

22d London, Huron & Bruce Railway (LH&B)

The LH&B was chartered in 1870 by London business interests (with a good deal of rural support) to participate in the emerging bountiful riches of its destination title. It was to build “from London to Goderich, or Kincardine, etc, etc”. It signed a traffic agreement with the Great Western Railway in 1873 when the GWR assumed responsibility for the major portion of its construction costs, and thus obtained control, before acquiring the line outright by virtue of its assumption of the LH&B’s debt in 1876. The LH&B passed into Grand Trunk Railway control in 1882 with the latter’s acquisition of the GWR, and became part of the GTR in 1893.

The original object of the charter was, as noted, a terminal on Lake Huron to attract transit traffic from the Great Lakes. The involvement of the Great Western, however, inevitably brought into play business politics and traffic rationalization, since the GWR had previously in 1869 leased the Wellington, Grey & Bruce Railway, with its similar charter objectives. In fact the WG&B had already reached Southampton in 1872, and was on its way to reach Kincardine in 1874. Accordingly, the GWR dictated its own preferred route, taking off from its mainline at Hyde Park, five miles west of London, and running straight due north via Ilderton, Centralia, Exeter, Hensall and Brucefield to a crossing with the Buffalo & Lake Huron Railway at Clinton, and then continuing on via Londesborough, Blyth and Belgrave to connect with and terminate at Wingham on the WG&B’s line to Kincardine: a plan that avoided direct competition and also stood to stimulate traffic at the Kincardine end of the WG&B.

Construction began in 1875, and the entire line was opened for traffic the next year – and indeed proved to be profitable in the early years of its operation.

Incoming traffic to the destination area was farm equipment, lumber, coal, feed and farm supplies, and the outgoing was grain, gain products and livestock; and much later sugar beets, corn and beans. The road obtained the nickname very early on as the “Butter and Eggs Special” in reference to the local farmers’ ready cash produce destined for London’s Covent Garden Market on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.

As did almost all of the branchlines of the Grand Trunk Railway, the LH&B emerged into the Canadian National Railways (CNR) in 1923, and likewise endured curtailment of service during the 1930s. In 1941 the section north of Clinton was abandoned, but the remainder of the line persevered through WWII with an additional spike in traffic, both in military personnel and equipment to and from the RCAF bases at Centralia and Clinton.

Following WWII, “mixed” train service was discontinued in favour of rail diesel car (RDC or dayliner) service, and that ceased also in 1956. Following that there was way freight and then freight service “as required”, until another development took place in 1988 when the track was lifted between Ilderton and Centralia. The reason for this became clear when the CNR sold its Stratford-Goderich operation (including the resulting Clinton-Centralia stub to Railtex Inc., San Antonio, as a shortline that is now the Goderich-Exeter Railway (the southern stub to Ilderton continues to be served by the CNR) in that the purpose of the break in track was to guarantee non-competition from the south.

Sources and Recommendations for further reading:

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