

# The Great Western Railway's Development of Looe and District

## 1935-1948

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This is a synopsis written for the **Cornwall Railway Society** of a paper entitled *The Great Western Railway's Last Resort*, published by the Caradon Heritage Partnership in September 2021. The full publication with extensive illustrations, map, supplement and references is held at Kresen Kernow in Camborne, the Library of the Royal Cornwall Institution, the St Ives Archive, the Library of Looe Museum, Liskeard Library, The Box in Plymouth, STEAM Museum in Swindon, the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre in Chippenham, the Great Western Trust at the Didcot Railway Centre, and the Institution of Civil Engineers in London. Copies are also held by the Old Cornwall Societies of Liskeard and Looe, the Trevithick Society, Mike Roach of the Cornwall Railway Society, and the Signalling Record Society.

### Note

The generous co-operation of local landowners was essential to the completion of this research. All of the route of the proposed St Germans to Looe branch line, and its planned station sites, the completed Kellow Housing Estate, and the completed 18-hole Championship Golf Course with the site of the proposed luxury 60-bedroom resort hotel, remain on private land. Those seeking to trace the course of the GWR's project should therefore respect the privacy of landowners and householders and observe relevant road and pedestrian safety standards.

### The Scope of the GWR's Ambitions for South East Cornwall

Although most written references to the scheme to develop the area east of Looe in the 1930s limit themselves to the building of a high-speed direct link from the Cornwall main line near St Germans to a new station in the Shutta-Barbican area of Looe, the GWR's ambitions were actually far broader. A new development partnership of 1936 aimed to create these features in the area served by the proposed railway:

- high-quality new housing estates in the coastal zone extending east from Kellow to Downderry (and possibly northwards along the Seaton Valley)
- a number of model farms in the district employing modern crop and livestock production methods
- a new 18-hole championship golf course occupying the plateau top between Bodigga in the west, Penhale in the east and Bucklawren in the north
- private beaches from Kellow to Downderry
- a new luxury hotel, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and sited on the cliff top at Bodigga adjacent to the 18<sup>th</sup> green of the golf course, being served by an access road from a halt on the new railway east of Millendreath

## What lay behind the GWR's plans?

### ***THE DEVELOPMENT OF A RAILWAY NETWORK TO THE CORNISH COAST***

The completion of the Cornwall Railway across the Tamar on Brunel's Royal Albert Bridge in May 1859 enabled the through running of broad gauge trains on the Cornwall, South Devon, Bristol and Exeter, and GWR systems as far west as **Truro**. The Cornwall Railway itself was beset by financial problems and the extension of its system to serve the County's coastal towns was only made possible by the financial input of the *Associated Companies*- the SDR, BER and GWR; by the incorporation of a third running rail to accommodate services on absorbed or isolated standard gauge networks like those of the West Cornwall Railway; and by exchange platforms like that at **Par**, where the standard gauge Cornwall Minerals Railway had constructed a spur to access the main (broad gauge) station there. The branch line to **St Ives**, opened in 1 June 1877 by the Associated Companies, was the last new broad gauge railway to be built in the county and the country.

### ***THE CONNECTION OF LOOE TO THE RAILWAY NETWORK***

As an ancient port, Looe's sphere of influence lay to the north, up the East Looe River valley towards Liskeard. The efficient distribution of lime and sand landed at the port to 'sweeten' the soils of this agricultural area became a pressing need in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and the opening of the Liskeard and Looe Union Canal from a terminus basin at Moorswater to a sea lock on the East Looe River at Terras by **1830** marked a new and important link with inland Cornwall. The development of large scale copper and tin mining, and granite quarrying, in the Caradon district in the 1840s created heavy southbound traffic on the canal to balance the 'upstream' flow of sand, lime, manure and domestic coal.

By **March 1846**, a horse- and gravity- operated standard gauge line, **The Liskeard and Caradon Railway**, had opened to connect the moorstone and quarry workings on and around Stowe's Hill, and the great South Caradon Mine, direct with the LLUC basin at Moorswater. By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, Looe had therefore become connected with Liskeard and the mining district to the north albeit with a transshipment break at Moorswater.

But what brought Looe itself closer to the national railway network?

- By **1856**, the LLUC was operating at maximum capacity. With commendable speed, the LLUC Committee obtained an Act of Parliament to convert much of its landholding into a route for a standard gauge railway. Connected by an end-on junction with the L and CR at Moorswater, the **Liskeard and Looe Railway** opened for use on 27 December 1860. Steam locomotives, supplied by the L and CR – which had modified and extended the route of its own line in 1860 to enable steam working – now handled goods and mineral traffic from Caradon and Sharptor direct to the quays at Looe.
- In **1879**, the L and CR obtained Board of Trade approval for a passenger service on the LLUC and opened stations at Moorswater, Causeland, Sandplace and Looe.
- In March **1891** the Board of the GWR agreed to convert the last remnant of Brunel's broad gauge system to standard gauge: this consisted of the 171 miles of track west of Exeter. The last Up broad gauge train left Liskeard Station at five minutes past midnight on the morning of Saturday 21 May 1892 and by the following Monday morning, 48 hours later, the broad gauge in Devon and Cornwall had gone forever. Liskeard was now directly connected to the national, standard gauge railway network.

- **The Liskeard and Looe Railway Extension Act of 1895**- a product of complex financial and legal manoeuvring with the GWR in the background, and its allies in public view – finally enabled the direct connection of the railways to Looe and Caradon to the national railway system. The Act enabled:

- *The construction of a new railway from the LLUC line at Coombe to a point adjacent to the GWR station in Liskeard*
- The restoration to the LLUC of legal control of its railway, and the acquisition by the LLUC of the locomotives and rolling stock of the L and CR and the right to operate the latter line
- A formal change of name for the LLUC to the *Liskeard and Looe Railway*

### **Connecting Looe to the main line**

Construction of the Liskeard and Looe Railway Extension formally began on **28 June 1898**, with the principal contractor being the Liskeard firm of Thomas Lang and Sons. The firm had been founded as a Timber Merchant and their early railway experience had included work on the Brunel-designed timber viaducts on the Cornwall Railway at Liskeard and Moorswater. Their 12-arch concrete viaduct of 1908 over the Tamar at Calstock is arguably their greatest achievement.

The Civil Engineer responsible for the Extension was the remarkable Joseph Thomas MInstCE, who had spent his childhood at Lansallos and had assisted his father with the civil engineering of the conversion of the LLUC to a railway. Joseph Thomas gained national and international experience over a long career and returned home to live in Cornwall in 1893. The Extension was to be his last project: he died on 14 August 1901 and rests in the churchyard of St Martin by Looe.

The Extension opened to passenger rail traffic on **8 May 1901**. Its Liskeard terminus consisted of a separate platform and goods yard at right angles to the eastern end of the GWR station. The physical connection to the GWR was and is via a tight 5-chain radius curved spur line from the L and LR goods yard to a crossover installed by the GWR on the main line at the eastern end of the Up platform of their station.

Although the curve permitted the working or transfer of goods rolling stock of most types to and from the Looe and Caradon Branches to the GWR system, its severe radius could not enable through working of loaded main line passenger trains. Reaching Looe by rail requires a break of journey and the transfer of passengers and luggage at Liskeard as it has done for 120 years.

The GWR's great scheme of the 1930s would have removed this inconvenience and generated increased year-round traffic flows to and from Looe – but not via Liskeard.

- On **25 May 1909**, the GWR's L and LR and L and CR Bills passed into law, now enabling the GWR to maintain, work and use both branch lines, an arrangement that had been quietly prepared in the preceding years by the GWR's management and the Chairman and principal shareholder of the L and LR. The latter would remain a nominally independent company until the Grouping of the early 1920s. **Travel to and from Looe by rail was now an integral part of the GWR system.**

### **THE CORNISH RIVIERA**

The GWR's development of holiday traffic to Devon and Cornwall dates from the 1890s but it gained momentum with the appointment of the progressive James Inglis as General Manager in May 1903. The use of Italian-Mediterranean imagery was a feature of Inglis' marketing regime and it would underpin the GWR's promotion of Cornwall for the next forty years. Accordingly, in 1904 the Company published a guide book bearing the title *The Cornish Riviera* and on 1 July that year *The Cornish Riviera Limited* – a new premium passenger service- left Paddington at 10.10am on its inaugural run, non-stop for Plymouth (North Road). By 1929, the *Riviera's* departure time from the Capital was 10.30am, maintaining a non-stop run to Plymouth, and arriving at Penzance at 4.50pm. The service aspired to the highest standards -silver-service dining, brand-new rolling stock with panoramic windows, affluent passengers – but it was of no direct benefit to Looe, as the *Riviera* did not stop at Liskeard.

Intending passengers for Looe would need to change trains at Plymouth (North Road) or Liskeard, from which latter station a train of old four-wheel carriages would convey them onwards to Looe. By the mid-1930s, the classic GWR 'B' set bogie compartment coaches – originally designed for suburban traffic in the Bristol area – were deployed on the Looe Branch with its tight curves and limited clearances and would carry thousands of holidaymakers and their families until displacement three decades later by diesel multiple units.

The GWR's 'Cornish Riviera' branding would survive two World Wars, a General Strike, a world-wide economic downturn and Nationalisation. Among the many facets of the Company's energetic promotion of holidays in Cornwall were:

#### **HOLIDAY HAUNTS**

The GWR's in-house guide to holiday resorts and accommodation, it was first published in 1906 and annually thereafter except for wartime suspensions. Charles Beaumont, former GWR Goods Clerk at Plymouth, was in charge of production from 1930-1940. Peak years were 1928-1931, with 200,000+ copies sold. The Cornish section alone occupied 160 pages in 1934. *Holiday Haunts* was edited and completely rewritten from 1930 by Maxwell Fraser FRGS (the pen-name of Dorothy May Fraser, an accomplished journalist and travel writer). Her description of Cornwall emphasises its mysticism and independence. Last edition: 1947.

#### **THE HOLIDAY LINE**

A strapline on publications and posters introduced in 1908 and created by Archibald Edwards, former GWR Goods Clerk at Newport in South Wales. In the 1920s, a new branding, **GO GREAT WESTERN**, appeared on franked mail, folders and stationery.

#### **THE CORNISH RIVIERA**

The GWR's official guidebook to the Duchy, commissioned from S P B Mais, a teacher, journalist, broadcaster and author who had previously written for the Southern Railway. The third edition of Mais's *The Cornish Riviera* was published in 1934; the section on Looe is at its best when Mais focuses on the town's history and culture and the remoteness of the coastline to the east and west.

**SIR FELIX J C POLE**

Generally acknowledged to be the GWR's finest General Manager, he occupied the post from 1921 to 1929. He was an energetic moderniser of the Company's infrastructure and services and a skilled publicist. Pole led the development of partnerships with industry and commerce, not the least of which were those promoting tourism in the GWR's territories. Cornwall was surprisingly slow to establish such a collaborative body, much to Pole's frustration. He was knighted in 1924 and became the first Chairman of AEI Limited in July 1929.

***LOOE – TRADING TO TOURISM***

The port of Looe became a resort partly as a result of the growth of tourism to the West but also because of an economic necessity as its traditional role declined. This transformation of Looe owes much to the zeal of Joseph Thomas, who not only engineered the Liskeard and Looe Railway Extension, but was also responsible for the upgrading of Station Road in East Looe to create the principal road to Plymouth; the design of improved roads and extended quays in West Looe; the wave-resistant pierhead now known as the 'Banjo Pier' in East Looe; a new road to Hannafore Point, and the laying-out of the Hannafore Estate of prestigious housing and hotels, together with an associated water supply – all work undertaken between 1895 and 1901.

By 1914 the town had reached a turning point, with the nature of its rail- and sea-borne traffic undergoing permanent change. Phoenix United was the last of the great Caradon Mines in operation but it was declared a failure on 7 September 1914 and the days of ore stacks on Buller Quay had gone forever. The carriage of granite to the port down the Caradon Branch was that line's last southbound traffic after 1914 – and in the hard winter of 1916-17 the railway itself north of Moorswater would cease to exist, its track lifted for aspects of the war effort. It was not until July 1925 that Sir Felix Pole made it clear that the Caradon line would never be relaid. In 1919, a large part of Looe Quay and its railway siding collapsed, and in the 1920s, the GWR diverted china clay traffic from the Moorswater Dries – formerly shipped from Looe – to the deep water quays at Fowey via the Liskeard Extension and the main line.

Goods traffic on the Looe branch remained important, but it now consisted of wagonloads of imported domestic and gas coals, timber, building materials, limestone and manure, together with vanloads of fish and sardines and regular consignments of livestock.

Tourist traffic to Looe (promoted and increased by the L and LR and the GWR) was maintained through the Great War by day-trip visits; from 1929 the impact of new road services introduced by the Western National Omnibus Company from Torpoint and Liskeard was being felt in the streets of the town. The construction of middle class homes and holiday accommodation on infill and new sites was beginning to spread up the eastern and western valley sides. The GWR would not only seek to add to the 'holiday offer' of Looe, but to its status as a residential centre, for by 1934 the permanent population of the town was three-quarters that of Liskeard.

The 1934 edition of *Holiday Haunts* carried advertisements for eight substantial hotels on Joseph Thomas's Hannafore Point Estate alone, with details of one hundred more modest providers of holiday accommodation in East and West Looe and the outlying areas. By 1935, the 18-hole Looe Bin Down Golf Course had opened to complement courses in Liskeard and at Whitsand Bay, and Western National buses were already serving Hessenford, the Seaton Valley and Dowlund. GWR steamers – actually Ocean Liner tenders based at Millbay Docks – offered excursions to the Fal and the Eddystone and brought thousands of Plymothians on day trips to Looe. The branch line connected with eight daily London trains in the high summer and cheap day railway excursions offered a day on the beach or an exploration of the lanes and villages of the East Looe River valley. And the private motor car, then the hallmark of the aspiring middle class, was being seen in increasing numbers in hitherto quiet byways and on the new parking areas of the bigger hotels in south-east Cornwall. The GWR aimed to capture each segment of this mixed holiday market – but the more affluent sector was already a prime target for the company's hotels, express trains and, perhaps, high-quality residential estates.

In 1935, a scheme the like and scale of which had not been seen before on the Looe coast would embrace all these aspects. It would largely be the outcome of a worldwide economic depression.

### ***A TIME TO INVEST***

Beyond the Cornish Riviera of the 1930s, the railways and the national economy alike were experiencing unprecedented turbulence.

- **Competition from independent road hauliers** from the 1920s onwards had forced the railway companies to introduce higher capacity freight vehicles, greater use of mechanised loading and unloading and a concentration of freight at large goods yards with local distribution by railway-owned motor lorries
- **Increasing labour unrest** had disrupted UK railway companies since before the Great War but from 1921 the strain of wartime working, historic under-investment by the owning companies, the refusal of the Government to restore the income of mines and railways to their 1913 peak, and massive devaluation of the pound led to urgent calls for wage increases, improvements in working conditions and nationalisation. To compound matters, Britain was also losing its overseas markets for coal and steel. The resulting General Strike of May 1926 was weathered by the GWR – services resumed on the Looe branch on 11 May 1926 – but it left a lingering bitterness among the Company's workforce.
- **The worldwide economic downturn** is popularly linked to the Stock Market crashes of October 1929, but its causes reach back at least a decade earlier. The slump was characterised in the UK by its high level of long-term unemployment (26% in 1933, a level at which it remained until 1937) but this impact was unevenly felt. The North East of England was hard-hit, with some towns experiencing a 70% unemployment rate. The Midlands and South escaped the worst effects of the downturn, but in the old mining centres of West Cornwall the worldwide reduced demand for minerals and mining equipment closed Cornwall's last tin smelter in 1931 and the numbers of the unemployed in Redruth alone ran into the hundreds.
- **Investment practice in the interwar years by the 'Big Four' railway companies** was characterised by low investment in the core business of operating railways and the pursuit of better returns on capital from what appears to be peripheral activities. Between 1929 and 1937, investment in railway services by the GWR, SR, LMSR and LNER increased by 2.9%. Their investment in non-railway activities over the same period increased by 7.9%.

- **The emergence of coalition Governments with policies of work creation** to address the economic collapse in the UK took place immediately following Election Day on 30 May 1929. With unemployment still rising in 1931 and a likely cut in unemployment benefits, the first coalition government collapsed. It was promptly replaced by a new National Government led by the Conservatives with four factions of the Labour and Liberal parties.

At the heart of the policy drive to create work were Britain's railways, among the greatest construction and engineering concerns of their time, and with a backlog of projects and modernisation plans demanding capital investment.

The Coalition Governments created two sources of funding to generate major construction programmes:

**The Development (Loan Guarantees and Grants) Act 1929** under which companies financed new works themselves, with Government grants to finance part of the interest payments on borrowing for up to 15 years. The GWR drew up 14 projects for development by this means.

**The Railway Finance Corporation Loan Act 1935** under which the Government set up a quasi-independent body to guarantee capital borrowed and the interest on the loans at below market rates. *The GWR's new railway to Looe would draw upon this source of finance.*

### ***AN ANNOUNCEMENT***

On Monday **4 November 1935**, the Minister for Transport, and MP for Devonport, Leslie Hore-Belisha addressed a meeting in his constituency to announce advance details of the West Country's share of the resources released by the Railway Finance Corporation Loan Act. Railway companies were expected to proceed with programmes of work funded under the Act within six months. The modernisation of Exeter (St Davids), Paignton, Penzance and Plymouth (North Road) Stations, and the construction of a new inland main line between Dawlish Warren and Newton Abbot were key features of the Devonport speech, together with the announcement **of a new seven-mile railway line from near St Germans Station to a terminus on the high ground near East Looe, with stations at Hessenford, Seaton Beach and Millendreath. Services would be operated by diesel railcars with the journey time [from Plymouth] reduced by over half an hour. The project would enable considerable development of the Looe neighbourhood as a seaside resort and residential centre.**

It was almost inevitable that the GWR would have drawn upon schemes that had already been scoped. It is entirely possible that the proposal for a new line to Looe, with its associated developments, originated in 1930 if not before, and under the aegis of Sir Felix Pole. The first sketches for the Great Western Railway Hotel on the cliff top at Bodigga, east of Millendreath, were drafted by Sir Edwin Lutyens in **1930** and Sir Robert Horne's GWR Board Report of February 1936 refers to the Hotel and an accompanying golf course as a development based upon the model established by the Company's Tregenna Castle Hotel at St Ives. There is documentary evidence that cost estimates for a new line to Looe were available from **10 May 1935**: initialled by the senior Civil Engineer in the GWR New Works Department responsible for the project, the estimates reveal a specification for a route built to main line standards and enabling train speeds of up to 65mph.

861 000 cu yds of earthworks  
8 miles of permanent way  
Fencing and drainage  
Four viaducts and seven bridges  
Four tunnels  
Accommodation works and 175-foot rise escalator at Looe  
10% contingencies  
**Total cost £836 843 [£61 million at 2021 values]**

## **The St Germans to Looe Branch Railway**

### ***THE ROUTE:***

**In December 1935**, the *Great Western Railway Magazine* published a brief article on the planned new route to Looe, based on preliminary ‘desk studies’; it included a sketch map showing a line diverging from the Cornwall main line just west of St Germans Station, running SW beneath the Bake Estate in a tunnel to a station on the E valley side at Hessenford. From there, the line would run SSW via another tunnel to cross the Seaton Valley on a viaduct above Keveral Mill to a station on the hillside N of Seaton. Curving to the W, the line entered a tunnel over a mile in length beneath the farmland at Penhale and Penvith before emerging on the N flank of a deep valley draining SW from Bucklawren. Here, a station would serve Millendreath and a new GWR Hotel. The line was then to cross the valley at Millendreath on a viaduct immediately above Polliscourt before running along the S side of a short tributary valley draining from the Barbican area of East Looe. Here, it entered a tunnel beneath what is now Looe Community Academy to emerge on the hillside approximately above the existing Looe Station. An engineered shelf along the hillside between what now the Sunrising Estate in the NE and Pendrim Road in the S provided the space required for the new terminus station.

There were a number of significant changes made to the proposed route by the time that the final drawings were issued.

The GWR’s Surveyors were in the field by **February 1936** when they were active at Hessenford, and on **22 July 1936** when the route of the new road from Polliscourt serving the proposed station at Millendreath and the adjoining Hotel was surveyed. **On New Year’s Day 1937** the Surveyors were recording an area close to the foreshore at Millendreath and by **September 1937** the field surveying was completed, the task having been made particularly difficult by thick undergrowth and hilly terrain.

On **31 July 1936**, the GWR (Additional Powers) Act 1936 had passed into law and the Company then possessed the legal powers to construct a new railway to Looe.

### ***KEY FEATURES***

**Crift Lane Bridge** carries a minor road connecting the Polbathic area with Tideford over the Cornwall Railway main line west of St Germans Station. The OS Bench Mark at 234.9 feet ASL on the E side of the bridge is the Datum Point from which heights on the route of the new railway were calculated.

**Junction of the new Looe branch line with the Cornwall main line (0m 0f 0ch)** is 3 chains W of the W side of Crift Lane Bridge, 6 chains E of MP 257¾ and approximately 1¾ miles W of St Germans Station. The Junction was not adjacent to Trerule Signal Box, a simple 6-lever Block Post constructed in or before 1907 by the Cornwall Railway. In June 1938, the GWR installed a new Signal Box – still with a six-lever frame – on the same location, 10 chains N of MP 258¼, and with the same function. The 1938 work is often associated, wrongly, with preparation for the new Junction. By 1959, Trerule Signal Box had been replaced by a colour-light signal.

**NE portal of South Bake Tunnel (826 yards) (1m 0f)** was on the hill spur at the foot of which lies Milladon Wood, and was entered via an 80' deep cutting. The tunnel ran SW beneath South Bake Farm, emerging nearly 300' SW of the farmhouse in a 60' deep cutting.

**Hessenford Station (1m 6f – 1m 7f)** was approached on a falling gradient from the NE and via an impressive skew overbridge– by protracted negotiation with the County Council – 45' wide and 16' above the A387 road. The only crossing point on the single-line branch, Hessenford Station would occupy a site cut into the SE valley side of the River Seaton from the A387 overbridge to a new underbridge built to carry the minor road from Higher Treyone to Hessenford. The station was of the most modern design, employing precast concrete in its construction and its facilities included:

- 600' long single island platform with two faces for Up and Down trains respectively and a short precast concrete canopy
- A below rail-level station building accommodating waiting rooms, offices and the latest *Passimeter* automated ticket and turnstile equipment as used on busy London commuter routes of the time
- Extensive goods traffic provision with a Cattle Dock and Pens, a siding for 20 cattle wagons, a Goods Platform and lock-up, and a loop siding with a 27-wagon capacity, direct road access via a steep drive from the A387

On leaving the station, the line was originally designed to enter a tunnel along the valley side beneath Treyone Woods, but the final plan shows a cutting at this location.

**Keveral Viaduct (3m 1f 4ch-3m 2f 9ch)** was approached on a rising gradient of 1:140. Final design drawings reveal an imposing structure built of massed concrete and precast concrete sections with a total length of 1029' and a maximum height of 144' above the River Seaton at Keveral Mill. There were 11 spans of 70' width and 2 spans of 35' width.

**Seaton Beach Station (3m 4f-3m 5f)** was a proposal whose site was never precisely defined. As far as can be determined from the GWR centreline survey and a 1935 GWR sketch map, the most likely location was on a curved, gently-graded stretch of line on the hillside traversed by Keveral Lane. Originally referred to as *Seaton Beach (near Donderry) Station*, by 1937 it was known as *Donderry*. There is no evidence among the 1938 station documents that detailed plans were ever drawn up for this site.

**East Portal of Seaton Tunnel (4m 0f 5ch) (1881 yards)** was to be driven WNW into the head of a small deep valley draining SE from Struddicks and beneath the minor road known as Looe Hill. Three test boreholes were drilled along the tunnel's centreline under a January 1936 GWR contract with C Isler and Company to depths ranging from 170' to 341'. The sites of three shafts along the centreline were also determined and plotted to enable the creation of eight working headings to speed the driving of the tunnel and its ventilation.

**West Portal of Seaton Tunnel (5m 1f)** was located 60' below the existing land surface on the S side of a tributary valley running W to the Millendreath Valley, and draining from Penwith and Bucklawren. The railway was on a falling gradient of 1:100.

**Millendreath Halt (5m 4f)** was designed as a simple 300' long single platform on the S side of the railway, which was here constructed on a shelf cut into the N side of the deep valley described above. Provision was made on the site for a potential extension of the platform to double its length. The station building was a modest wooden structure with canopies on the platform and road elevations. The only road access to the Halt would be via a new road to be constructed to climb steeply from Polliscourt, and extending beyond the parking bay outside the station building uphill through the fields of Trefrome to a junction with the GWR's newly diverted road leading to the Company's Hotel at Bodigga. The overall appearance of Millendreath Halt closely resembled that of Perranporth Beach Halt, opened in 1931 on the Chacewater to Newquay line.

**Millendreath Viaduct (5m 5f 4ch) (861')** was of an identical design to that at Keveral in its use of mass concrete and precast concrete sections. Two 35' spans carried the line from Millendreath Halt over the roads beneath and onto the nine 70' spans across the deep valley and immediately above Polliscourt. A final span of 35' formed the exit from the viaduct at its Looe end.

**North East Portal of Looe Tunnel (6m 1f 5ch) (740 yards)** entered the head of a short tributary valley 60' below the land surface and SE of Barbican Road and N of Looe Community Academy. The line of the tunnel followed a 5-furlong continuous curve to the SW.

**South West Portal of Looe Tunnel (6m 5f 0ch)** was 80' below the level of the land surface in a substantial cutting in an area today known as Fairfields, on the Sunrising Estate. As the line left the tunnel, it immediately entered the wide shelf on the valley side engineered to accommodate the new terminus station at Looe, passing sidings on the Up and Down sides as it did so.

**Looe Station** was designed for commuter passenger traffic and through excursion and holiday services. Its overall style and configuration reflected that of the contemporary Newquay Station. Principal features were to include:

- Location on a shelf cut into the hillside: approximately 100' wide at the N (Looe Tunnel) end, widening to 200' to accommodate the principal station structures and sidings, and narrowing to 100' at the E (Pendrim Road) end, where a new station drive linked the forecourt and parking area with Barbican Road. The western margins of the site were heavily reinforced by battering and embanking.
- Track layout consisted of a single 600' long island platform with two faces, served by two running lines for Up and Down services. Each running line was paralleled by a loco release loop and four carriage sidings to the west, overlooking the town beneath, and a single goods siding on the east. The 600' long carriage siding fan and the goods siding were connected to two long headshunts, terminating close to the tunnel portal on the east and west of the running line: at this point the tracks crossed the site of St Martin's Well, which would have been protected beneath a concrete invert.
- Canopied station building providing access to the platform via a hall with booking office, parcels office, cloakroom, Station Master's and Porters' Offices, waiting rooms and refreshment room.
- Single mileage freight siding for wagonload freight like coal and fish traffic.

- 175' rise Escalator from an access on Station Road below to Pendrim Road outside the new station. This proposal was short-lived and the feature does not appear on the definitive station plan of 1936.

### ***OPERATION:***

The route was planned and set out to main line running standards to enable through operation of passenger trains from across the GWR network, with steam locomotive haulage. However, with remarkable foresight, the GWR's Chairman, Sir Robert Horne announced in February 1938 that the Company had commissioned a design study from Merz and McClelland to electrify all of its lines west of Taunton: branch lines not electrified would be operated by diesel traction. Suburban services on the new Looe line to and from the Plymouth area were from the outset planned for the GWR's new high-speed diesel railcars. First revealed at a press launch on 1 December 1933, 38 of these vehicles were delivered for service: powered by two underfloor AEC 130hp diesel engines, they could be run singly, in pairs, or with a GWR coach sandwiched between them. Some were fitted out with a buffet for interurban services. There are three survivors today, one in working order and often in service at the Great Western Society's Didcot base.

In May 1939, the Merz and McClelland study reported that a 3000v overhead electrification scheme west of Taunton was perfectly feasible, but the infrastructure and locomotive replacement costs would result in marginal benefits. The GWR Board opted not to proceed with the scheme.

### ***WORK UNDERTAKEN:***

- Field survey ca January 1936 to September 1937, involving pegging out the centreline of the route and new access roads
- Test drilling under GWR Contract 3153 of 31 January 1936 by C Isler and Company of Southwark: three boreholes along the line of Seaton Tunnel, one borehole close to South Bake farmhouse at approach to South Bake Tunnel, one borehole close to Looe Community Academy on line of Looe Tunnel
- Test drilling under GWR Contract 3255 of 2 October 1936 by Duke and Ockenden Limited of Littlehampton: four boreholes in two areas at Bodigga to prove geology of alternative sites for the proposed GWR Hotel
- Sinking of 41 trial pits at pegged locations along the railway route under GWR Contracts 3265 of 13 October 1936 and 3393 of 25 May 1937 by Charles Symons and Company of Liskeard. Typically such pits are 4' in depth and enable rapid assessment of ground conditions for foundation purposes: they are backfilled after use. There is no documentary confirmation that these works were completed, but 4 pits were to be located in the new Looe station area, with the remainder between Looe and Millendreath stations – thirteen of them on the line of Millendreath Viaduct.
- Detailed large scale plans of the route and stations at Looe, Millendreath and Hessenford

### ***KEY PERSONNEL:***

**New Works Engineer** C E SHACKLE AMInstCE was the GWR Civil Engineer responsible for the development and design of the new railway to Looe. Aged 60 when he signed off the cost estimates for the line, he had joined the staff of the GWR in 1900. In 1906 he was Resident Engineer for the reconstruction of Snow Hill Station in Birmingham, a project described as 'staggeringly complex'. Shackle served as a Technical Officer in the RFC in the Great War, and resumed his GWR career

after demobilisation in 1919; in 1933 he took over responsibility for the New Works Department, having worked on the modernisation of Bristol (Temple Meads) Station three years earlier. On 1 January 1940, Shackle was appointed as New Works Assistant to the GWR Chief Engineer Allan Quartermaine, but he retired at the end of that year. Charles E Shackle retired to Castle Cary in Somerset and he died on 26 January 1960, aged 85.

**Resident Engineer M A HENRY AMInstCE** was the Civil Engineer responsible for the on-site delivery of the contracts for the construction of the new line. Born in Dumfries and Galloway in 1891, he joined the engineering staff of the Caledonian Railway in 1912 and served as an Officer in the Royal Engineers in the Great War. Not demobilised until 1921, his war service had been extended to include a posting as a Construction Officer with the Allied Mission in Poland, where a Soviet incursion was being resisted. In July 1924, Henry joined the GWR as a Resident Engineer in Newport. He would spend the majority of his railway career in South Wales and by December 1936 he had become Assistant Divisional Engineer at Neath. In March 1937, he was appointed as Resident Engineer on the project to construct the St Germans to Looe railway but by September 1939 he and his family had returned to Neath Henry resumed his previous responsibilities. In January 1949, he was Divisional Engineer for the British Railways (Western Region) at Neath. Having completed work on the huge automated hump-shunting yard at Margam in 1959, he retired to live in Kensington in West London. Malcolm Alexander Henry died on 10 December 1971, aged 80.

#### ***OUTCOME:***

In **December 1937** the *Railway Magazine* published a progress report on work associated with the new railway to Looe, but the article was virtually a reprint of an official GWR account three months previously. It was in **February 1938** that the GWR Chairman, Sir Robert Horne, made his report to the Board and Shareholders at the Company's Annual General Meeting: following the discussion of a number of positive agenda items, Sir Robert reported that the Board had concluded that, independently of the costs to be incurred, the national interest would be better served by the deferral to 'slacker times' of those projects intended to meet future, rather than present, needs. Such a deferral required the approval of the Minister of Transport, which had already been granted with effect to 1 January 1945. The two GWR schemes so affected were the inland deviation of the main line between Newton Abbot and Dawlish, and the new railway from St Germans to Looe. At its meeting of **28 October 1938**, the GWR Board approved a recommendation by the General Manager, Sir James Milne that Parliamentary powers to acquire land scheduled for the new Looe line – and not yet secured- should be allowed to lapse. Fresh powers would be sought as and when needed.

The end for the GWR came at midnight on **31 December 1947** when the Company, with the SR, LMSR, and LNER companies were vested in the newly-nationalised British Railways, itself a constituent body of the integrated British Transport Commission. There remained optimism in the Looe area that the GWR's pre-war scheme for the new railway, hotel, and golf resort would be revived, but on the **22 May 1948** the *Western Morning News* reported an official statement issued by the Western Region of British Railways to the effect that the scheme for a new railway from St Germans to Looe had been officially abandoned. The hotel and golf course elements of the overall development remained under consideration for progress 'when conditions permit'.

South East Cornwall's spectacular new railway had quietly vanished from the scene, leaving a trace only in reports and plans.

## **Developing South East Cornwall**

The funding of the new railway to Looe was secured by means of a Government-guaranteed loan at advantageous rates of interest, but the GWR would need to invest its own capital in the non-railway aspects of the SE Cornwall scheme. To do so, the Company recruited an additional investor, and Section 53 of the GWR (Additional Powers) Act 1936 gave it the required legal powers. On **24 January 1936**, a new organisation, *Western Enterprises Limited*, came into being to develop the area served by the route of the new railway: over its lifetime, WEL would extend its landholdings to other areas of GWR territory, including the South Wales coast and Berkshire.

WEL was effectively a commercial partnership of the GWR and the Provident Mutual Life Assurance Association, the latter being the majority shareholder; its five-member Board was chaired by Geoffrey Luttrell, a GWR Director, with the active involvement of F C Hockridge (GWR Estates and Surveyor's Department, Paddington), P H McCormack (Manager and Actuary, Provident Mutual Life Assurance Association), Sir W Dampier (Agriculturalist and scientist, Trinity College Cambridge), and W S Mansfield (Director, Cambridge University Farm). The objectives of WEL were to:

- Acquire lands in the vicinity of a railway owned or worked by the GWR
- Prepare building sites and construct, adapt, maintain and use housing, hotels, shops, workplaces, aerodromes and conveniences of all kinds
- Construct roads, paths, open spaces, golf courses, sports grounds and swimming pools
- Construct, operate or contribute to the operation of public utilities
- Promote the development of housing trusts or public utility societies
- Establish or aid any churches, hospitals, schools, institutions or libraries for the benefit of people employed by or dealing with WEL, or living on land belonging to or formerly belonging to WEL

These objectives offer an insight of the GWR's vision for the area served by its new railway to Looe. To realise it, from **March 1936** onwards, WEL started the process of purchasing around 1000 acres of land extending east and north-east of Looe, including Duchy of Cornwall holdings and the shoreline from Kellow to Downderry.

## **The 18-hole Championship Golf Course**

**LOCATION:** Three principal fairways, two south of the road from Bodigga to Seaton and one running NW from Penhale via Penvith to Bucklawren. The southern fairways are split by the landholding of Murrayton and consist of a western section from Bodigga to Windsworth – this probably includes the 18<sup>th</sup> green – and an eastern section from the Murrayton boundary to the clifftop south of Penhale Farm.

**DEVELOPER:** Western Enterprises Limited for the GWR

**OIUTCOME:** Completed by **Spring 1938**; unplayed but maintained in good order until **August 1941**; decayed and overgrown by open pasture for wartime food production by **October 1945**. Today the course remains as agricultural land and the lack of traditional hedges here is one of the few clues that a golf course ever existed.

**DESIGNER:** The identity of the course designer is not yet known but the contractors, **Franks Harris Brothers Limited** of Guildford, were the one of the first and largest golf course constructors. Responsible for building courses at Wentworth and St Andrews among many other settings, Franks Harris Brothers did have a long association with the well-known designer Henry ('Harry') Shapland Colt, who created the championship course at Trevose in Cornwall, among many others in this country and overseas.

**WORK UNDERTAKEN:**

- By **January 1937**, work by Franks Harris Brothers to construct the course – removal of hedges, landscaping, building access paths and gateways, creation of greens and bunkers, installation of piped irrigation system, planting of windbreaks – was nearing completion. A workforce of 60 local men was employed and this was supplemented by volunteers who were tasked to pick stones from the playing areas. By **August 1937**, new growth of turf and the overall appearance of the course suggested that opening could not be far away, but the course would not be playable for at least a year with time needed for grass to grow on some of the greens and for others to settle.
- On **14 July 1937**, the GWR let Contract 3429 to Franks Harris Brothers for the construction of a diversion to the Seaton to Millendreath road, from the gateway at Murrayton to Bodigga farmhouse. The old route of the road was abandoned and removed to create the final fairway of the golf course. The new route was completed by **January 1938**, except for new fencing, gateways and stone pitching along its length, which was undertaken by Charles Symons and Company of Liskeard under GWR Contract 3552, with work beginning in **February 1938**. The fencing used was a standard GWR Taunton Concrete Works post-and-wire installation along the complete length of the diversion, which would serve the golf course, the 120-bedroom hotel to be built at Bodigga, and the drive to Millendreath Halt and Polliscourt. Today, the road survives as a public highway with its original pitching and much of its GWR concrete post fencing intact.

**STAFF APPOINTED:**

The following WEL golf course employees in **1939** have been identified with certainty:

- James Cabble, Groundsman, resident with family in a company house at Penhale Cottage
- John Munro, Green Keeper, resident as lodger at Penvith Farm

**The Great Western Railway Hotel, Bodigga**

**LOCATION:** Initially around 250' due E of Bodigga Farmhouse on a gently sloping platform of land facing SE with uninterrupted views over Salter Rocks below. Subsequently an alternative site was investigated 250' to the north of the first, with a clear view towards the valley in which Millendreath Halt was located.

**DEVELOPER:** Western Enterprises Limited for the GWR

**OUTCOME:** Apart from drilling to prove underlying geology, no groundwork was ever undertaken. Despite local post-war optimism and some prevarication on the part of the Western Region of British Railways in May 1948, selling-off of

the land dedicated for the hotel began in November 1952, with sales of the GWR's private beaches commencing in February 1953. One area was never sold – 'Lot 13...comprising about 30 acres of unspoilt Cliff Land with exceptional views' – and was gifted to the National Trust by the selling agents appointed by the British Transport Commission in 1952. A worn slate plaque today at Bodigga marks the place where guests from the GWR Hotel might have strolled to take in the evening air.

**DESIGNER:** **Sir Edwin Lutyens** produced the architectural sketches of the SE facade of the proposed hotel at Bodigga in **1930**. Lutyens died on 1 January 1944 and had the construction work proceeded, the hotel would have been one of his final pieces of work: it was the only such building he designed.

**WORK UNDERTAKEN:**

- Initial sketches by Lutyens and an outline plan possibly by him show a 22 000 square feet site, with a short entrance drive from a diverted public road, a lodge, an arrival and departure quadrangle, a service yard and garaging. The western extremity of the golf course - abuts the N and E boundaries of the hotel. The **1935** estimate of costs for the hotel construction amounted to £9.5 million at today's values. In **March 1936**, Lutyens visited the Windsworth-Bodigga area to review the landscape and hotel site.
- On **31 July 1936**, the GWR's Hotels and Refreshment Rooms Committee received the completed plans for the hotel and a cost estimate of £12.5 million at today's values.
- In **October 1936**, Duke and Ockenden Limited drilled four boreholes to prove the underlying geology on the hotel site first identified by Lutyens and on a second site 250' to the N. Hard rock was found only at a depth of 100' on the site nearest to the sea, and at 50' depth further inland.
- In **February 1937**, the GWR applied at the Cornwall County Licensing Sessions at Liskeard for a Provisional Licence for the hotel. The GWR was represented by:
  - Percival Pine, GWR Solicitor
  - R A P Setterfield, GWR Head of Hotels and Refreshment Rooms Department
  - A E Yeaman, Assistant in the Department of the GWR Chief Architect

The GWR's senior officers reported to the Magistrates that the hotel would accommodate 150 guests in an imposing building set in 20 acres of grounds. It would provide:

- Two passenger and one goods lifts, sea and medicinal baths
- Ensuite bathroom in every bedroom
- Bowling greens, tennis and squash courts and putting greens
- Bathing pool on the hotel foreshore
- Escalator to enable guests to access the beach from the hotel
- Winding paths to the shore
- Fresh food to be purchased locally
- Staff recruited locally with no reduction in the winter

The GWR's estimated cost for the new hotel was now reported by Pine to be £10.5 million, at today's values. Setterfield and Pine completed the Licensing process with a further appearance before a sub-committee of the Quarter Sessions in Bodmin in **May 1937**. The Committee were unimpressed by the fact that no tender for the construction of the hotel had

yet been let, but accepted Setterfield's view that it was due to open in 1940 and Pine's assertion that the GWR General Manager, Sir James Milne, was promoting the scheme 'with the greatest expedition'. The Provisional Licence for the Great Western Hotel at Bodigga was granted and renewed every year by the GWR from **1938 to 1947** inclusive.

- In **July 1937**, the GWR contract for the diversion and improvement of the road to serve the hotel and golf course from Murrayton to Bodigga is let to Franks Harris Brothers and it includes an extension down to Millendreath, to replace an existing narrow pathway. The route of this extension – never built- had probably been surveyed a year earlier.
- Sir James Milne and other senior officers of the GWR made an unannounced and private visit to Windsworth on the morning of **20 December 1937**, to view an alternative site for the hotel 'close at hand'. The planned location had not proved 'in every way suitable'.
- In **April 1938**, the GWR Hotels and Refreshment Rooms Committee were advised that the site of the hotel would need to be moved; in **July** of that year the Committee received the news that the lowest tender opened for the construction of the hotel was £15.3 million at today's values. The Committee immediately recommended to the GWR Board that an alternative scheme for the hotel should be prepared.
- In **August 1939**, the South East Cornwall Water Board agreed to offer Liskeard Rural District Council a capped level of water supply for the use of the GWR Hotel at Bodigga.
- In **July 1945**, the GWR Board approved revised plans for the hotel, to reduce its capacity (and therefore overall scale) from the original 120 beds to 60 beds.

### ***THE LAST RESORT:***

On **26 July 1945**, a Labour Government under Prime Minister Clement Atlee was elected by a landslide majority. The Labour Manifesto had included a clear commitment to public ownership of inland transport, to which the 'Big Four' railway companies responded with a programme of mutual co-operation and planning, and sustained lobbying of their staff, passengers and allies. The GWR's strategy for an independent future was set out in Viscount Portal's Chairman's Report to the GWR Board in **March 1946**. Christian Barman, a talented architect and designer, was commissioned by the GWR to write a popular version of the company's forward plan and his *Next Station* was published in 1947. Barman knew he was by then writing a valediction. The Government had announced that nationalisation of the railways would be addressed in Parliament in 1947.

Barman had described the GWR Hotel at Bodigga as the last development of its kind. The postwar GWR would focus thenceforth on hotels in principal cities aimed at the business market and the company's holiday accommodation would embrace low-priced 'family hotels' with 24-hours crèche services, and holiday camps. It was all too little, and too late.

The Western Region of British Railways came into being on **1 January 1948** under its first General Manager, K W C Grand, who had been Principal Assistant to Sir James Milne through the war years. The first casualty of the new regime was the proposed branch line to Looe from St Germans (May 1948), followed by the release onto the market of the lands purchased by the GWR and WEL for railway and hotel construction, and of the land occupied by what had been the completed golf course.

WEL itself was wound up – under the authority of its Chairman, K W C Grand – at a meeting in London in **March 1954**.

The British Transport Commission, as the ultimate owners of the railway and WEL landholdings, appear to have rapidly realised their value by transferring them to ***Metropolitan Railway Country***

*Estates Limited*, a company established by the Metropolitan Railway in 1863 to enable residential development on land adjoining its railway network.

On **Monday 30 August 1954**, MRCEL made an ambitious attempt to sell off the great majority of the GWR's and WEL's former landholdings in an auction of 16 lots at Purdy's Rooms on Bay Tree Hill in Liskeard. The lots included six working farms, stretches of foreshore and cliff land, and residential property. Not a single lot was sold on that day.

### **The Kellow Estate, East Looe**

**LOCATION:** The original Estate comprised the western side of the lower Millendreath valley, land above Plaidy Beach, and Kellow Lodge itself. Kellow Lodge was excluded from the purchase of the Estate by the GWR but the Company added the entire shoreline between Plaidy and Pen Rocks.

**DEVELOPER:** Western Enterprises Limited for the GWR

**OUTCOME:** The Kellow Estate was planned at the outset to become an area of prestigious residential housing served by the new railway. The 1937 phase of road layout and installation of services in the south of the Estate, above Plaidy Beach, were completed by the outbreak of the war, together with the first two houses (*St Annes* and *Kellow House*) and these survive today. The current extensive development of the Estate dates from the 1980s when WEL's vision of connecting Plaidy Park Road with Barbican Road was finally achieved.

**DESIGNER:** Not currently known.

#### **WORK UNDERTAKEN:**

- First planning draft submitted to the South East Cornwall Joint Planning Committee in **February 1937**.
- Transfer of title of the Kellow Estate to the GWR/WEL took place on **3 July 1937**.
- Construction of roads and services was under way by **July 1938**, with the site planned to accommodate 38 building plots of nearly equal size, although 8 slightly larger plots were laid out adjoining the cliff edge. Plots for two pairs of semi-detached shops were intended for construction on a site abutting *Kellow Cottages*.
- Two houses – *St Annes* and *Kellow House* – were completed on plots 22 and 21 respectively
- Further development by WEL stalled at the outbreak of the Second World War.

### **Myths and Legends**

Rumours and misunderstandings have swirled around the GWR's scheme for South East Cornwall from its launch through to the present day. In part this is the result of the Company's commercial sensitivity over its intentions, and a degree of local suspicion at the project launch. Common misapprehensions are:

- The junction for the new railway was at Trerulefoot
- The line was actually a secret supply route for a Royal Navy fleet refuelling installation for warships moored in Whitsand Bay
- The golf course was designed for the personal use of King George V

- Old railway carriages were installed at Millendreath for the construction of the railway
- The golf course was opened with an inaugural round
- The foundations for the hotel were completed

### Acknowledgments

The full paper and supplement from which this synopsis is drawn was written in 2021 and employed over 270 references to original documents, newspapers, magazine articles, reference books, technical journals and a range of historic sources including wartime aerial photography. Personal recollections were cross-checked against documentary evidence. Interested readers are advised to consult the original paper and supplement, copies of which are lodged with the organisations listed earlier.

Forty-three people contributed to and enabled the original research in the field, in interpretation of findings, in professional expertise and in supplying original documents. They all gave of their time freely and with generous encouragement. Thank you to them all.

### In the landscape today



**The 18<sup>th</sup> green with two boundary bunkers, WEL Golf Course, Windsworth-Bodigga fairway**

Photograph © Caroline Petherick 2021

*This feature is on private land and is not accessible.*

**Original Franks, Harris Brothers entrance to the SE fairway of the WEL Golf Course at Struddicks, accessed across the road from the Bucklawren fairway.** Now a public entry to the Coast Path and land donated to the National Trust by MRCEL. Three areas of rough, two bunkers and a green once lay beyond.

Photograph © Jim Lewis 2021





**The revised inland site for the GWR Hotel after borehole exploration in 1937 at Bodigga.** The hotel would have occupied the level area beyond the gate; Millendreath Halt and the railway were to be sited on a shelf along the far side of the deep valley in the middle distance. The portal of Seaton Tunnel was to be sited at the head of the RH tributary valley where it meets the hedge line on the R.

Photograph © Peter Murnaghan 2021

*These sites are on private land and are not accessible.*



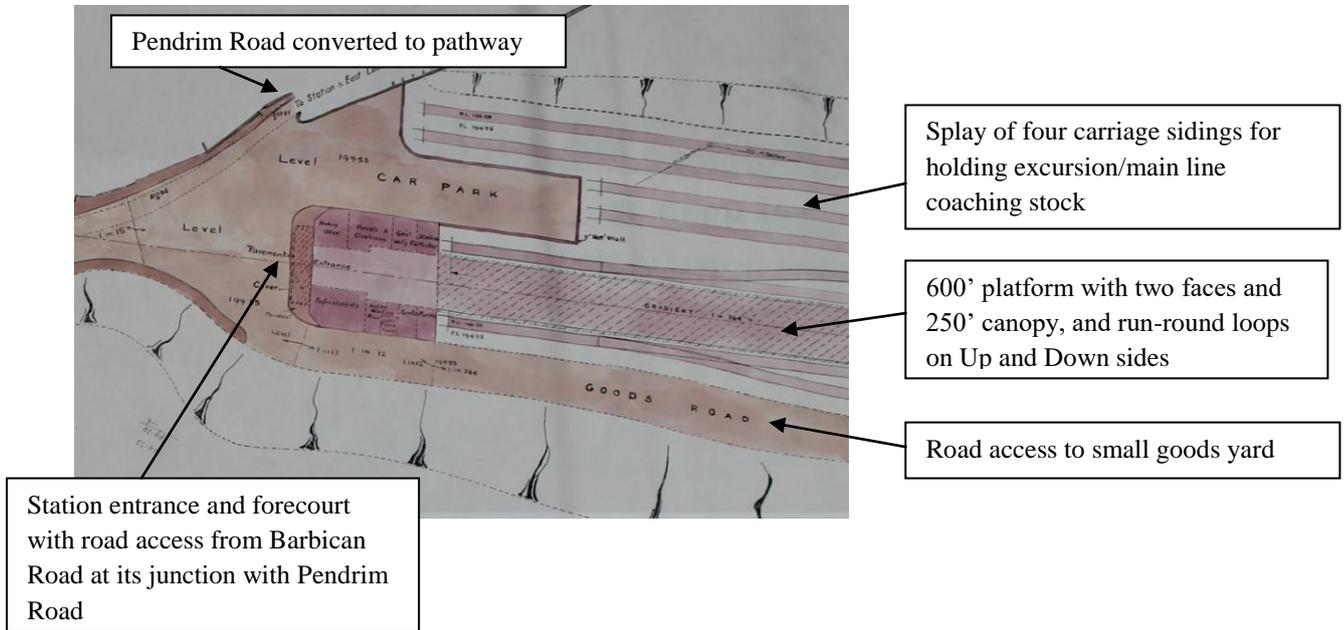
**Original Franks, Harris Brothers new road to serve the WEL golf course and hotel, and completed in January 1938, with stone pitching by Charles Symons and Company of February 1938, under GWR contracts.** The picture is taken near Bodigga, with the curve in the far distance originally intended to extend the new road downhill to Millendreath. Behind the photographer, on both sides of the new road, are intact stretches of GWR Taunton Concrete Works standard post-and-wire fencing, installed by Charles Symons and Company.

Photograph © Peter Murnaghan 2021

**Never in the landscape**

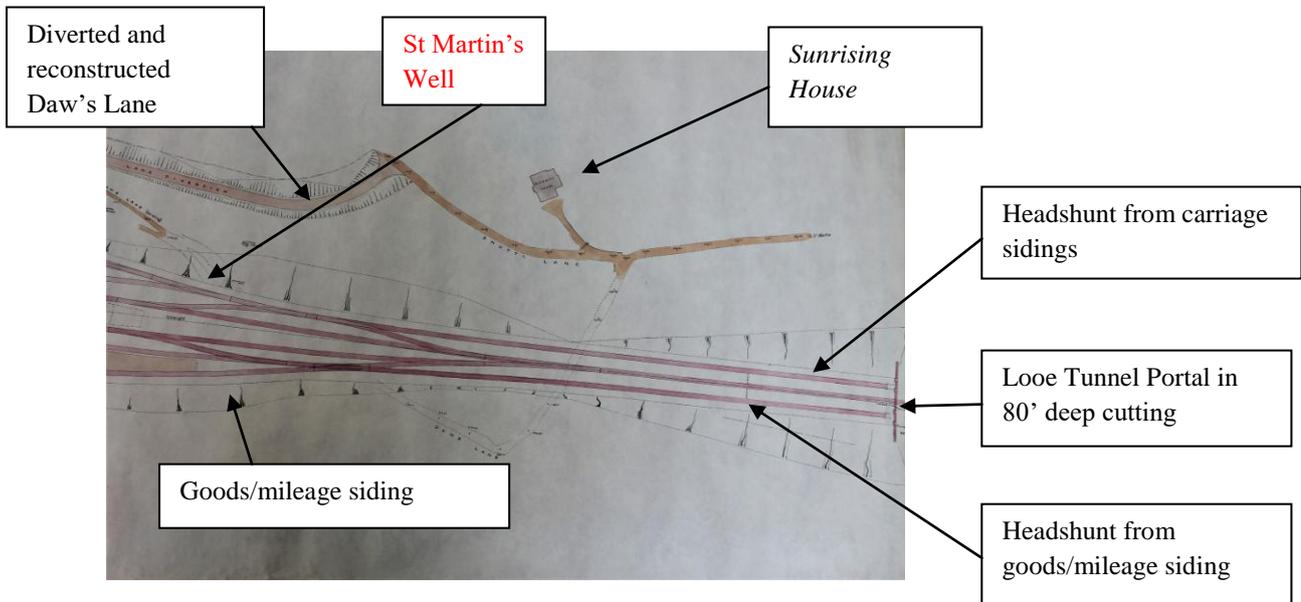
**LOOE STATION: GWR Plan of June 1936**

*Image © and by used with permission of Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre*



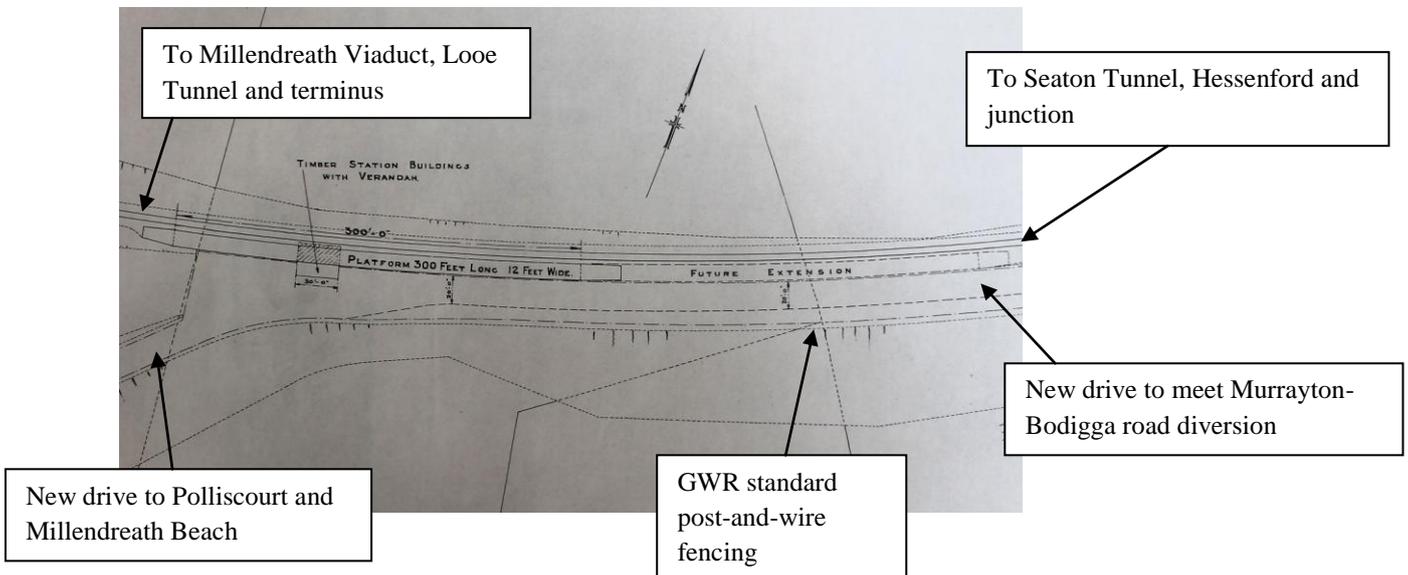
**LOOE STATION AND LOOE TUNNEL PORTAL: GWR Plan of 1936**

*Image © and used with permission of Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre*



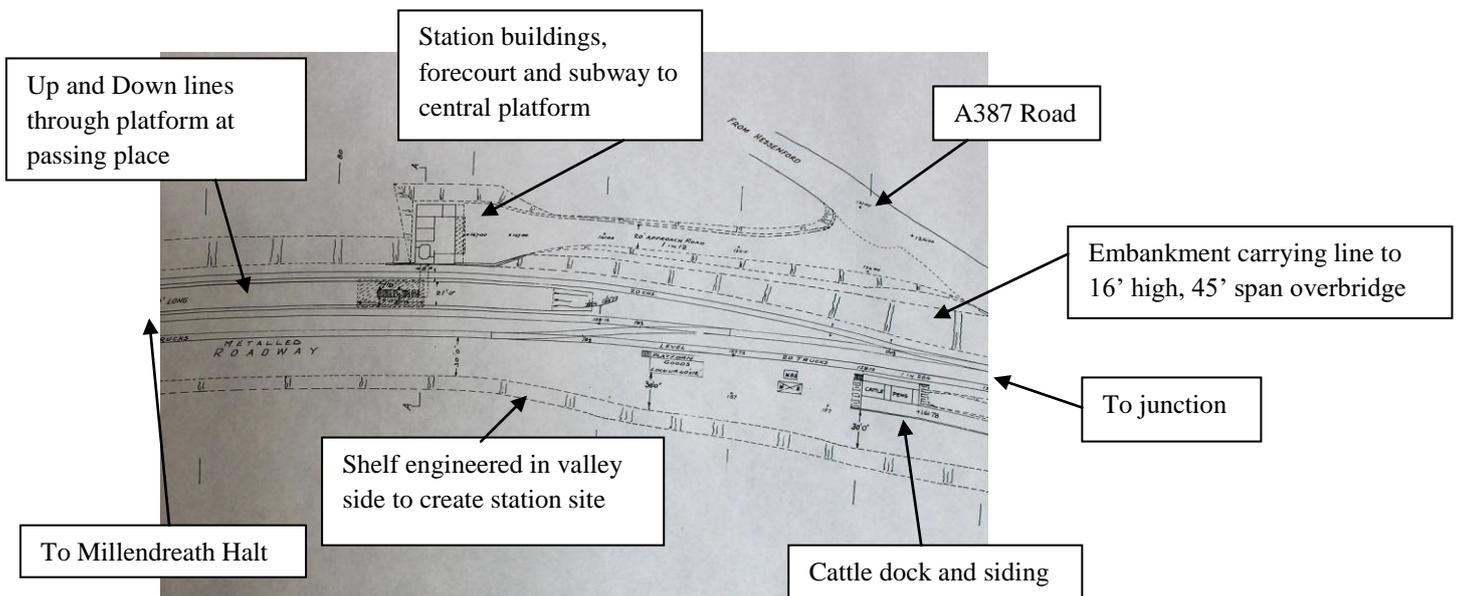
### MILLENDREATH HALT: GWR Plan of 1938

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### HESSINFORD STATION: GWR Plan of 1938

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