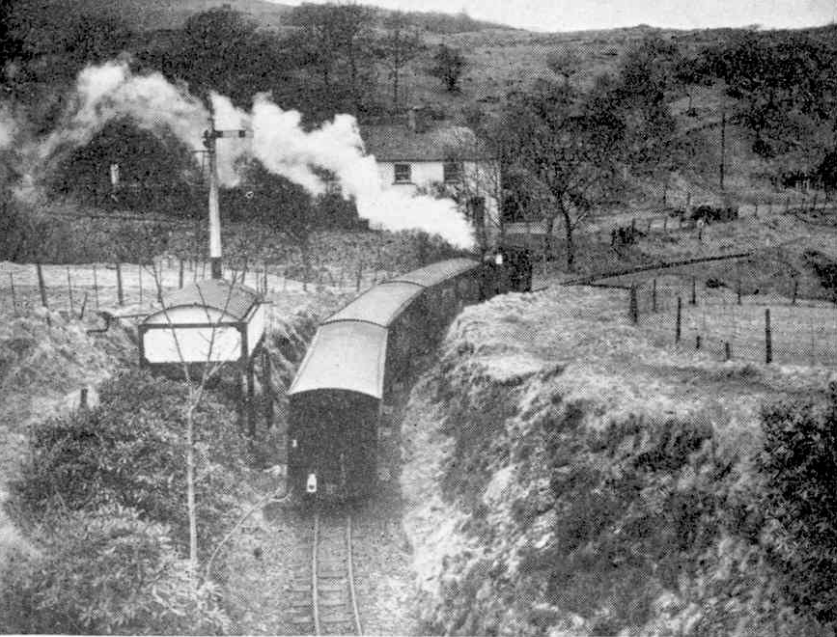


by **Michael Rickett**

# BRITISH RAILWAYS'

## TINIEST LINE



The Vale of Rheidol Railway. A cutting between Aberystwyth and Devil's Bridge. Note the narrow gauge of the track

THE VALE of Rheidol Railway has recently been given a new lease of life by British Railways, following a 30 per cent increase in passenger receipts in 1963.

The railway has also been given a new look and visitors to Aberystwyth will find that the coaching stock is now painted a bronze green with 'V of R' painted on the sides. This livery is very reminiscent of that used when the line was owned by Cambrian Railways, prior to the grouping of 1923. It is hoped to effect a further five per cent increase in traffic this year, to help cover the cost of stock maintenance.

The Vale of Rheidol Railway was authorised in 1897, and construction of the line started in 1901, although at first it was found difficult to raise sufficient capital. The contract for the construction of the line was secured by Pethick Bros. of Plymouth. At the time of building, Aberystwyth was well-developed as a seaside resort and the traders and merchants of the town, no doubt realised the advantages to be gained from building a railway link between Aberystwyth and the well-known beauty spot, Devil's Bridge.

There was also a considerable industry in lead mining, which later proved to be a profitable source of revenue for the railway. The only available transport at the time consisted of horse drawn carts, which were both expensive and slow.

The Vale of Rheidol Railway was first projected many years before, in 1861 in fact, when the Manchester and Milford Railway obtained powers to construct a branch from its proposed main line at Devil's Bridge through to Aberystwyth. The project, however, was allowed to lapse and nothing was done by that company.

The builders of the present railway were no doubt influenced by the highly successful Festiniog Railway, for when choosing the track gauge it was decided to build the line to the popular 1 ft. 11½ in. gauge. The cost of laying a railway to this track gauge is much less than with standard gauge.

The application to Parliament to build the line was successful and the Vale of Rheidol Railway Company

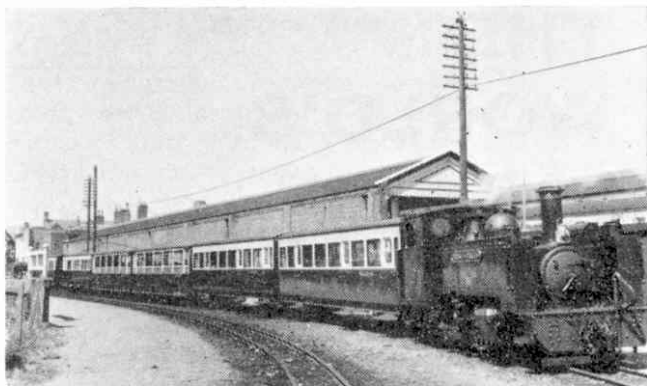
was incorporated by an Act of Parliament on August 6, 1897. This gave permission for the building of two railways of 1 ft. 11½ in. gauge—a main line from Aberystwyth to Devil's Bridge, and a branch to Aberystwyth Harbour. The branch, however, was closed in 1924 and dismantled in 1930.

When the construction of the line began in 1901, difficulty was experienced in attracting sufficient labour. This was neatly solved, however, by the completion of the Birmingham Waterworks in the Elan Valley, which resulted in a large number of navvies being available for building the railway. For the first few years, traffic on the line exceeded all expectations and the initial services inaugurated by the company, resulted in the withdrawal of the horse coach that was formerly the only transport in the area.

The line starts alongside the standard gauge station at Aberystwyth, where a ground level platform is placed. There is also a separate booking office adjacent to the

All aboard! Locomotive No. 8 'Llywelyn' puffs impatiently awaiting the guard's green flag



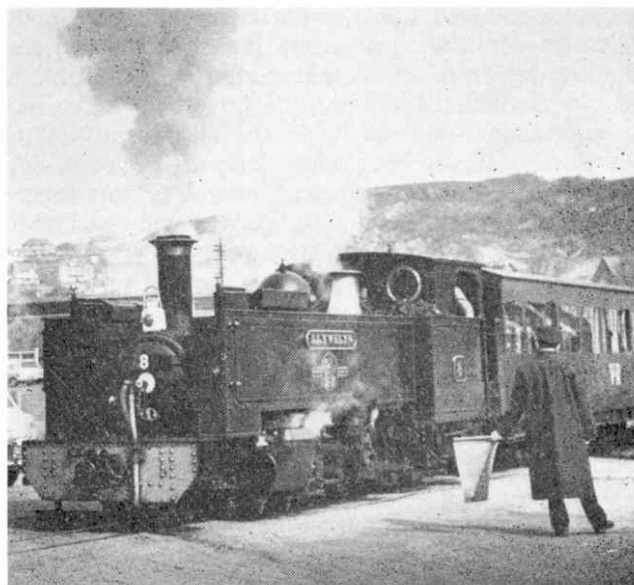
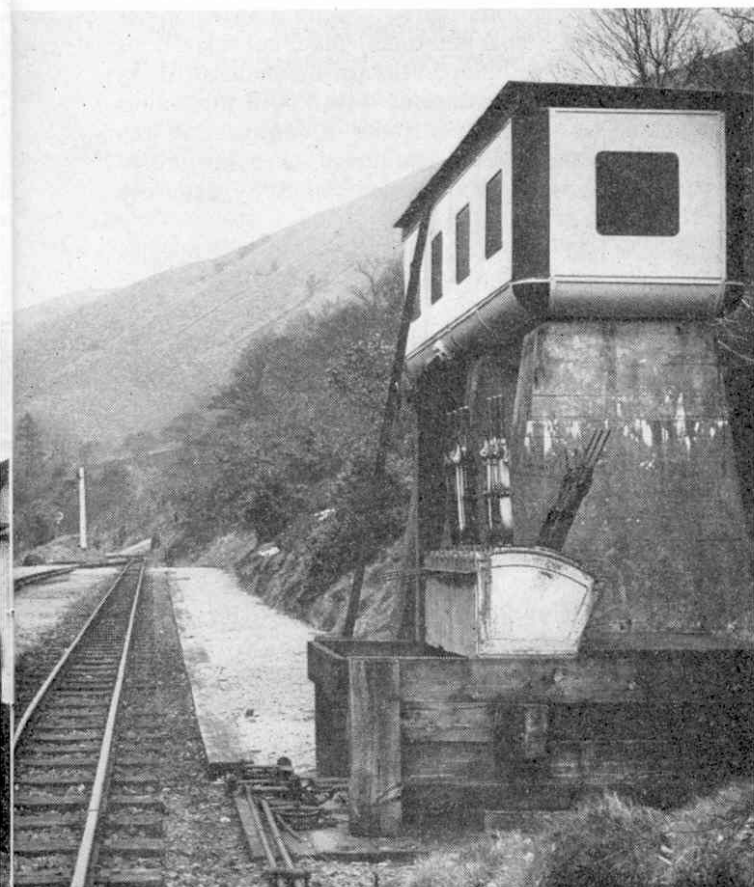


The 2-6-2T locomotive No. 9 'Prince of Wales' of the Vale of Rheidol Railway getting up steam at Aberystwyth

main line office. On leaving Aberystwyth Station, the line passes the site of the former narrow gauge terminus, which was used before the extension to Aberystwyth was built. After passing over a marshland, Glanrafon Halt is reached and then the railway runs alongside the River Rheidol to Capel Bangor.

The remainder of the journey is spent climbing and winding to Antyronen Halt, and then to Aberffwrdd, which lies 200 feet above sea level. A continuous gradient of 1 in 50 is experienced, and the railway runs on a rocky ledge to Rheidol Valley Halt. After this, the track rounds a horseshoe bend to arrive at Rhiwfron Halt.

A signal box on the Vale of Rheidol Railway. In the distance, the two tracks converge into single track



Level crossing without gates! One of the railway's staff has to hold up road traffic, while the train crosses the road

Breathtaking views of the Rheidol gorge can be seen from here and on the remaining stretch of line to Devil's Bridge Station.

The success achieved by the railway made it attractive to larger concerns and in 1913, it was taken over by Cambrian Railways. This event marked the turning point in the railway's career, for it had been badly neglected during the 1914-18 war. The goods' services were ended in the middle 1920s, following the closure of the lead mines in the district, and the winter passenger services were eventually discontinued in 1931; a bus service having gained most of the local traffic.

The line was closed for the duration of the Second World War and was re-opened on July 23, 1945. It was nationalised shortly afterwards and formed part of the Western Region until just recently, when the London Midland Region took control of the line.

The three locomotives owned by the railway in 1945 were painted in a similar shade of green to that used by the former Great Western Railway. They were also given names in 1956—Nos. 7 and 8, the Swindon built locomotives, becoming 'Owain Glynwr' and 'Llywelyn'. The original locomotive built by Davies and Metcalf took its old Vale of Rheidol name 'Prince of Wales'.

No efforts were made to extol the virtues of tourist travel until 1954 and the future of the line was very doubtful. Fortunately, a substantial increase in passenger traffic in that year prevented the closure of the line. The following year saw an amazing increase in passenger traffic to a total of 23,616 and the railway began to be widely advertised. The appearance of the trains themselves was greatly improved, the coaches being painted in a chocolate and cream livery.

Thanks to the determination of the Vale of Rheidol Railway management, it now seems fairly certain that this highly picturesque route will continue to exist. In the days of Dr. Beeching it has proved, by its sustained effort to increase traffic, that it can survive economically.