



View eastwards, May 1967. Only the demolition train has yet to call. Despite nominally independent origins, everything here is pure GWR. Photograph: K. A. Jagers.

Plan of the Month

Bala and Bala Junction, GWR

by K. A. Jagers

THE scenically attractive former Great Western Railway route into North Wales, the Ruabon-Morfa Mawddach 'Barmouth Road', has received very little attention from railway authors, photographers or modellers. Perhaps the holiday trains of the '50s were rarely delayed along here, and it was probably raining anyway!

Situated about half-way along this route, Bala Junction station was one of those particularly Welsh GWR curiosities, a purely interchange station between main line and branch, having no road access and no goods facilities, and which never appeared in the public timetables. With its variety of train workings, short platforms, relatively simple track layout and pleasant scenery, it seemed the ideal prototype for an attempt at a true-to-scale model.

The problem is, of course, that it is nice to have somewhere credible for the trains to go to, with goods and loco facilities, to give some purpose to the layout. In this case, the solution is close at hand, since the branch to Bala (Town) Station was only some 3/8 mile long, and about half this distance was occupied by Bala goods yard.

To get all this into an average suburban semi's loft or garage requires some truncation of siding lengths at Bala, but a realistic representation of the facilities, layout and operation is quite possible. Both the main line and Blaenau Ffestiniog branch beyond Bala are taken to hidden sidings, in my case more 'hidden' than most, being tight up under the roof eaves, but they generally can be fitted in wherever the space is available and convenient.

I first looked in detail at the prototype in 1966, and was immediately struck by the abundance of Great Western Country Railway atmosphere, especially at the Junction station; because of its isolation, everything looked so neat and tidy even 18 months after closure. From the approach by footpath down the hillside it *looked* just like a model, and one almost expected the periodic flurry of activity from crossing and connecting trains, which of course never came again.

It was another 11 years before I found a house with sufficient space available to contemplate the model, and another five before I actually started it! Now it is mechanically and electrical-

ly almost complete, the task becomes the much more interesting detective work of piecing together the various buildings and structures from the available photos, plans and sketches — which is likely to occupy me for a considerable further period. At this distance in time, it amazes and frustrates me how much information I didn't think to record properly when it was freely available!

A bit of history

Bala is a small market town in the old county of Merioneth, North Wales. The name means, in Welsh, 'Head of the lake'; Bala Lake, or Llyn Tegid being the largest area of natural inland water in Wales, and the source of the River Dee. The first railway to serve the area was ostensibly a private, local concern, the Corwen & Bala, opened in 1865. This terminated at a point on the south side of the lake some half mile from the town, at what later briefly became Bala Lake Halt, now the terminus of the narrow-gauge Lakeside railway. Another similar small company, the Bala & Dolgellau was being concurrently constructed onward from here, and opened a few months after the line from Corwen. By 1868 the lines were consolidated as part of a through route from the GWR's main Shrewsbury-Chester line at Ruabon, to the West Wales coast near Barmouth. They were always operated by the GWR, being used as a means by which the large company could tap the growing holiday resort traffic away from its rivals.

The branch railway from Bala Junction to Blaenau Ffestiniog was also built as a competitive venture, this time somewhat belatedly for a share of the slate traffic from this busy mining area. It was opened in 1882, resulting in the provision of a new station in Bala itself with goods and loco facilities, and also the interchange platforms at Bala Junction. The old Bala station, half mile west of the new junction, was then abandoned.

All the railways at Bala were closed completely by January 1965, the result of the combined onslaught of extensive flooding along the Dee Valley and Dr. Beeching's cuts. After a period of delightful rustic decay, and following track

lifting in 1968, the station site at Bala was transformed into a fire station, car park and industrial estate. Bala Junction is reverting to nature, the grass-grown platforms and surviving corrugated-iron 'pagoda' shed now visited only by sheep.

Train working

After 1920's upgrading of the Ffestiniog branch with the development of a military camp near Trawsfynydd, both main line and branch were classified as 'blue' routes by the Great Western Railway, allowing the use of locomotives up to and including the lightweight 4-6-0 classes.

Main line stopping passenger trains were the province of the Churchward Moguls, then the Manor 4-6-0s and latterly LMS and BR Standard light 4-6-0 and 2-6-0 types. Summer holiday trains, from places as far afield as Birmingham and Paddington, were frequently double-headed to assist working over the heavily-graded moorland sections west of Bala Junction. Bulldog and Duke class 4-4-0s and Collett 2251 class 0-6-0 tender locos also frequently worked the passenger trains. Some trains, from Wrexham and Birkenhead, ran on to the branch to terminate at Bala. These were latterly 57XX pannier tank hauled, but these and the troop workings to Trawsfynydd present the excuse for the occasional use of LMS locomotives and/or coaching stock. The Blaenau branch passenger trains, often running in mixed formation, were hauled by all sorts of pannier tank from the oldest to the newest (except, of course, the 84XX), and the Collett non-motor 0-4-2T (58XX). The branch service was normally worked in two sections, Blaenau-Bala and Bala-Bala Junction, the latter a one- or two-coach shuttle hauled by the above small loco types, and running round at each end. In the form of the Bala school train, this would also venture down the main line in both directions, as far as Glyndyfrdwy and Llanuwchllyn. Whilst every main line passenger would be conveniently met by the Bala shuttle, the wait at Bala before proceeding onward towards Blaenau could sometimes be lengthy.

Goods traffic comprised farm produce and

slate outbound; general merchandise, coal and gunpowder (for the quarries) inbound. Most main line freights would daily while up the branch, since traffic from all three directions was remarshalled in Bala yard, which also served as the railhead for a large area of rural North Wales. These trains would be handled by the Moguls, Collett and Dean 0-6-0s, and occasionally Aberdare 2-6-0s or ROD 2-8-0s. These locos were serviced and turned (if necessary and possible) on the small turntable at Bala while their trains were shunted. The loco yard (a sub-depot of Croes Newydd, Wrexham) normally housed about six small engines for the local duties, as well as hosting the visitors.

A great variety of proprietary locomotives and rolling stock is available which is suitable for use on the model.

The layout

Track formations for the model are relatively straightforward, though the long 3-way point at the east end of Bala Junction needs to be handbuilt for absolute accuracy and smooth running. In the station areas, no curve is sharper than 5 ft radius as shown. On the branch itself, the minimum radius necessary will be dictated by the space available; in my case there is a small portion at 3 ft minimum. The Bala Junction layout comprises a long passing loop on the single-track main line, capable of accommodating the holiday trains up to nine coaches (though the platforms are only long enough for six) plus branch bay and reversing loop for the goods trains. It was reproduced directly from the GWR plans on to the baseboards (*re-drawn here by Ian Beattie — ED*). The station was picturesquely situated on a hillside ledge beside the River Dee, and the main line is easily 'lost' into cuttings at either end on the model, as on the prototype. Unusually, the branch divergence round to Bala appears to be double-tracked, off the single-track mainline, but this is deceptive, since it was normally worked as two single lines, passenger to/from Bala station, and freight to/from Bala goods respectively, the latter also serving as a long headshunt to the Bala yard. In the space of somewhat under half mile, the branch crosses various water channels of the Dee flood plain no fewer than three times, on small plate girder bridges.

Bala Junction station facilities were very limited, and used standard contemporary GWR architecture, including a challenging lattice footbridge. The town station, though catering only for 4-coach trains (or, more usually, 2x1 or 2 coaches at the same platform) had much more extensive facilities, executed in a 'one-off' architectural design, at the insistence of a local landowner, which included several distinctive features. This was particularly obvious in the goods shed, which had an ornate stone castellated and turreted end stuck on to a very plain standard GWR brick structure, so that it would look nice when viewed from the station bridge!

So, we have two very different stations, operationally, scenically and architecturally, in their correct relative settings, and with a working timetable showing some 60 varied daily train movements (in 1939). And it was Great Western, too! What more could anyone want?

Footnote

I am always interested to borrow and copy for private purposes, any photographs or drawings relating to the buildings/structures at Bala and Bala Junction, in particular the engine shed, goods shed and road side of the station building at Bala, to enable completion of the model to as great an authenticity as possible. Any such material will of course be treated with the utmost care and returned promptly.

