

LARKHALL REOPENS

by Iain Frew

As a young man I knew the railways running south from Hamilton into an area where the once important coal mining industry was in terminal decline. The Lesmahagow Railway had been opened from Motherwell (Lesmahagow Junction) to Coalburn via Larkhall East and Bocketsbrae (for Lesmahagow) on 1st December 1866 with branches from Dalserf to Stonehouse and Tillietudlem to

Blackwood. Passenger services began on 1st April 1868. Eventually the line extended into the lonely wilds of Galawhistle to serve a few collieries but ambitions for it to continue to Muirkirk were never achieved. The route from Hamilton through Larkhall Central to Stonehouse opened in 1876. Strathaven (pronounced Straiven) had been served by an indirect line from Hamilton through Meikle Earnock since 1863. The

more direct branch from Stonehouse opened on 1 June 1905 together with the Blackwood - Poneil Junction (on the Lanark - Muirkirk branch) link intersecting the Coalburn line at Alton Heights, a remote junction named after the nearby Auldtonheights farm.

By the early 1960s most of this network had closed but the route from Hamilton Central through Larkhall Central to Stonehouse, its continuation to Coalburn, and the Stonehouse - Strathaven branch retained a decent rush hour service for workers in Glasgow and scholars in both Hamilton and Glasgow. The experimental introduction of railbuses to give a more frequent service attracted little traffic except at Larkhall. Evening peak trains carried very heavy traffic from Glasgow as far as Hamilton but loads then fell away. The 5.11 pm from Glasgow took around 110 people to Larkhall, 30 to Stonehouse plus 25 for the connecting branch shuttle to Strathaven, but Blackwood, Lesmahagow and Coalburn together would rarely muster more than 15 people on the six coach train. There was just one season ticket holder at Coalburn where a massive pit bing beside the station was a reminder of the industrial past. The 17.39 service from Glasgow ran to Strathaven with a connection to Coalburn. About 85 rode to Larkhall, 20 to Stonehouse and 30 to Strathaven with 10 or less for the Coalburn connection. A senior railway manager lived in Stonehouse and it was widely believed that the lines would be safe until he retired which he did in 1964. Moves to close the branches were set in motion and despite loud protests from Larkhall and Stonehouse residents, the passenger services ceased on 4th October 1965, and freight on 4 November 1968.

In the intervening 40 years Larkhall has

grown to become one of the largest towns in Scotland without a railway. Stonehouse was proposed as a site for a new town of 80,000 people but it was decided to expand East Kilbride instead. Strathaven has grown slightly but the railway via Stonehouse was too circuitous. The establishment of the Scottish Parliament created the means to reopen the line as far as Larkhall Central. The original route was double track and left the Hamilton - Motherwell line by means of a triangular junction. Ross Junction faced Motherwell, Haughhead Junction faced Hamilton, and the two routes came together at Ferniegair Junction where the line from the Hamilton direction passed above the Motherwell tracks on a flyover. So great was the mineral traffic in earlier days that a flat junction would have resulted in unacceptable delays. The M74 Motorway obliterated part of the curve to Ross Junction but left just enough space for the link from Haughhead Junction. Hamilton has become a major shopping and local government administrative centre and is now much more important than Motherwell. The Scottish Parliament approved the reopening as far as the old Larkhall Central station together with the building of two new halts. The restored branch is just over three miles long and the first stop is Chatelherault, ½ mile from Haughhead Junction and close to the site of Ferniegair Junction. In addition to the nearby hamlet of Allanton it serves a country park based around an elaborate 17th century hunting lodge and summer house built in the French style for the Duke of Hamilton. It is one of William Adam's finest designs and was once linked to Hamilton Palace by a grand avenue of trees, but the Palace fell victim to the then Duke's coal mining activities and was demolished owing to subsidence. The parkland remains a great attraction and heavy traffic is

expected during the warmer months. Merryton (2½ miles) serves new housing areas on the northern edge of Larkhall and is near the site of Merryton Junction where the route to Tillietudlem diverged. Larkhall station itself (3 miles) has two platforms but no loop and is close to the town centre. The branch is single track with a passing loop at Allanton, just south of Chatelherault. Reconstruction of the branch proceeded quickly once the Parliamentary Bill had been passed.

The line has been electrified at 25 KV ac and a half-hourly service operates from Larkhall, across Glasgow via the Argyle Line and Central Low Level station generally to Dalmuir via Drumchapel and Singer. The original plan had been to operate the Larkhall services to and from Milngavie but it is the Lanark to Glasgow service that will now generally be diverted to Milngavie. The rebuilding of a single line between Maryhill and Anniesland is an important part of the plan since it creates a new terminus for the Glasgow - Maryhill service. The dmus had to reverse at

Westerton, occupying track space required for the extra Milngavie trains. The Maryhill-Anniesland section was opened on 5th September 2005.

Construction work to Larkhall was completed during June 2005 and the route was "available for traffic" from 4th July 2005 but not energised until 17th July. Driver training was due to begin on 15th August but track work at Chatelherault delayed this for a few days. The reopening date of 11th December 2005 coincided with the start of the new winter timetable. Many believed that Larkhall station should never have closed but the reluctance of the then railway management to keep a 3 mile single station branch is understandable. The survival of any railway to Hamilton was in doubt during those dark days but today it has four trains each hour to Glasgow, two to both Motherwell and Larkhall, around an hourly service to Lanark, and peak hour services to Coatbridge. Reopening to Stonehouse was considered but a key viaduct has been demolished and its restoration would be too costly.

Railways around LARKHALL

