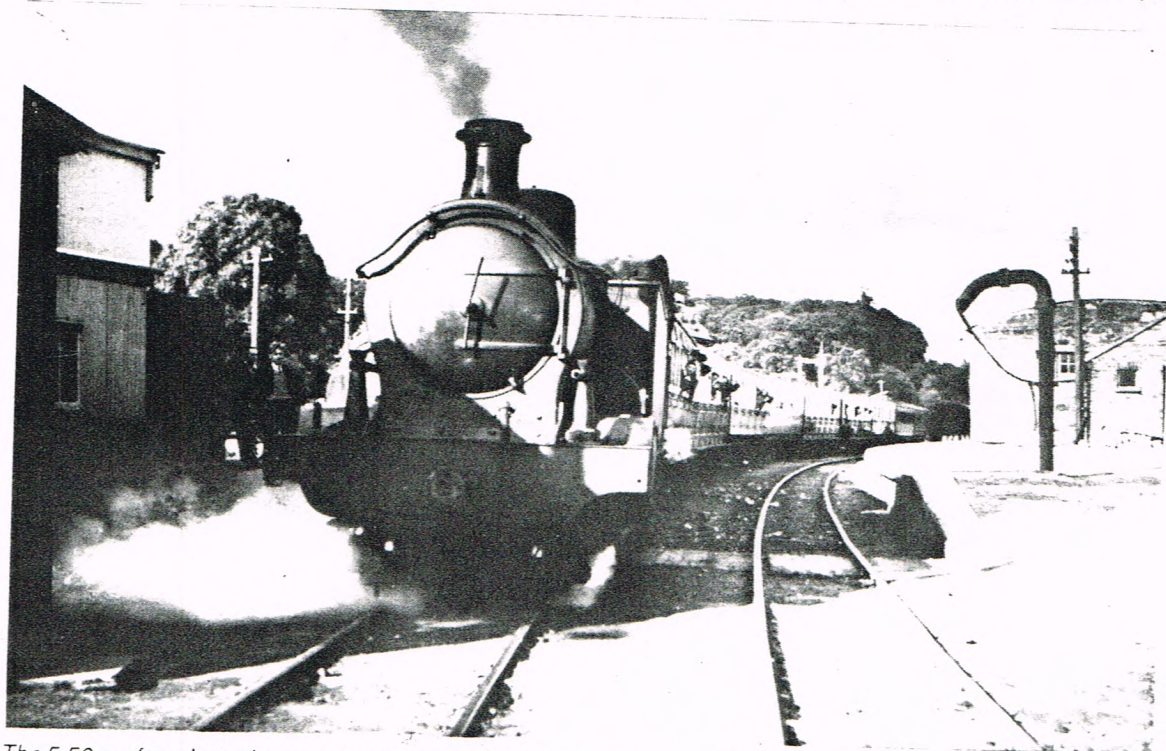
until the final demise of the L & LS railway system in 1953, along with Nos. 3 and 4, although No. 1 was scrapped in 1940. Other L & LSR locomotives also worked on the line, however, and another photograph shows 4-6-2T No. 14 of the L & LSR, built in 1910 by Hawthorn, Leslie; paid for out of a Government grant; and scrapped in 1943, at speed (!) with the usual mixed train near Gweedore.

The L & BER was not the first Government-funded railway built in West Donegal. The railway system which became known as the Donegal Railway (and later still as the County Donegal Railways Joint Committee of the Midland and Great Northern Railways), operating in the southern part of the county, had had two extensions added to its system by the Government under earlier Acts of Parliament relating to light railways in poor districts. These were the Donegal - Killybegs and the Stranorlar - Glenties lines, opened in 1893 and 1895 respectively. 4-6-0T locomotives built by Neilsons were supplied for these lines. However, all six had been scrapped by the time of my visit to County Donegal in September 1938 in the company of Charles Bayes, three of whose photographs are reproduced here.

The 2-6-4T COLUMBKILLE (No. 6), freshly repainted in geranium red, was on a Strabane to Killybegs train at Stranorlar. It was the second locomotive of that name, and was formerly KILLYBEGS (and numbered 18); it was allotted its new name and number when the original COLUMBKILLE (No.9) was scrapped in 1937, the original No.6 INVER having been scrapped in 1931. The date of building was 1907 and the builder was Nasmyth, Wilson. Columbkille relates the locomotive to my theme of West Donegal and its Congested Districts, since Glencolumbkille is a parish on the 'congested' west coast of that county, which at the time the railways were built had an average of 8 acres per person. Similarly with its former name and the destination of the train; Killybegs was the name of a small town and of two parishes, Upper and Lower, with 5 and 6 acres per person respectively.



Trailer car (formerly Dublin & Blessington Tramway railcar) at Stranorlar in September 1938. (Charles Bayes)



The 5.50 pm from Letterkenny running with a special school train handed over from the Co. Donegal at Strabane, 1939. (W A Camwell)

The Glenties line, at the time of our visit, was being served by a Walker railcar (NO. 15) as shown in another of Charles Bayes's photographs. Railcars were by then a feature of the County Donegal Railways Joint Committee, and they sometimes hauled trailers, of which an example is the one shown near Stranorlar East signal box in the last photograph. (This trailer had been formerly a small railcar on the Dublin & Blessington Tramway, from which it had been acquired in 1934).

The three lines mentioned (Burtonport, Killybegs and Glenties) were the only Government-financed railways in West Donegal, but there was another in a Congested District in North Donegal, namely the line from Buncrana to Carndonagh, opened in 1901 and worked by the L & LSR, to which it effectively formed another extension. Further information on the topics mentioned can be obtained from the following:-

Railway Magazine, Vol.6, 1900, pp. 240-6 and Vol.13, 1903, pp. 120-3.

'The County Donegal Railways', by E.M. Patterson, David & Charles, Dawlish, 1962.

'The Londonderry & Lough Swilly Railway', by E M. Patterson, David & Charles, Dawlish, 1964.

'The Irish Narrow Gauge Railway', by J.D.C.A. Prideaux, David & Charles, Newton Abbot, 1981.

'Ireland', by T.W. Freeman, Methuen, London, 4th edition, 1969, p. 451 ff.

'The Struggle for Land in Ireland 1800-1923', by J.E. Pomfret, Princeton Univ. Press, 1930, pp. 308-312.

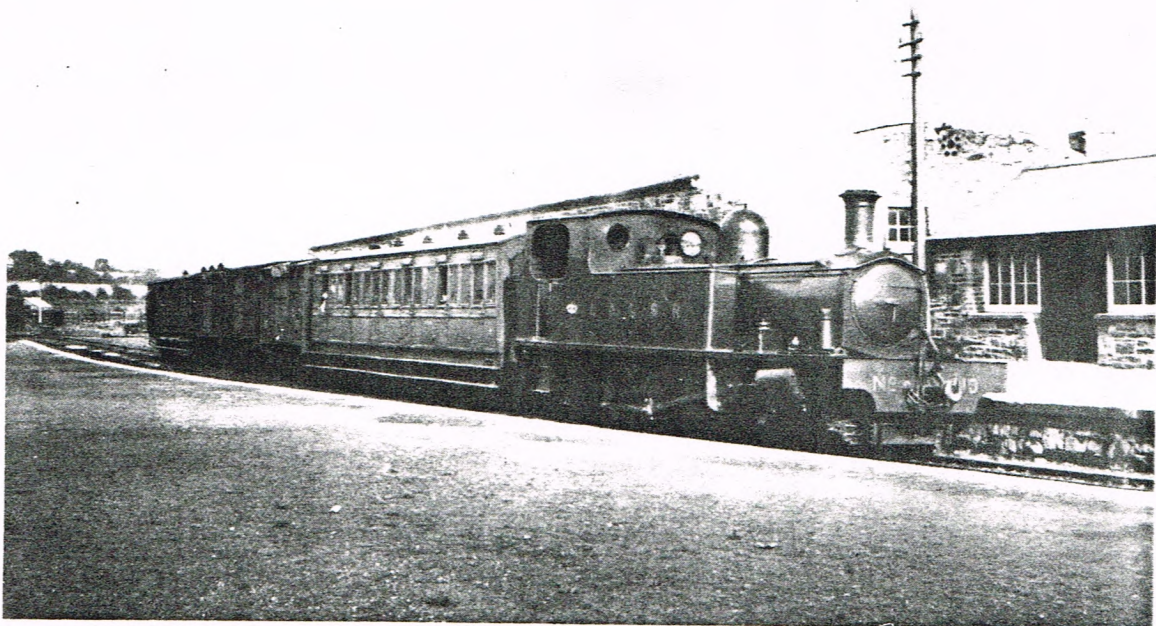
Published Census Returns for Ireland, H.M.S.O., 1851 and every 10 years.

I am very grateful to Canon Charles Bayes for the use of his photographs and other information.



4-8-0 no 12 at Sallybrook station, 1937.

(W A Camwell)



No 10 at Letterkenny in 1937.

(W A Camwell)



The 8.30 from Burtonport at Letterkenny in 1938.

(W A Camwell)



The Burtonport extension (officially the Letterkenny & Burtonport Extension Railway) of the Londonderry & Lough Swilly Railway in wild country near Gweedore, in September, 1938.

(Gordon Tucker)
