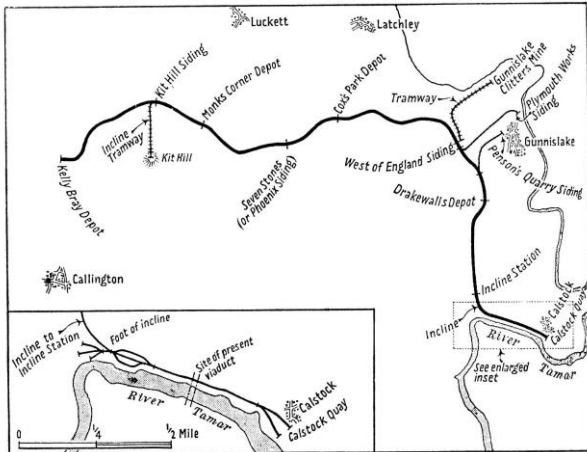


Holman Fred Stephens and the building of a branch to Callington

When you read books and articles about the Plymouth Devonport & South Western Junction Railway Co. (PD&SWJR) they rarely mention Stephens. Likewise books about the Colonel and his railways seem to concentrate on lines with the PD&SWJR. being mainly pictorial with few hard details. Even a trawl through 'The Colonel' index reveals few references to his line in the S.W.

So what was his involvement in the building of a branch line from Bere Alston to Callington.



The ECMR line from Kelly Bray to Calstock Quay

A bit of background

The LSWR main line from Waterloo to the SW relied on the GWR for access to Plymouth via their branch line from Lydford. The PD&SWJR built a line from Plymouth Kings Rd station to Lydford via Bere Ferrers, Bere Alston and Tavistock. The line was operated from the outset by the LSWR giving them direct access to Plymouth but was always owned and maintained (until the grouping) by the PD&SWJR.

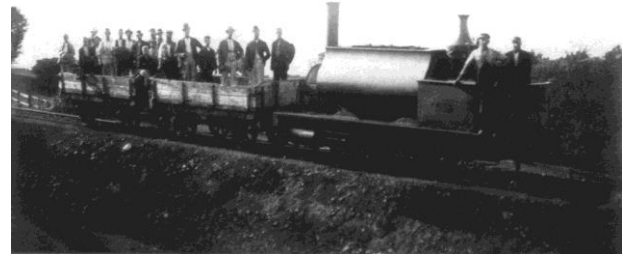
There had always been plans to link Callington to the main rail network, the two front runners were the GWR's plan for a branch from Saltash (they ran a bus service from Albaston via Callington to Saltash station) and the LSWR/PD&SWJR plan for a line from Bere Alston to Callington and points north. The people of Callington preferred the GWR option to Saltash but it was the Bere Alston option that went ahead.

The building of the line was to be carried out as two separate contracts

- (A) To build a new railway, the Bere Alston & Calstock Light Railway (BA&CLR) from the main line at Bere Alston via a newly constructed viaduct to Calstock and to join the ECMR at a point above the incline and south of Gunnislake
- (B) To re-align the existing 3ft 6" East Cornwall Mineral Railway (ECMR) which ran from Kelly Bray to Calstock Quay via an incline, and to convert the goods depots at Kelly Bray, Monks Corner, Cox Park and Drakewalls to passenger stations.

(A) The contract to build the BA&CLR was awarded to the building firm of John George Lang of Liskeard. This was the biggest job that Lang had ever undertaken and he greatly underestimated the cost, time and complexity of the job.

(B) The upgrading of the ECMR was to be carried out by the lines owners the 'Plymouth Devonport & South Western Junction Railway' (PD&SWJR) under the direction of Capt. Sowton who had been the General Manager of the ECMR since 1883. It was realised that there was a lack of light railway expertise so the PD&SWJR board agreed to employ an engineer with the relevant expertise to advise and work with Capt. Sowton. Holman Fred Stephens was approached and in 1904 became a consultant engineer to the PD&SWJR. In 1905 the board decided to convert the line to standard gauge (probably on advice from Stephens). He was also asked to acquire rolling stock and signalling for the whole line.



An ECMR Neilson 0-4-0 c. 1903 being used to ferry workers to one of the quarries

Holman Fred Stephens involvement

Stephens did not base himself in the west county but preferred to periodically travel to the area to inspect the work in progress and advise on work to be carried out. He would visit on average about twice a month, in the early stages there were longer gaps between his visits but when work was at a critical point and towards completion and opening of the line his visits were more frequent.

The management saw Stephens as a dynamic entrepreneur who could push things along and keep costs under control.

The workforce saw Stephens as an interfering outsider who thought he knew everything.

The truth is probably somewhere in between.

His routine was to travel to Tavistock or Bere Alston then on to Callington for a meeting with Capt. Sowton for a progress report followed by an inspection of the work in hand, he would quite often 'walk the line' dictating notes to an assistant. On returning to his office letters would be sent out detailing things that required correcting and prioritising future work. Quite often these letters accompanied by his instructions

would be written on the train as he returned to Tonbridge.

If materials were required to progress work they were ordered within a couple of days to be delivered to the site as required, rail and sleepers were quite often shipped to Plymouth and then onto Calstock by barge (in Jan 1906 7,500 sleepers) lighter material arrived by rail at Bere Alston to be transferred to Calstock via the viaduct cableway.

When plans were required they were drawn and dispatched within days. Stephens attention to detail was meticulous with many sketches to illustrate the method of construction.

It is probably true to surmise that there was no great pressure on Stephens as Lang was having problems with the viaduct and the completion date was continually being revised.

The work on the ECMR consisted of :-

1. Straightening the track where require, this involved some earth work.
2. Removal of the existing ballast and to re-sleeper the track, laying new rail to standard gauge and relaying the best of the old rail as a third rail at 3ft 6" so that the line could continue in use as a narrow gauge mineral railway. This third rail was removed on completion of the wagon lift and just before the line was inspected by Major Pringle from the B of T. Re-ballast the track, ballast being obtained locally as spoil from Wheal Edward and Kit Hill quarry
3. Strengthen or rebuild the bridges adding parapets, this was done by the addition of steel girders
4. Fence both sides of the track.
5. Design and build stations at,

Callington Road	(Kelly Bray)
Stoke Climsland	
Lockett	(Monks Corner)
Latchley	(Cox Park)
Gunnislake	(Drakewalls)
Calstock	
6. To build a carriage shed and engine shed complete with repair facilities at Callington.
7. To change the gauge of the track on Calstock Quay. This was to be done over 3 days after the completion of the wagon lift.



Gunnislake station May 1908 with the typical Stephens station buildings but still retaining the third narrow gauge rail in the siding



Callington Road Station under construction

Stephens also had an involvement with the overall project. He was asked to supply the motive power, rolling stock and signalling for the whole branch.

His initial intention was to purchase second hand locomotives from the L&SWR. When no suitable loco's were available three new ones were ordered from Hawthorn Leslie,

No. 3 0-6-0T A.S. HARRIS

No. 4 0-6-2T LORD ST. LEVEN

No. 5 0-6-2T EARL OF MOUNT EDGCUMBE

(No. 1 & 2 were the original ECMR Nielson's)

One Neilson, (No. 2) was converted to standard gauge and a cab added but proved to be under powered and of little practical use.

4 wheel passenger coaches were obtained from the L&SWR and painted green but were soon replaced by more modern bogie coaches.

50 second hand ex MR open goods wagons and two vans were purchased from R. Y. Pickering along with two new brake vans.

Signalling for the branch was purchased from F.A. Atkinson & Co. of Birmingham at a cost of £1200.



0-6-2T Lord St. Leven at Callington with three ex-L&SWR four wheel coaches

The above information is probably accepted as the limit to Stephens involvement with the building of the PD&SWJR's branch line to Callington, but was it?

Much of the correspondence between Lang, (the builder of the BA&CLR) and Henry Byers, (the PD&SWJR engineer) still exist, as do all the weekly reports written by Byers to the board. Byers also kept a diary in note form, probably used to compile his weekly reports. A few of these letters are addressed to

H.F. Stephens or are written by him but many more refer to Stephens or refer to correspondence between Stephens and Byers or Stephens and the board pointing to Stephens having a much greater input into the branch line construction than was first thought.

As early as Nov 1905 the board were concerned by the slow progress being made by Lang.

On 10 Nov. 1905 Richard Church wrote to Byers *'I enclose press copy of a letter to Lang. I have asked Stephens to look into the matter as to where earthwork can be put. Banks would be widened where there is room. I believe Stephens will be down tomorrow'*.

Stephens must have reported back to Church as Church wrote to Byers on 8 Dec 1905 *'....Mr Stephens reports that work re the abutments was going on in a "very slow and slack way" and also that No.9 coffer dam is not being pushed forward and the stage started three weeks ago is not yet finished....'* Lang was ordered to start night gangs.

On 11 Dec 1905 Burchell wrote to Church *'....Mr St. Aubyn asked Stephens whether if no unforeseen difficulties occurred in the foundations of pier No.9 would the line be ready for opening by 1 June 1906....'* Stephens replied *'...that with due diligence there was no reason why the line should not be ready by the due date....'*

On 14 Feb 1906 Byers wrote to Lang *'I have just received a telegram from Mr. Stephens to the effect that it has been decided to have the Bere Alston Station buildings in masonry. The plan sent to you is therefore cancelled and I expect to get another drawing in a few days. I think Mr. Coombe has made some enquires as to where stone similar to that used in the present station buildings can be obtained'*.

There was in Feb. also much correspondence where Stephens was asked to arrange for the removal of telegraph poles and the re-routing of telegraph wires around the area of Bere Alston Station.

On 22 Feb 1906 Stephens wrote direct to Lang saying he had discussed the use of the permanent way for ballast with Mr. Church and in effect directed Lang on what to do *'... you will arrange to ballast the same (except for top ballast) and to provide a rail press to straighten any crippled rails and place same in sidings and make good any damage to chairs and sleepers. You will also agree not to allow any soft filling....'*

19 March 1906 Stephens sent the plans for Calstock Station to Lang. There was also a string of correspondence about minor matters but all outside Stephens original brief.

It is clear that by the summer of 1906 that Stephens commanded considerable respect from the board and

from Byers. His advice and opinion was sought, and any recommendations he made were acted on.

On 15 Aug. 1906 Church wrote to Lang *'Mr Stephens reports to me that it is your intention to drive dolphins in the river for the purpose of attaching guy roped from the centres of the arch over the river. I consider that this is courting disaster. Any vessel or barge fouling a dolphin or rope would in all probability upset the whole lot of centres and if any arch was turned it would endanger the whole viaduct. I cannot agree with this plan.....'*

On 12 Oct 1906 Church wrote to Lang *'Mr. Stephens reports that your locomotive is not powerful enough and can only take up 3 trucks at a time. If this is so I think you should at once get another one.....'*

On 3 Nov 1906 Byers wrote to Coombs *'Mr. Stephens notes on his last visit to works. The following is an extract from Stephens notes made on his last visit, some of the points I mentioned to you this morning:-*
Bere Alston Station
"Lifting & platform finishing also siding and lifting and finishing"

Viaduct
"As solid block work is to be used for pier No. 9 there is no reason why this work should not go on night and day"

Calstock Station
"This surely should be started now"

Harewood Cutting
'Will not be finished for at least 10 weeks. This cutting should be worked with a second lift and filling tipped into the trucks by skips running on rails supported on needles over the tops of the trucks used on the bottom lift'

On 4 Jan 1907 Lang wrote to Byers *'Referring to my interview with Mr. Stephens and yourself.....I am prepared to supply and spread ballast from Wheal Edward between Calstock Station and the junction with the East Cornwall Mineral Line for the sum of 2/10 per c. yd. (this includes purchase of ballast).....'*

On 17 Jan 1907 Stephens wrote to Lang *'2 miles of rails will leave Southampton for Plymouth about Thursday next. Can you hurry on the charring of the sleepers, I noticed yesterday that progress herein was not rapid.'*

On 13 Feb 1907 Byers wrote to Lang *'.....Stephens reports to me that there is a crack in the key of arch No. 5 – No. 6. This should not be – No centres should be slacked until the arch next has been keyed in and gravest care should be taken.....'*

On 27 May 1907 Church wrote to Lang *'I am sorry to say that Mr. Stephens reports that you are not making the progress you ought and certainly*

the number of men employed as given by Mr Byers does not look like it....'

Towards the end of 1907 there was much correspondence about minor details and finishing leading up to the B of T inspection.

In the weekly reports sent by Henry Byers to the PD&SWJR board Stephens is frequently mentioned, sometimes as a source of information but more frequently as a critic of Lang's inexperience and slack working practice, often followed by a recommendation of how to improve matters.

It is quite clear from these correspondences that Stephens opinion was valued and that the board were happy to use him as a 'trouble shooter'.

They also show that his involvement was not just limited to the ECMR and that he had an input into the construction of the whole line

Bruce Hunt,