

Railways in the North Derbyshire Coalfield

The earliest scheme for a modern, locomotive-operated railway in the Derbyshire coalfield, proposed in 1832, was for a line running down the Erewash valley in the south-east of the county to compete with the canals linking the coalfield with Nottingham, Derby and the Trent. This was not built for some years but the major wave of railway promotion in the mid-1830s included a line which ran north from Derby through the Derwent and Amber valleys before tunnelling beneath the watershed to enter the Rother valley south of Chesterfield and from there continue to Rotherham and Leeds. As soon as the North Midland Railway opened in 1840, branches were built to nearby pits and the modern history of mining in Clay Cross and neighbouring villages began.

The Midland Railway, formed in 1844 by the amalgamation of the North Midland and the two other companies serving Derby, retained the advantage it gained by being the first to serve the Derbyshire coalfield. A second line through the southern half of the coalfield, from Clay Cross through Alfreton and the Erewash Valley to join the Derby–Nottingham line at what became Trent Junction, was opened in 1862, to which colliery branches were soon added. In the early 1870s, when interest grew in exploiting the deeper coal seams beneath the magnesian limestone to the east of Chesterfield, the company built a line between Mansfield and the Manchester, Sheffield & Lincolnshire Railway (MS&L) at Worksop. It was this line that enabled the Sheepbridge Company to open their colliery at Langwith. Without the prospect of collieries being sunk it was uneconomic for a railway company to consider a new line; without a railway it was impossible to open a colliery.

The Midland continued to build branches as mining east of Chesterfield expanded. A line from Staveley up the Doe Lea valley to Glapwell was later extended to join another Midland branch built from Westhouses (near Alfreton) through Pleasley to Mansfield. A second line from Staveley ran via Clowne to the Mansfield–Worksop branch at Creswell. Although these lines had passenger services they existed mainly to carry coal, and in some cases also to take miners to and from collieries where the men did not live locally.

In the 1890s three other companies tried to secure a share of the local coal trade, encouraged by colliery owners who disliked being dependent on a single carrier.

The MS&L, as part of their scheme to build a new trunk route from south Yorkshire to London, opened a line between Beighton and Annesley. This ran parallel with the Midland as far as Staveley and then passed to the east of Chesterfield (which was served by a loop from the main line) through Heath and Tibshelf to the Leen valley north of Annesley. Branches were put in to each colliery on the line, most of which were already served by the Midland.

The other scheme of the 1890s was the independent Lancashire, Derbyshire & East Coast Railway, promoted largely by E.M. Bainbridge, the founder of the Bolsover Colliery Company, and originally intended to link the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire coalfield with new docks on both the west and east coasts. In the event, the company built a line from Chesterfield to near Lincoln which provided an outlet for coal from the Bolsover area (and later the Dukeries coalfield) to the east coast ports in competition with the Great Central (as the MS&L was renamed after the opening of its line to Marylebone). The LD&EC was unable to survive as an independent concern and in 1907 was absorbed into the Great Central.

The third company to penetrate the coalfield was the Great Northern, whose Leen valley line was extended in the late 1890s through Pleasley to Langwith Junction. By 1914, therefore, both the older Derbyshire coalfield and the newer mining district on the magnesian limestone were served by a dense network of branches, mostly built by two of the major railway companies of Britain, the Midland and the Great Central, which at the grouping of 1923 became principal constituents of the London, Midland & Scottish Railway and the London & North Eastern Railway respectively.

Both these companies and the nationalised industry after 1947 continued to serve the north Derbyshire



Figure A A porter on the Great Central Railway at Bolsover some time between 1907 and 1923.

coalfield for the remainder of its life. Just as lines had been built to enable collieries to be sunk in the 19th century, so the branches were abandoned from the 1960s as the pits closed. By then the passenger stations had long gone, early victims of the more flexible bus services introduced from 1920 onwards, while the small stations on the main lines also closed in the 1960s.

So, too, did the depots built to house the locomotives that were used to carry coal from the pits to sidings on the main lines, where larger trains, hauled by some of the most powerful steam locomotives used

in Britain, were made up every night to take coal to the power stations of the Trent valley or to the domestic markets of London and the Home Counties. Just as the end of mining in Derbyshire brought with it the end of a distinctive way of life for many communities, so (on a smaller scale) did the disappearance of the railway from places like Westhouses or Langwith Junction.

Forty years on some of these lines have been converted into footpaths (notably the Five Pits' Trail around Tibshelf and North Wingfield) while others have disappeared as completely as the collieries they served.

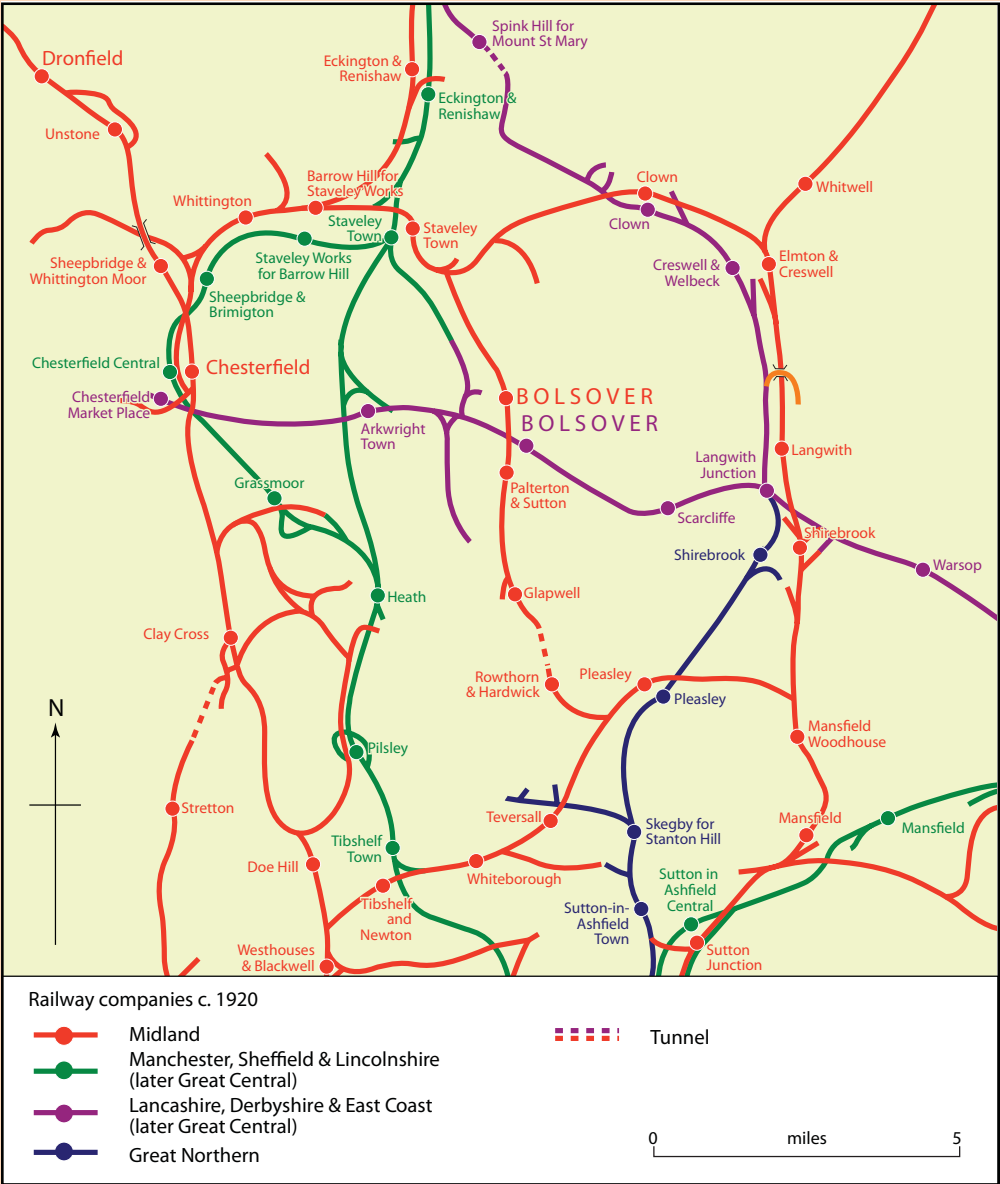


Figure B The Railway network around Bolsover at its greatest extent c. 1920