



Green Lane Junction in the late 1950s where we have an excellent example of the old joint tradition of a Western Region train hauled by an London Midland locomotive. Stanier Mogul No.42977 is on the up slow line with a local passenger train whilst ex-GW 2-6-0 No.6346 hauls coal empties for the Wrexham area on the up fast line. At that time both were Birkenhead engines. Note the pannier tank shunting in the siding and the new coaling plant behind the old LNWR-type signals. (J. A. Peden)

The routes described, south from Birkenhead

* Indicates stations with booking halls and facilities sited on an overbridge.

As already described, the main line ran as four tracks from Grange Lane where at Blackpool Street Junction the dock lines joined from the west side of the main line which came up from the Woodside Tunnel and the old Town station. On the east side lay an expanse of carriage sidings between the main line and Cammell Laird shipyard. That being served by a private siding complex, with its own bridge crossing the New Chester Road which ran below and parallel to the railway. Continuing as a four-track main line with the fast lines on

THE GREAT WESTERN IN WIRRAL

**PART TWO
BY TONY ROBINSON**

the east side of the formation, Rock Ferry was reached where the Mersey electrics terminated having run along the western side of the line since surfacing at Green Lane Junction.

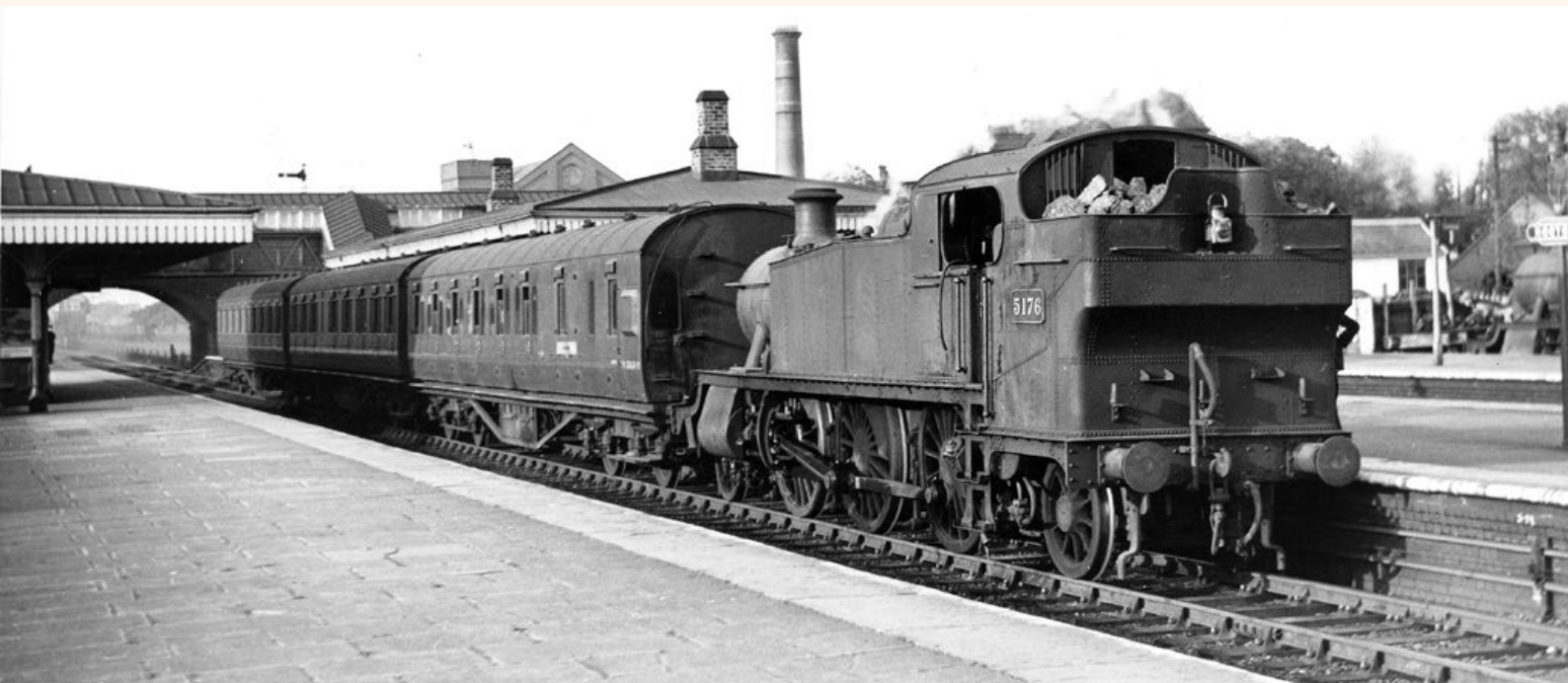
Typical of several main line Joint stations Rock Ferry had an overbridge with booking hall facilities on it. It had four main line platforms and a two-platform bay for the Mersey electrics which until 1956 were predominantly of old Westinghouse stock redolent of American subway trains. The following main line stations of Bebington, *Spital and *Bromborough were all of four platforms with the exception of two-platform Port Sunlight which was built later to serve the Lever Brothers' soap works. Hooton was reached after just over five miles and at an approximate midway point between Birkenhead and Chester. As mentioned previously there were two junctions here necessitating six main line through platforms. An array of sidings on both sides stretched out towards Chester. A single platform bay served

local trains for the Ellesmere Port and Helsby line which branched off to the left (east) shortly after leaving the station. On the opposite side of the line branching off on a westerly curve, commenced the West Kirby branch.

The Great Western Railway had a sub-shed of Birkenhead at Hooton on the up side of the line just on the Chester side of the station. The allocation was known to be small tank engines of the '517' Class 0-4-2T, '3571' Class 0-4-2T and '645' Class 0-6-0ST. It was closed in 1916 and later converted into a goods shed.

From Hooton the line was flanked by several loops and sorting sidings and continued south east as a four-track main line. The slow lines as before being on the

Bunker first with a West Kirby-bound local of ex-LMS suburban stock, '51XX' 2-6-2T No.5176 of 6C shed stands at Hooton on the up slow platform in August 1954. A classmate stands in the Helsby bay nearby. (N. R. Knight)



west side of the formation, the four platform *Ledsham station was reached after a mile, then a mile further on the four tracks became two at Ledsham Junction signal box. Two tracks were the order from here right through to Brook Lane Bridge at Chester, passing first through Capenhurst station. In post-war years there was an extensive Nuclear Fuels plant on the west side of the line and it is known that this generated a considerable volume of traffic between here and Aldermaston, this of course being over the old GWR route south. Perhaps of all the stations on the Wirral main line Capenhurst was the most charming in appearance, being a typical country station with house and adjacent booking hall with awning attached.

From Capenhurst the line ran slowly downhill via a two-mile cutting to Mollington station (closed 1960) where on the down side there was a rail-served oil depot, shortly afterwards crossing Moston Viaduct over the Chester–Ellesmere Port leg of the Shropshire Union Canal. This was the most substantial piece of civil engineering on the line and its cost was believed to have precluded the building of a mating structure to accept the continued quadrupling of the 1902–1908 period. A further mile or so brought the line to the outer extremities of Chester and here a small station called Upton-by-Chester was built with staircase entries to its two platforms from the A41 road overbridge; the writer clearly remembers seeing ‘GW & LNWR Joint Railways’ written on the LNWR-style bridge plate.

Because of the geography of this article we will stop just short of Chester at Brook Lane Bridge where the Cheshire Lines Committee’s Chester–Manchester Central line crossed over the Birkenhead Joint line tracks on the northern edge of the Chester West triangle.

Hooton to Helsby

The Hooton–Helsby route was hardly what one would term a secondary line as it was a

‘51XX’ Class 2-6-2T No.4124 is ready to depart Helsby on the 5.22pm for Hooton and Woodside in June 1956.

(David Chatfield)



Capenhurst in August 1958 with ‘57XX’ Class 0-6-0PT No.9728 on a lengthy up van train, probably a Grange Lane to Chester Brook Lane or Saltney local working.
(H. Leadbetter Collection)

major source of freight traffic to both the Joint line owners. It ran absolutely straight for seven and a half miles, mainly between the oil refineries and associated industrial complexes. As mentioned previously, it was a major route for traffic from Birkenhead Docks to the main industrial areas of Lancashire and north Cheshire. A large (Shell) oil refinery sprang up at Stanlow before the war and this together with various post-war associated chemical factory developments provided a great deal of the area’s freight traffic. The Great Western enjoyed growing revenues for tanker traffic between the refinery at Stanlow and various oil depots in the West Midlands, Rowley Regis being a major recipient of such traffic. Trains would, of course, need to reverse at Hooton before proceeding south via the Chester ‘cutting’ and in order to ease movements during busy periods the various loops and sidings south of the station were regularly put into use for both the marshalling and storage of tank wagons.

Apart from the extensive oil refinery sidings there were private feeder lines from the Manchester Ship Canal Company as well as Bowater’s Paper Mill which (along with the Shell refinery) used their own locomotives for movements on their internal systems. A small two-road LNWR-pattern engine shed stood at Ellesmere Port which was sold to the Manchester Ship Canal Co. in 1921 and was operating until 1961 to facilitate servicing of shunting locomotives employed on their various siding complexes. There were stations at Little Sutton, Ellesmere Port and Ince which were supplemented by a workers’ halt at Stanlow & Thornton. The local passenger trains either ran direct from Woodside or the bay platform at Hooton, with motive power for this traffic being equally shared between the GW and LMS companies. About a mile before Helsby was reached the line ran alongside the south side of the post-war Ince ‘A’ power station which was essentially built there to power the vast nuclear fuel facility at



Capenhurst as well as being a national grid feeder station. Shortly after this point West Cheshire Junction with the Cheshire Lines was reached where a branch from Mouldsworth would bring London & North Eastern Railway locomotives on to the scene in pre- and post-war years. Helsby was reached after a further half mile where the line connected with the GW&LNW Joint line from Chester to Warrington. The line from Hooton ran into separate platforms and shared a still extant signal box in the 'V' of the junction with the line from Chester.

The West Kirby branch

As explained earlier this single line branch was built in two distinct stages. The first in 1866 was from Hooton to Parkgate to facilitate access to the Wirral Colliery. This had a short branch off it in a south easterly direction down to the pit head sidings on the shore of the Dee estuary. Passing loops were available at Hadlow Road (Willaston) and Parkgate stations and the line was extended to its full twelve miles in 1886 through to West Kirby where it had a junction with the Wirral Railway. The line terminated here and so had a separate single platform station. Again there were passing loops with signalled sections at Heswall and Thurstaston with single platform halts at Caldy and Kirby Park.

This line was somewhat bucolic by the standards of the other Wirral line; but for the 'giveaway' signalling it presented itself very much photographically as a typical Great Western country branch line especially when seen with a '14XX' 0-4-2T-powered motor train. Stations were well kept and there were seasonal competitions between the various station masters who liked to show off their gardening expertise.

Whilst traffic was light it was essentially a commuter line for the residents of the more affluent areas of the Wirral to facilitate access to Liverpool, either via Hooton and Rock Ferry in one direction or via West Kirby and the later electrified Wirral and Mersey Railways in the other. One suspects the latter was by far the quicker for people using stations north

GWR Fast Freight Departures Pre- and Post-War, to and from Morpeth Dock, Birkenhead			
Departs	Time	Destination	Train name
Morpeth Dock	3.55 pm	Smithfield	<i>The Meat</i>
Morpeth Dock	6.05 pm	Pontypool Road	<i>The Feeder</i>
Morpeth Dock	8.20 pm	Paddington	<i>The General</i>
Morpeth Dock	9.05 pm	Cardiff	<i>The Mersey</i>
Morpeth Dock	10.50 pm	Bordesley Jct.	<i>The Birmingham Market</i>
Morpeth Dock	11.35 pm	Oswestry	<i>The Cambrian Pioneer</i>
Bordesley Jct.	9.10 pm	Morpeth Dock	<i>The Shipper</i>
Bristol	6.50 pm	Morpeth Dock	<i>The Farmers Boy</i>
Paddington	9.10 pm	Morpeth Dock	<i>The Northern Flash</i>
Wolverhampton	2.45 am	Morpeth Dock	<i>The Northern Docker</i>
Wolverhampton	12.45 am	Morpeth Dock	<i>The Flying Skipper</i>

of Parkgate. However, Hooton was a major changing point for Chester and stations further south. On weekdays there were six trains either way with only three on a Sunday. Pre-war a special 'club car' was provided for first class passengers on the 8.40am from Heswall and the 5.15pm from Woodside. Whilst the line was jointly worked by engines and crews from Birkenhead 6C, the Great Western contingent was represented by the '51XX' Class 2-6-2Ts and the small '14XX' 0-4-2Ts running on motor train; these small engines were unpopular when running bunker first due to poor visibility. Apparently the LNWR ran a competing direct carriage from West Kirby to Euston, no doubt beating any Hooton-Paddington offerings by a considerable time margin!

Passenger workings were pretty equally shared between the LMS and GW from Birkenhead as were the infrequent freight workings. The West Kirby turntable was removed some years before closure, with the last scheduled passenger train being worked by GW '51XX' Class 2-6-2T No.4122 on the evening of 15th September 1956. Apparently that train contained a van with two circus elephants in it which were heard to trumpet their own salute as they left West Kirby (probably brought on by the detonators placed on the track for the occasion!). Complete closure to freight followed in May 1962, the entire trackbed now forming the 'Wirral Way', a pathway for cyclists, walkers and riders

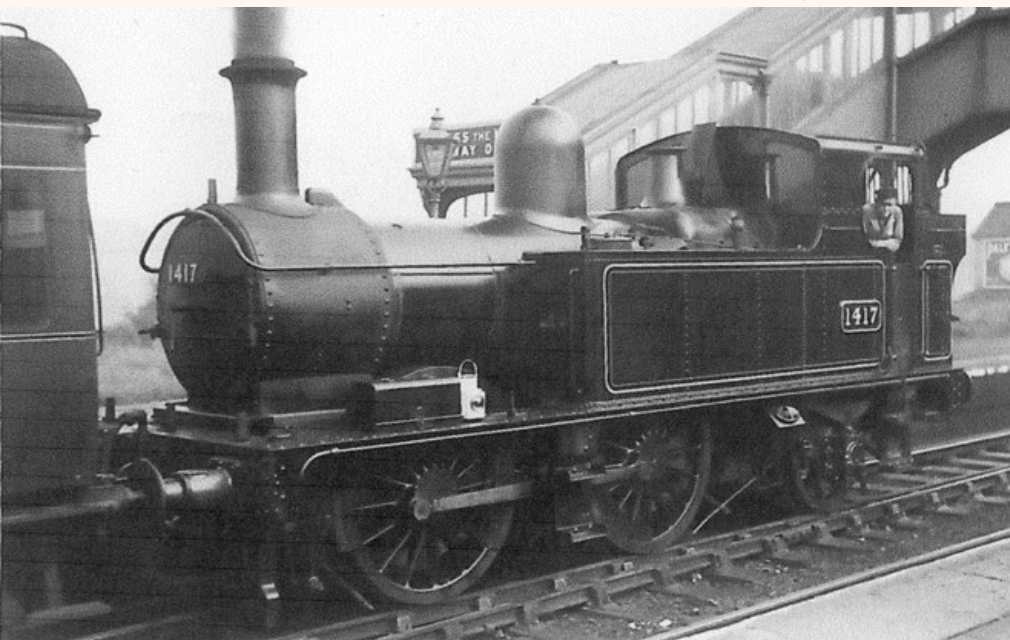
to enjoy with Hadlow Road station nicely preserved for posterity.

Freight traffic to and from Birkenhead

The majority of up Great Western freights were listed as starting from Grange Lane which was the mass of sorting sidings between Blackpool Street and Green Lane Junction. In reality, however, the main starting point was the docks. Whilst some short freight trains were worked up from the Morpeth and Cavendish Docks by a pannier tank to Grange Lane for marshalling prior to departing as a complete train to further destinations, many complete workings originated directly from the docks. These long-distance workings were invariably Class C or D fitted trains in the later years and in true time-honoured GW fashion acquired 'official' nicknames from the goods staff. The names applied to both up and down trains and lasted well into the nationalisation period post-war. Perhaps the most celebrated of the up evening workings was that known as the 'General'. This train was for many years regularly hauled by one of Churchward's celebrated '47XX' mixed traffic 2-8-0 class. Records taken by local enthusiasts reveal these locomotives worked this train regularly right up to 1963 although the 4-6-0 'Halls' and 'Granges' were regular performers on this and the other Class C trains as well. 'Castle' Class 4-6-0s were also recorded on this working right up to 1963. See Table above.

There were over twenty up freight workings daily in the post-war years including the named ones with main destinations including Oxley Sidings (Wolverhampton), Croes Newydd and Bersham Colliery (both Wrexham), Oswestry, Bordesley Junction, Pontypool Road and Cardiff, as well as the express London freights to Smithfield and Paddington. These latter trains were usually worked at night by Birkenhead men as far as Coton Hill yard, Shrewsbury, where Old Oak men would take over. Anecdotes exist of the 81A men complaining about the lack of coal on tenders emanating from Birkenhead; one story relates how following a warning by the shedmaster, a young 6C fireman got a bit carried away at the coaling stage by stacking the tender of his '47XX' so high that, to the wrath of his driver, the coal hit a bridge when running light down the Sough tender first, bringing much of it down on to the footplate! The last recorded working of the 'General' by a '47XX' Class was on 31st May 1963 when No.4704 was in charge. This was by Barry Shore of the now defunct Merseyside Railway Society. After that date most workings (at least

Helsby station and '14XX' 0-4-2T No1417 is at rest in Platform 4 sporting the early BR mixed traffic lined black but without the 'lion on wheel' crest. (J. Lloyd Collection)





as far as Chester) were by Horwich 'Crabs' or Stanier 8Fs and Moguls from Birkenhead shed.

There were many local pick-up and trip goods workings mainly equally split on the Joint Line but the specifically GW ones would run between Grange Lane and Brook Lane (Chester), Ellesmere Port or Saltney yard (South of Chester). These trains were frequently hauled by 84K Chester West '57XX' 0-6-0 pannier tanks. Oil traffic from the Stanlow refinery to the West Midlands and south of Shrewsbury was worked by Birkenhead and Chester West engines and men. These trains, unfitted and with a brake van at both ends, would of course undergo reversal at Hooton.

A great deal of the dock traffic that ran on the joint lines became LMS as it invariably was destined for points further north and east but scrutiny of the dock map will reveal that the Cheshire Lines had a substantial goods station at Shore Road almost adjacent to the GW facilities. The traffic to and from this facility would not share but cross the GW/LMS line out of the dock complex and run on Mersey Docks & Harbour Board tracks westwards past Egerton, Vittoria and Cavendish Dock to join the Great Central line near Bidston beyond the West Float.

It is worth relating a wartime episode of sheer bravery concerning a Great Western man which was enacted at Morpeth docks during a night time bombing raid in 1941. He was a shunter named Norman Tunna and an incendiary bomb landed on a munitions train comprising sheeted wagons which was waiting to leave the yard. The wagons contained high explosive 250lb bombs and with the burning incendiary wedged between them and the sheeting ablaze, Tunna, exceedingly brave and quick-witted, tried to extinguish the blaze with water from the engine. When this failed he used his shunter's pole to force

Parkgate station in August 1954 and over six years after nationalisation '51XX' No.4129 with a 6C shedplate still bears 'G W R' on its tank sides. Thus are displayed the rivalries that lingered on between the old companies as this engine had emerged from a heavy general overhaul at Swindon in 1951 and that would have included a repaint! (J. McCann/Colour-Rail.com BRW1318)

the bombs apart and with his bare hands threw the burning incendiary away from the wagons. The driver and firemen also helped by drenching the burning device with a stirrup pump. For this action Tunna was awarded the George Cross. Two British Empire Medals and a George Medal were also won by his colleagues for their bravery on that dreadful night.

It is worth noting that the weekday freight traffic volume on the GW side of operations alone was copious in the post-war years with up to twenty departures from Birkenhead and up to fifteen arrivals over any 24-hour period. This traffic includes the named Class C and D trains listed previously. The official start and finish point of the freight workings is given as Brook Street but it can be taken that most of the traffic was originating at or bound for the docks. Clearly there would have been flows into and from the coal sidings and the shipyard's private sidings amongst others as part of this volume.

Sadly for Great Western fans the run-down of GWR power on freight duties after 1963 was pronounced, with final sightings by the summer of 1965 of 'Hall', '28XX' and 'Grange' Classes at what had then become 8H. Shortly after the complete (official) cessation of ex-GW classes at the end of that year, the traffic from the docks began its slow decline as container traffic started its inexorable takeover and most types of shipping traffic

were transferred to the opposite bank of the Mersey. Morpeth dock closed in 1972 and today the entire inland dock complex is all but out of use, with rail traffic at the eastern end of the docks having ceased in its entirety by the mid-1990s. Birkenhead Mollington Street sheds were closed for steam at the end of 1967 and became a diesel servicing depot until closure in 1985, complete demolition of the shed site taking place in 1987. Fortunately 'E' Bridge survives to this day as a reminder of what once was and has been nicely preserved, although incorrectly named 'Egerton Bridge'.

Passenger workings

As is typified in the photograph of a Paddington-Birkenhead Woodside passenger working, the bulk of the post-war Great Western main line passenger traffic on the Wirral was worked by engines of the '51XX' class of either Birkenhead or Chester West sheds. On rare occasions, or when a '51XX' was not available, specials were worked by GW tender locomotives of the '43XX' 2-6-0 Class or 'Hall' and 'Grange' Class 4-6-0s. In post-war years the GW (WR) main line destinations were, of course, those between Birkenhead and Paddington, routed mainly via High Wycombe. Secondary main line trains to Welsh destinations regularly operated to Barmouth and Pwllheli. They were augmented by the local 'joint' services to Chester, Helsby and West Kirby. In the summer period there were regular inter-Regional trains operating to the south coast via Shrewsbury, Birmingham Snow Hill, Oxford and Reading. These often comprised Southern (green) stock working through to Ramsgate and Bournemouth West. Engine changes took place at Chester (for reversal) and Oxford where a Southern locomotive would usually take over for the final part of a long journey that became known amongst LMS railwaymen as the 'Great Way Round'. In its post-grouping heyday, including



empty stock workings there were 'jointly' up to 163 passenger train movements in and out of Woodside over a 24-hour period and to handle this volume there were over 75 staff employed including the station master and inspectors.

The most important up daily express was named the 'Zulu' and this with a dining car departed Woodside at 11.40am which in pre-war days avoided Chester, only stopping briefly at a ticket platform which stood on the 'Cutting' avoiding line. This practice stopped when larger and faster locomotives were introduced in the form of the 4-6-0 'Saints' and 'Stars' which invariably backed on to the rear of the trains at Chester. The first down express train of the day left Paddington at 9.10am carrying a dining car and arrived at Woodside at 1.57pm, giving a journey time of almost five hours! I can't be sure but I believe this train was known as 'The Birkenhead Flyer' and so it's easy to see why the Euston-Crewe route was favoured for passengers heading for Chester and the Wirral from the capital! Journey times for this route in post-war years were in the order of just over three hours. Indeed many chose the Euston-Liverpool Lime Street and Mersey ferry route to get to Birkenhead. However, there was one service that was popular and that was the nightly sleeper from Woodside to Paddington departing around 9.00pm. After travelling at a leisurely pace it arrived in the capital around 5.00am and, from personal experience, passengers were allowed to remain in their cabins until at least 7.00am.

An unidentified '28XX' 2-8-0 seen taking water at Hooton prior to running around its ex-Shell refinery tanker train before proceeding south – clearly early 1960s with tender 'flashes'. (G. Parry Collection)

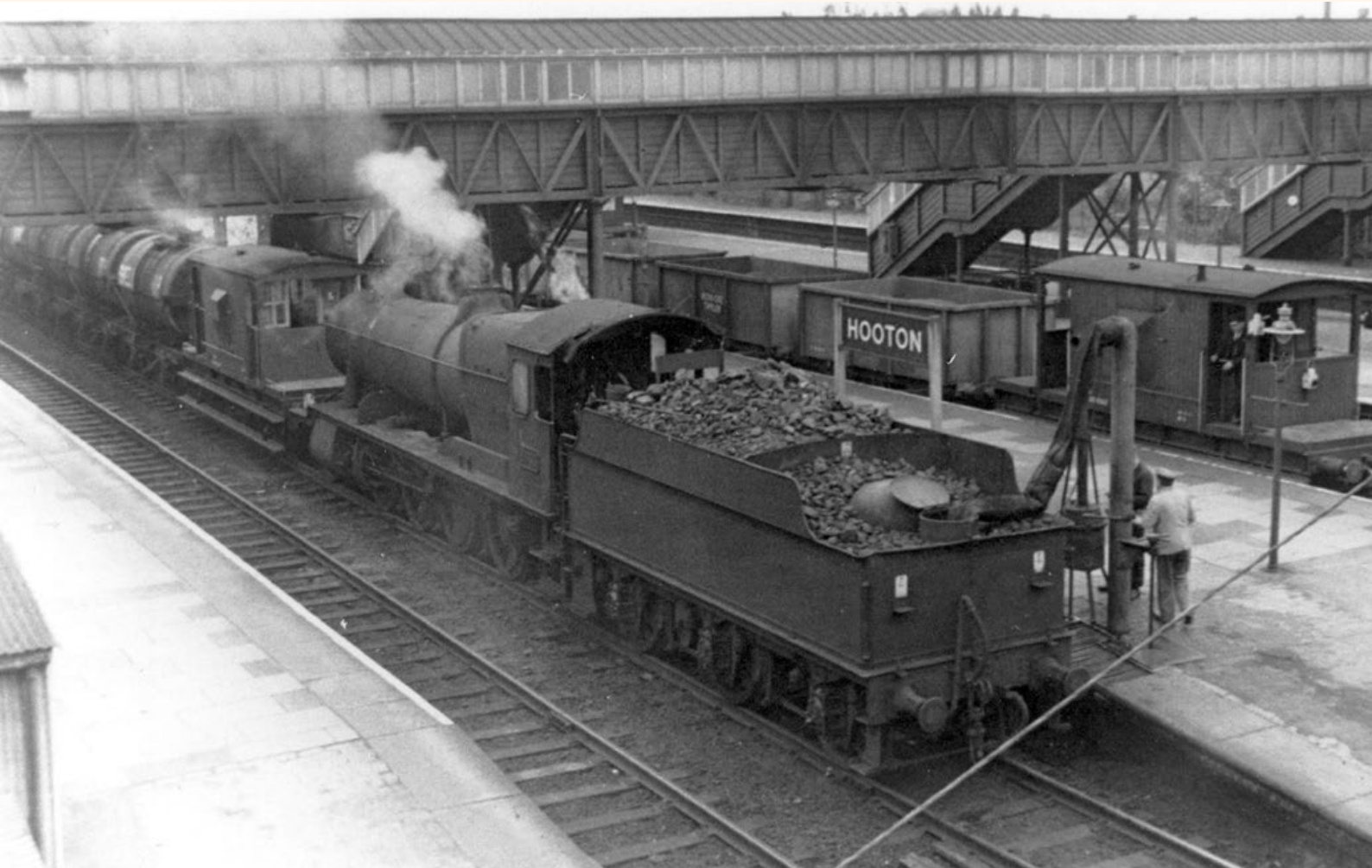


Old Oak Common's '47XX' 2-8-0 No.4704, once a 6C engine, slowly crosses 'E' Bridge with 'The General', a London-bound fitted freight in the late 1950s. (G. Parry Collection)

When this service ceased in 1967 I distinctly remember the Bishop of Chester complaining in the local press that he would no longer be able to leave his abode the night before to arrive nice and early for meetings at Lambeth Palace! This service was balanced by a down working on similar timings. Both trains ran via Reading and Didcot.

In post-war years all passenger trains heading from and to Birkenhead would reverse at Chester with an engine change taking place. The aforementioned 'southern' workings would arrive at Chester from the south and invariably they would have some coaches removed and put into overnight storage there, the reason being that the platforms at Woodside only had a capacity for about six bogies and a locomotive. Platform 1 was the longest at 537ft.

However, there was one annual exception to the reversal rule and that was the Grand National Aintree Special which ran on race day from Paddington to Birkenhead with only a stop at Shrewsbury, then using the 'Cutting' to by-pass Chester station, thus negating the need for a reversal. These trains were invariably hauled by a 'Castle' Class 4-6-0 in the post-war years. In the earlier years these excursions, probably hauled by a 'Star' or 'Saint' 4-6-0, deposited their well-heeled passengers at Woodside where a ferry would be taken to the Liverpool Landing Stage. Thereafter they were transported by charabanc to the Aintree racecourse. The trains were all first class and equipped with full dining car facilities. Fares were in the region of £5 for a full (day) round trip including meals and ferry etc (more than a





A shipyard crane dominates Cammell Laird's skyline as No.5103 of 84K Chester West heads past Green Lane Junction en route for Woodside with a train from Paddington in September 1958. (J. A. Peden)

week's wages for most pre-war!). After 1934 the Mersey Tunnel opened and the clientele was taken by private buses directly to the racecourse from Woodside station. It is worth noting that the larger tender engines were confined to using Platform 1 only at Woodside station due to curvature constrictions on the other platforms.

The Great Western Paddington–Birkenhead passenger service, which had begun in 1861, finally succumbed to the upgrading and electrification of the Euston–Crewe (LNWR) line of the London Midland Region in March 1967. Bearing in mind also that the old GW route north of Banbury had been under LMR control since September 1963, there was very little incentive for the new 'powers that be' to maintain an express through route which had become less and less competitive time-wise as the electrification had become live on the Euston line. The publisher Ian Allan Ltd. ran two 'Castle'-hailed specials on Saturday 4th March 1967 – No.4079 *Pendennis Castle* from Didcot



Built by Sir William Arrol & Co. in 1932, 'E' Bridge seen in January 2016. (Author)

and No.7029 *Clun Castle* from Banbury – to Chester which were taken on to Birkenhead by BR Standard Class 5s. The next day two Stephenson Locomotive Society specials ran from Birmingham and *Clun Castle* worked through to Birkenhead with its train, so laying claim to be the last GW locomotive to enter Woodside station. The locomotive was serviced and turned at Birkenhead shed before returning south.

Preserved 'Castle' 4-6-0 No.7029 *Clun Castle* rolls into Platform 1 at Birkenhead Woodside station on 5th March 1967, the last GW engine to work into the station which was demolished later that year. (Bevan Price, courtesy of Disused Stations website)



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