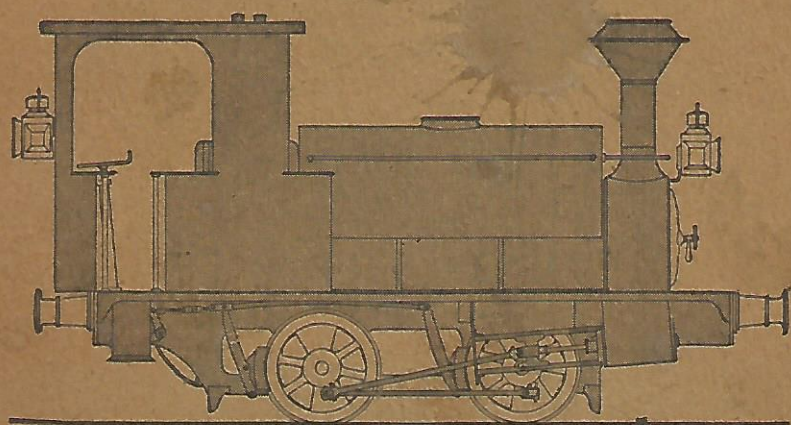


Some Industrial  
**RAILWAYS**  
of Ireland

(AND OTHER MINOR LINES)

by WALTER McGRATH



Μιον-Ιασηρδω Τιονρελας  
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CORCAIG, 1959

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# FERGUS RECLAMATION SCHEME

## —AND ITS RAILWAYS

**A** FRIGHTFUL accident occurred at the Sloblands of the Fergus Reclamation Works on Friday last. A steam engine drawing 'lorries' of stones along an embankment ran off the rails and was precipitated into the river, carrying with it a wagon fully laden with material. Fortunately, there was a full tide at the time and the engine driver and four other men who were on it were plunged into deep water. When the engine and wagon went down the men rose to the surface and swam to the embankment, which they reached more frightened than hurt."

This rather startling extract from the CLARE INDEPENDENT (Ennis) of May 27, 1882, serves as a suitable introduction to the story of the Fergus Reclamation and its railways—a scheme which was to be a triumph of engineering skill and perseverance over manifold hazards including tempests, floods and accidents.

South of Clarecastle in Co. Clare there is a vast tract of land—several thousands of acres—which is now arable and fertile but was once a muddy, tidal waste. That transformation is the subject of this chapter and the man primarily responsible for it was an English engineer named Herbert C. Drinkwater, who had London offices in the 1880's at 50, Parliament Street.

In connection with this work, at least two railways with steam locomotives existed. One in the 1870's and early 1880's was brought to an end when part of the track was washed away by the sea in a storm in February, 1883; the second (of different gauge) operated approximately ten years later.

Legend has it that in medieval times monks from Clare monasteries dug at the soil with their hands in an effort to change the course of the river Fergus so as to reduce flooding near Ennis and Clarecastle. Certainly there is a long tradition of reclamation work around the mouth of the Fergus, which forms a joint estuary with the Shannon to the south of Co. Clare.

In 1846 the Commissioners of Public Works were authorised to spend large sums on reclamation work in the area. In 1860 the River Fergus Navigation and Embankment Company was incorporated for the same purpose. In the 20 years which followed, several bills came before Parliament and several concerns were launched, notably the Clare Slobland Reclamation Company and the River Fergus Reclamation Company, all with the same object. It was the last-named ven-

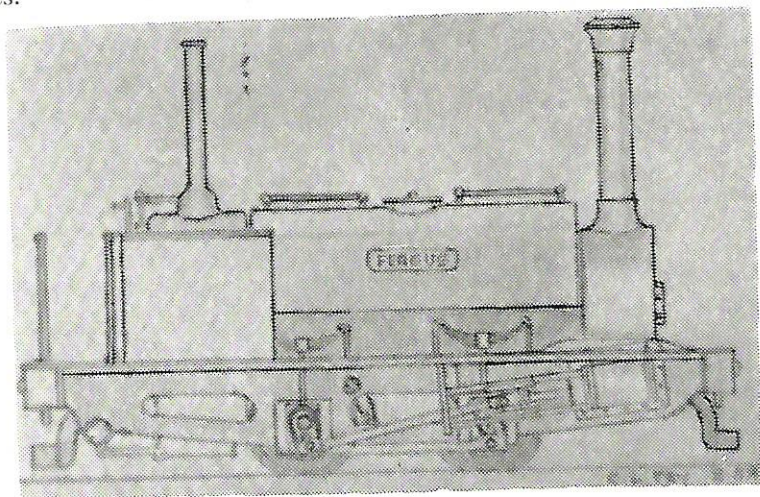


ture, of which H. C. Drinkwater was chief promoter and director, with which we are primarily concerned.

The scene of its labours may be roughly described as the tract of land inside a line joining Drumquin, Islandavanna, Islandmagrath and Teermaclane — all south of Clarecastle.

Even apart from the railway aspect, the scheme was a most interesting engineering project and itinerant workers came from all parts of Ireland to take part in it, attracted, no doubt, by the wages of half-a-crown or three shillings per day which Drinkwater was paying.

To this day a massive seawall, built of huge limestone boulders may be seen stretching along the estuary of the Fergus from Islandavanna in the direction of Drumquin. The boulders for this were brought by water on "lighters" from Cannon Island, about seven miles south, and a railway was constructed along this seawall and around towards Islandmagrath, a total length of about four or five miles.



Drawing by C. L. Fry of the Hunslet engine.

The railway was built in the 1870's and was to the gauge of 2'-6" —most unusual in Ireland. No information has survived about the first locomotive to work on it but through the kindness of Mr. H. Pybus, chief draughtsman of the Hunslet Engine Co. Ltd., Leeds, full details are forthcoming of its second engine, delivered by Hunslet to Drinkwater in June, 1881. It was Hunslet's No. 268, 0-4-0 ST., with 6" × 10" outside cylinders and 1'-8" wheel diameter.

Mr. Pybus supplied a "class" drawing, from which Mr. C. L. Fry of Dublin prepared the illustration reproduced herewith. The block-makers themselves, at the request of the author, appended the name-

plate *Fergus*, because the Hunslet records confirm that the locomotive did, in fact, bear this nameplate on leaving the works.

It is of interest to recall that in later years the well-known 3' gauge West Clare Railway also had a locomotive named *Fergus* and nowadays one of C.I.E.'s yellow-painted road coaches of the touring class, all called after Irish rivers, bears that name.

The main purpose of the reclamation railway was the transport of heavy boulders. It was also used for removing mud and clay from particular parts of the scheme to the dumping grounds.

Drinkwater had over 600 men working on the project. They lived in a colony of corrugated iron houses at Islandavanna, past which the railway ran, and which became known as "Iron Town" or "Drinkwater Colony." It had many interesting features. For instance, although this was close on 80 years ago, a huge electric lamp lit up the locality of "Iron Town" at night and shifts of men worked right round the clock. This lamp was visible for a long distance and caused great wonderment.

Drinkwater as an employer was much before his time. He provided a canteen bar with excellent food and drink at the camp and started the "Fergus Reclamation Workmen's Club" which supplied playing-cards, dominoes, dice and reading material for the men.

In 1881 (or early '82) the locomotive *Fergus* is believed to have caused the death of a visiting priest who was sight-seeing at the works. A de-railment occurred and the priest, who was either travelling on the railway or walking near it, was killed. Exact details of the accident are not available, but the place where it occurred is still pointed out and is known as "the priest's corner."

The startling accident concerning the train's fall into the harbour has already been described. Details of how the engine and truck were recovered are not forthcoming but a newspaper account of two months later (July, 1882) describes the railway as being in working order again.

Storms in October, 1882 and February, 1883 had a disastrous effect on the reclamation work. The former was characterised by a wind of gale force which raged over all Ireland, causing several fatalities. In Limerick it blew down part of the spire of St. John's Cathedral, while in Derry it ripped the roof completely off the goods store of the Great Northern Railway station. At Islandavanna the sea claimed back much of the land wrested from it in preceding years.

Four months later the treatment was repeated and on this occasion the waves were so high that they swept away a large earthen embankment carrying the railway between Islandavanna and Islandmagrath. The CLARE INDEPENDENT stated that half the reclamation site was under water; that the *Fergus* had formed whole lakes and



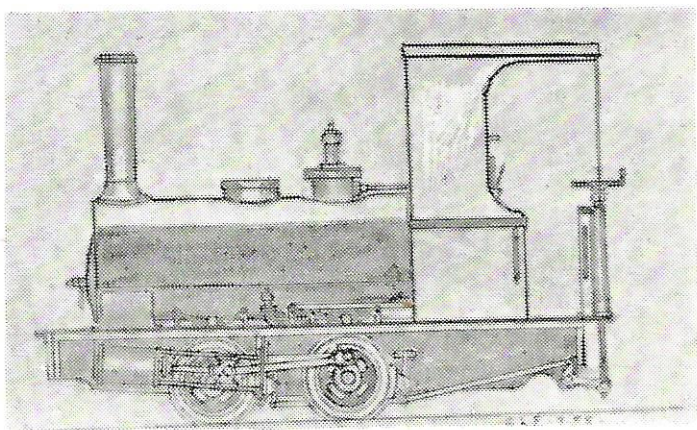
miniature seas, and had raced through the streets of Ennis submerging the floors of houses, ruining food and bedding and threatening widespread disease and famine.

After these setbacks a lull occurred in the work and later in 1883 much of the machinery, including, it is believed, the railway equipment, was sold. The *Fergus* was auctioned at this time and the next record of the locomotive is at the Warwickshire quarries of the Jeas Hartshill Brick and Granite Company, where it worked for some years.

In 1884 the Commissioners of Public Works re-entered into possession of the sloblands (which they had leased to the reclamation contractors) and continued the work themselves. The next development with which we are concerned was the purchase of the land, in 1892, by a new concern, the Fergus Reclamation Syndicate Ltd., the directors of which were mainly businessmen from Limerick, a county which adjoins Clare.

This concern built another railway from Islandavanna to Islandmagrath. It is shown, marked "tramway," on the ordnance survey maps of the early years of this century.

This was to a gauge frequently referred to as 2 feet but in reality 600 millimetres or 1'-11 $\frac{1}{2}$ ", the usual colliery or public works gauge.



Drawing by C. L. Fry of the Barclay engine.

The engine working on this was supplied by Messrs. Andrew Barclay Sons & Co. Ltd., Kilmarnock, and the present technical director of that firm, Mr. J. A. D. Turner, kindly provided drawings of it. Once again Mr. Fry prepared the sketch for the blockmakers. The engine was a O-4-O ST with cylinders 5"  $\times$  10". It was works No. 703. It was delivered to the Fergus Syndicate in January, 1893. An

interesting detail is that Barclay's records show it to have been ordered by Max Orenstein of Berlin but it is unlikely that he had any connection with the Fergus project unless he acted as agent in the railway equipment transaction. (Some readers will probably notice the similarity between the drawing reproduced here and a Barclay engine used on the Lynton and Barnstaple narrow-gauge railway in the south of England and illustrated in L. T. Catchpole's book on that line.)

How long No. 703 worked on the banks of the Fergus is not known. The Reclamation Syndicate remained in existence for half-a-century and in addition to reclaiming land from the estuary it worked and tilled the fields, set up marketing and distributing centres, studied seed and soil developments, went in for hay-baling, brick-making, etc. Older residents recall that up to 20 or 30 years ago there was a horse-worked length of track at Islandavanna used in connection with farm work there but they do not remember a locomotive at work. It is almost certain that it had gone before 1900.

Still to be seen on a farm at Islandavanna is an interesting relic of the 1893 railway. It is a turntable and was probably used at a right-angle branch line as there would scarcely have been any reason for engine or wagons to turn completely. It is now used as a covering for a septic tank.

An interesting tailpiece to this article is provided by Messrs. R. T. Russell and E. E. Smith, both of whom provided the writer with photographs of a disused locomotive at Little Mill quarry (John Richardson Ltd.), Northumberland, which, though it has not been definitely identified, is very probably the Hunslet engine *Fergus*. It had the number 268 stamped on the motion and had been rebuilt by J. W. Ellis at East Boldon, Co. Durham, in 1920. It was scrapped about 1952.

CORK WEEKLY EXAMINER, October 11, 1958.

S.L.S. JOURNAL, January, 1959.