

RAILWAYS OF ADEN.

With thanks to Brian Baxter for sending some copies from old issues of the 'Railway Magazine'.

1. Original Article. "Indian Outpost in Arabia". By Robert Mumford. 'Railway Magazine' February 1976 pp. 73 - 75.

"Few people are aware of the fact that Aden, a one-time dependency of Bombay, British Colony and Protectorate, in the south-west corner of Southern Arabia, possessed a 29-mile long metre-gauge railway which operated between 1916 and 1929.

The idea of constructing a railway to serve Aden Colony and the hinterland of the West Aden Protectorate was originally considered in 1905, but it was not until 1916 that it became a reality, first as far as Sheikh 'Othman, a town near the border with the West Aden Protectorate, and initially it was used for supplying the British forces fighting against the Turks, who had penetrated to within a few miles of Sheikh 'Othman. Aden was then part of the Indian Empire and the permanent way and stock were in the main drawn from the Bombay, Baroda & Central India Railway. The Aden Railway was worked by the North Western Railway of India under one of its officers who was designated 'Engineer-in-charge'.

To work the section between Ma'alla (Aden) and Sheikh 'Othman when it was opened in 1916, two 4-4-0 engines were transferred from the Eastern Ben-

gal Railway (Nos. 561 and 563) and three of the same type from the Bombay, Baroda & Central India Railway (Nos. 228, 349 and 727) as well as a number of first and second-class composite bogie and third-class four-wheel carriages with sunshades from the BBCIR. A Simplex rail motor coach with Dorman four-cylinder petrol engine built for the South Indian Railway was also put into service, making six trips daily to Sheikh 'Othman with seating for 70 passengers.

In 1922, after the railway had been extended to Lahej and Al Khudad, a 4-6-0 locomotive built by Nasmyth, Wilson & Co. Ltd. was sent out to Aden. It was of the India State Railways standard design for metre-gauge. The engine was equipped with the Holden system of oil fuel burning and the main particulars were:- cylinders 16 in. diameter x 22 in. stroke, placed at an inclination of 1 in 16 with Walschaerts valve gear and piston valves. Coupled

wheels 4 ft. dia. and leading bogie wheels 2ft. 4 1/2in. dia. The boiler, which was capable of a working pressure of 160lb. per sq. in., had a heating surface as follows: 90 small tubes of 1 3/4 in. dia. and 12 larger tubes 5 1/4 in. dia., 679sq. ft. Belpaire firebox 108 sq. ft. MLS superheater, surface inside 125 sq. ft., total 912 sq.ft.: grate area was 15 sq. ft. The boiler barrel was 11 ft. 5 1/2 in. long and 3ft. 7 1/2 in. diameter, while the outside firebox measured 8ft. 3 in. long. The combined capacity of the two cylindrical oil tanks on the six-wheel tender was 514 gal. or about 2 1/2 tons, while the water tank carried 2,000 gal. Maximum weight of engine and tender in working order was 61.67 tons of which the coupled wheels of the engine carried 27.9 tons.

In its heyday the railway extended to Al Khudad, a village seven miles north of Lahej, the chief town of the Abdali State, and at one time it was

proposed to extend the railway to the Yemen border some 40 miles away, and there was even a grandiose idea of extending it right up to Mecca, which assumed that the proposal to extend the Damascus - Medina (Hedjaz) Railway would come to fruition. The railway carried passengers in first- and third-class compartments, and was also used for the transport of grass, charcoal, green vegetables, potatoes and skins from the Yemen to Aden via Lahej, and also large quantities of water from the other side of Lahej for the army at Sheikh 'Othman which included a mobile force of cavalry and a camel corps. This was before a number of artesian wells were sunk at Sheikh 'Othman.

Political considerations, both internal and external, delayed the construction of the railway and at one time the Abdali State Emir tried to come to a private arrangement with Indian commercial concerns who were interested.

At the same time as negotiations were proceeding for the Aden Railway

project, the Ottoman Turkish Government, which had extensive interests in the neighbouring Yemen, was negotiating for the construction of a railway from Hodeidah on the Red Sea to Sana with a branch line to Taiz. As a matter of fact, General Izzat Pasha, Chief of the General Staff in Turkey and commander of the Ottoman forces in the Yemen, removed the first sod on March 21 1911, on the site of the railway station just outside the port of Hodeidah, the terminus of the proposed Yemen Railway. It is not clear as to how much of this railway was actually constructed. The Turks also had dreams of a connection with the Hedjaz Railway at Mecca.

When it was decided to extend the Aden Railway beyond Lahej, the civil engineer in charge of the works was a Mr. MacLean who had been in charge of the first section of the railway to Sheikh 'Othman. He was recalled from Mesopotamia (Iraq) and given orders to collect the necessary material and personnel from Bombay and supervise the construction of the extension line.

In a letter dated July 8, 1919, the Government of India Railway Department formally advised the British Resident in Aden that the railway had been extended to Lahej and was open for public transport and that whereas the railway from Aden Town to Sheikh 'Othman was built out of the Indian Railway programme funds, the extension was built for military reasons and at the cost of military funds. The whole railway was however operated by the establishment sent to Aden by the India Railway Board.

The 'Imperial Gazette Atlas of India' for 1928 showed stations at the following places: Al Khudad (terminus), Zaida, Ath Tha Luba (Lahej), Flijah, Danal Amin, Bir Musa Ben (Sheikh 'Othman), Khormaksar and Ma'alla (Aden terminus.) The railway had a total length of 28 3/4 miles. The section from Ma'alla (Inner Harbour, Aden) to Sheikh 'Othman, a distance of seven miles, was opened on January 1, 1916; the section from Sheikh 'Othman to Lahej, 15 1/2 miles, was opened on February 11, 1919; and that from Lahej to Al Khudad, 6 1/4 miles, on January 7, 1920. On May 7, 1920, the Government of India transferred the whole of the Aden State Railway from military control to that of the Railway Board under the control of a Mr. Affleck who was designated 'Engineer-in-Charge'.

The railway is estimated to have cost 37,500 Pounds of which 60 per cent was borne by the Imperial Government War Office and 40 per cent

by the India Railway Board. In the months of April, May and June 1920 the expenditure averaged approx. P 2,000 a month and the traffic receipts P 1,350 a month. In his report to the First Assistant to the British Resident, Aden, in July 1920, Mr. Affleck considered the immediate future expenditure was likely to be P 2,700 a month, and the traffic receipts P 2,000. He stated he could not give an estimate for the more distant future for the following reasons: The railway had not yet been properly equipped with large locomotives and rolling stock, although the matter was being considered by the Railway Board; Public traffic had never had a chance to show its potential, having been started, stopped, and started again whereby the public had lost confidence in the railway and preferred to send their merchandise by camels and carts even though it cost more.

In Mr. Affleck's opinion the public traffic would have to be operated for some time before any worthwhile figures could be produced. In 1910 it had been proposed to construct a 2ft. 6in. gauge steam tramway from Tawahi, a suburb of Aden close to Steamer Point where the ocean liners used to call, to Crater, the old capital, with a branch to Khormaksar and Sheikh 'Othman. In his opinion the railway would pay but it would always be an expensive line to run. He thought that if the Tawahi (Khormaksar - Sheikh 'Othman) - Crater tramway were built, Sheikh 'Othman should develop into a large town and the combined railway and tramway should be a sound commercial proposition. However, this tramway never materialised.

In the early twenties the railway was bedevilled by both labour and sabotage problems, the first being possibly due to the fact that it was administered by mainly Indian personnel, whereas the operational manual tasks were carried out by mainly Adenis, Yemenis and Somalis. Sabotage and pilfering reached such proportions that in August 1920 the Chief Police Commissioner wrote to the First Assistant in the British Resident's HQ that Mr. Affleck had requested a much-increased security staff. At Ma'alla Depot one Inspector or Sub-Inspector, one Hawalder (head constable) and three Constables; and at Sheikh 'Othman Depot one Hawalder and three Constables. Their duties were to be to detect, arrest or prosecute thieves, persons travelling without tickets and vagrants and to travel by train to a certain extent with the object of ensuring that this was achieved; to maintain order at the sta-

tions and to assist staff in dealing with crowds of passengers; to safeguard railway property and staff quarters, particularly at night, and generally to carry out the functions of railway police as laid down in the police manual.

In August 1928 the Political Resident, Aden, advised the Railway Board at Simla that the conclusion had been reached that the railway could not become a paying concern and should be closed down but not immediately, the present service to be reduced by October 1 to one train each way daily between Ma'alla, Lahej and Al Khudad, and maintained till March 31, 1929. About the same time the Colonial office advised the Ministry of Defence that the section from Ma'alla to Khormaksar was of military importance, and should remain; the section from Khormaksar to Sheikh 'Othman had a potential military value only for the protection of water borehole supplies at Sheikh 'Othman; and the section beyond Sheikh 'Othman had no military importance and should be closed as from April 1, 1929, but it would not be dismantled immediately.

At the height of its existence there were two mixed trains a day which left Ma'alla at 07.00 and 14.00, arriving at the terminus beyond Lahej at 09.00 and 16.00. These two trains each returned an hour later. The passenger section of each train was composed usually of eight carriages. The fares were Ma'alla to Sheikh 'Othman, first class eight annas, third class three annas; Sheikh 'Othman to Lahej, first class one rupee four annas, and third class five annas.

From April 1, 1929 the railway's days were numbered and finally in the 'Aden Gazette' of June 29, 1929 an announcement appeared giving one month's notice of closure. Thus ended a railway which, had it proven an economical proposition, could have opened up commercial possibilities in that part of South Arabia especially if it had been extended to Mecca and Medina.

As an anti-climax to the account of this fascinating railway, it is interesting to note that although it was dismantled in 1930, this fact did not prevent the Italians making a broadcast in 1940 that Aden's railways had been destroyed in an air-raid, not realising it had been dismantled ten years before."

Mumford notes that his article was based on files in the India Office Library - specifically R/20; A2A series, files 2/2, 2/3 Pt. 111 2/4 and 2/5; and L/P&S series files 3083/1917 Parts 16,

18 and 26. On p.75 appears a photo of metre-gauge 0-6-0 684 "believed to be of Indian origin" at Ma'alla - intriguingly this loco is not mentioned in the article. There were clearly repetitions and contradictions, so for completeness' sake, and as an illustration of the problems in believing what one reads of ancient systems, here is:-

2. Response.

In 'Railway Magazine' April 1976 p.206 appears a Reader's Letter from Hugh Hughes, then of Croydon. Typically, it points out major discrepancies in a polite manner and adds some very different details.

"May I point out that the reference to 4-4-0 engines being used there is incorrect. Mr. Mumford may well have been misled by an error in an article in the 'Locomotive Magazine' for February 1928.

For working the line, the Bombay, Baroda & Central India Railway supplied in 1915 three of its class 'F1' 0-6-0 locomotives, with 3ft. 7 1/2in. coupled wheels and 14 in. x 20 in. cylinders; they were numbered 288 (built by Neilson & Company in 1879), 349 (Neilson 1880) and 727 (Dübs, 1894). The same railway also provided two first/second composite and four third-class carriages (all these being listed as bogie vehicles), three brake vans, 12 high-sided and 56 low-sided wagons, and one oil tank wagon. In the following year the South Indian Railway railmotor (No. 3 of 1916) was added.

Three similar 0-6-0 locomotives, but emanating from the Eastern Bengal Railway, put in an appearance later on. Two of them, numbered 561 and 563, had been used by the military authorities in East Africa from 1916 onwards; no. 563 (Vulcan Foundry 1900) was transferred direct from Africa to Aden, probably in 1919, but 561 (Neilson 1898) was first of all returned to India and reached Aden in 1920. The third EBR engine was numbered 584 (not 684 as given by Mumford); it was also built by Neilson in 1898 and was transferred to Aden about 1926.

As far as I can trace, none of these 0-6-0 engines worked again after the closure of the railway at the end of July 1929. The 4-6-0 locomotive, however, which was built by Nasmyth, Wilson Company in 1922 and carried the number '1' on the smokebox door as well as on the cab sides, eventually got to India and became Eastern Bengal Railway No. 325 in 1931; moreover it was still running on Bangladesah Railways in 1973 and is probably still active there."