

NLR coal yards



An unidentified ex-NLR 0-6-0T trundles an eastbound train of coal wagons past Homerton station at an unknown date, possibly in the mid-1920s. Coal had been an important source of traffic for the North London Railway since the line's earliest days.

Jim Connor collection

When the East and West India Docks and Birmingham Junction Railway was first conceived in 1845, it seems to have been intended that the line should be used only for the London and Birmingham Railway to work its own goods trains to and from the docks at Poplar. However, the best laid plans often go awry, especially for those trying to run a railway, and when the E&WID&BJR finally opened on 26th September 1850, it was for passenger traffic only, using engines and crews leased from the L&NWR, hauling those few of the railway's own carriages which had been delivered in time, and some hired from the London and Blackwall Railway. The first goods traffic did not commence

until over a year later, and this was not the anticipated merchandise from or to the L&NWR, (into which the London & Birmingham had been amalgamated) but coal from London's traditional source, brought by sea from the North East of England and unloaded at Poplar.

The E&WID&BJR Company was only two months old when it became obvious that capital would be difficult to raise, and it had gone cap in hand to the L&B for assistance. One of the conditions of the L&B subscribing £300,000 (nearly half the estimated cost), was that the "act shall contain clauses enabling the London and Birmingham or amalgamated company to lease and work the said

railway". However, by early 1850, the L&NWR did not seem so keen, and the E&WID&BJR Directors set up a special committee to "prepare for opening the Railway to traffic". One of its recommendations was that the coal traffic should be handled by the Northumberland and Durham Coal Company. The N&DCC had previously approached the Railway, and the Committee considered that it would be easier to deal with them rather than the large numbers of existing coal dealers then trading in the area, although it was concerned about avoiding a monopoly, and keen to encourage inland coal traffic via the L&NWR.

It was proposed that the Railway Company should provide accommodation and sidings at the docks free of charge; lease arches carrying the railway at Hackney and Camden to the Coal Company, and fit them out for coal storage. Also to "make stations at Highbury, Caledonian Road and Kingsland suitable for conducting coal traffic", and to grant the Coal Company every facility for conducting their traffic. The Coal Company were expected to provide all "the cranes, wagons, locomotives, and plant, to find all labour, and to be at (sic) all the expense of conducting the same"; and to pay the Railway company £10,000 a year for 5 years (paid quarterly). The agreement, which was made on 22nd August 1850, was to run for 21 years, with the sums being reviewed at the end of the first 5 years and every 3 years thereafter. The locomotives and wagons brought onto the railway were to be approved by the Railway

Company, and after 21 years, "the locomotives, wagons and cranes were to be taken over by the Railway Company at valuation". The N&DCC was required "to receive and carry forward coal and coke of other parties, charging over and above the Railway dues 4d. per ton for landing, and 3d. per ton for using the depots, or if brought from the L&NWR, 3d. per ton".

The coal trains were intended to be run at night to avoid interfering with the passenger service, and initially it seems that at Hackney and Camden they were to stand on the main line for unloading, but saner thoughts prevailed, and timber coal drops with separate sidings were built at an extra cost of some £3,000, before the traffic commenced.

Work started quickly and must have progressed well, as in June 1851, the N&DCC complained that the depots were not big enough, and that there were not enough sidings at the docks. Therefore the Railway had to spend another £11,000 - nearly as much as the total they had allowed, to carry out improvements and provide three more sidings at the docks. Trains began to run on 20th October 1851 with, as planned, the Coal Company unloading boats directly into its own wagons, and hauling these with its own engines to the depots. At first it seems that only the wharf at Poplar and the depots at Hackney, Kingsland, & Highbury were open, and it is believed that Camden opened in December 1851, with Caledonian Road following sometime later¹. Trains had not been running for very long when the Coal Company asked

for more accommodation, and in March 1852 it was agreed to open two more depots at Bow and Poplar, at a cost of £7,500 in total, with the Coal Company offering a guaranteed extra £1,500 a year (although there is no record that they paid it!).

This arrangement, a non-railway company running its own trains hauled by its own engines, over a passenger carrying railway, is believed to be unique at the time, yet it seems to have worked quite well for the E&WID&BJR, and caused few operational problems for them. (Unfortunately the same cannot be said of the passenger service, as at almost every Board meeting, letters were tabled from the London and Blackwall Railway complaining about delays caused by the condition or failure of the L&NWR engines on the passenger trains!) However, it was not long before the L&NWR began to cast a covetous eye on the coal depots, which were well sited to serve a sizeable area of north London. Its own coal depot at Camden was becoming very congested. The extensive cattle landings and the need for additional goods and engine sheds had left little room for expansion, and in November 1854 they enquired whether the North London Railway (as the E&WID&BJR had thankfully become) would take any inland coal traffic. They received the ambiguous response that "the Company have laid out very large amounts in sidings for sea borne coal, and it would not be in their interests to allow competing traffic; however if the L&NWR were willing to pay the usual wharf-age of 2d. per ton, an arrangement could be

made"!.

A year later a deputation from the Midland Railway made the same enquiry (presumably wishing to use the Midland Counties route via Rugby, as it had no other access to London at that time). It received a similar response, and the NLR directors asked the L&NWR whether they still wished to enter into an agreement. Apparently they did; paying the extra, while the NLR altered Highbury depot for inland coal, at the same time happily collecting their £2,500 each quarter from the N&DCC.

Life cannot have been easy for the Coal Company. In July 1852 it was six months in arrears, although it did pay up; and in October 1853 it complained about the shortage of accommodation at Caledonian Road and Kingsland and negotiated a rebate of £1,000 for the next six months. Despite what has been stated elsewhere², it was, in fact, they who ended the arrangement, presumably because the development of inland coal traffic from the Midlands and Yorkshire via the GNR was undercutting their prices. In late 1857 they approached the L&NWR to see if they would buy the contract for the same price that the N&DCC had spent in establishing the traffic. The L&NWR was rather keen to accept as "it afforded the opportunity of introducing inland coal into London", however there were legal obstacles to their doing so, and they suggested that the NLR should accept the offer, the L&NWR providing the money and the NLR paying 5% per annum interest on it³.

At their board meeting on 8th December 1857, the NLR directors

agreed the proposal, provided the L&NWR assured them against making a loss. They must have pondered long and hard, as the Coal Company was paying them a guaranteed £10,000 a year, and they did not have the money to hand to buy out the contract, nor to repay the L&NWR. However, on 22nd December 1857 an agreement was made with the N&DCC, and another with the L&NWR, under which the NLR purchased all the plant of the Coal Company and reimbursed all their expenses and losses with interest at 5%, so that the Company was put *"in the same position as if it had never entered into the business"*. This agreement was dated 19th January 1858. The Coal Company in return agreed to procure the concurrence of the sub-contractors to make new agreements with the NLR, and not to establish coal depots on the GNR nor on the Regent's Canal, nor anywhere else within 1 mile of the NLR for fourteen years. The N&DCC coke ovens at Bow were excluded, but their engine shed at Poplar seems to have been included. The L&NWR was to provide the money needed, regarding all the plant as its own, and leasing it back to the NLR at 5% rental. The NLR agreed to maintain it in good order, and to buy it back at the same price after three years notice. Both railways were bound to develop inland coal traffic from the L&NWR to stations on the NLR, with the L&NWR having first option on any new depots opened on the line.

By the time the agreements had been signed, the NLR had already paid £12,000 for the motley collection of engines and some 3,144 coal wagons,

which were handed over to it on 1st January 1858. The balance of the purchase money was to be paid over the ensuing two years, with interest at 5%. It was the following November before the N&DCC had trawled their accounts and records and presented a price of £56,814 to the NLR directors. The NLR were not so tardy in replying with an offer of £32,307, before finally accepting a compromise of £43,000 on 21st December 1858; but it was another nine months before they told their shareholders on 17th August 1859, proudly reporting that they *"have no doubts that they shall be able fully to maintain the revenue hitherto guaranteed to this Company by the Coal Company; and they have readily accepted the opportunity which offered of putting an end to the agreement, in consequence of the increasing risk and embarrassment arising from the divided management of the Traffic on the Railway."*

The Directors confidence was not misplaced, for immediately coal traffic revenue began to rise in leaps and bounds, from the Coal Company's £10,000 a year, to a peak of £44,000 in 1867. By 1869 it had fallen to a more reasonable £34,000, presumably from the effects of the Midland's new line into London. Almost all the increase was due to inland coal, although there were occasional special shipments to Poplar. However, this success was becoming an embarrassment. Most of the coal depots were small affairs, with only one or two sidings, and could not cope with the increase. They were all on the Down side of the line, and arranged so that loaded wagons could be detached from Down trains

and empty ones collected by Up trains. In addition the coal drops at Hackney were in a parlous state, with the engineer reporting in January 1870 that the timbers were so rotten that they should be renewed at once or the depot closed; whilst the sidings at Caledonian Road were in the way of the new station.

All these problems were referred in turn to the L&NWR, presumably because they were paying the tolls. In any case the North London's time and money was taken up by the widening of their main line. At first the L&NWR wanted to delay action until the existing coal agent's contracts had expired, but eventually agreed to acquire the depots from the NLR. The negotiations are not well documented, but the following bits and pieces may shed some light, and the final outcome was agreed as follows. All these arrangements were tied up in one agreement on 15th June 1871. From then on the North London Railway's only interest in goods and coal traffic was to haul it around its lines for other companies. There was only one exception, and this was the supply of coal to Bow Common gasworks, and for this purpose the company retained a large stock of coal wagons. Although this traffic continued well into LMS days, there seems to have been a move away from sea borne coal around the time of the Great War.

The following coal depots are taken in mileage order:-

CAMDEN

At Camden, which was opened in December 1851, (*also later known as Lockett's to distinguish it from the larger*

depot at Camden L&NWR) the engineer recommended that some further work was required in the early days, and in October 1855 Messrs Hack & Co tender for the work at £182 10s was accepted. On 21st June 1859 Mr. Lockett asked that the depot was transferred to him from Messrs Thomas Wood & Co and this was agreed. Additional work was agreed at a meeting on 7th February 1865, but when it was done and what the extent was we do not know. When sold much later, it consisted of the coal depot together with a house and garden and six cottages. The land occupied by the sidings were sold for £4,000 and 15 arches under the railway were leased at £5 each a year. Later a bit more work was carried out, but the depot was rather a confined site and not much more could be done. It was closed sometime during 1940.

MAIDEN LANE or YORK WAY

The depot at Maiden Lane (*later known as York Way*) started life as a cattle-station and is covered in detail in *NLRHS Journal* No 35, but part is included here for completeness. The first mention of it was on 11th December 1851, and the plans were received on 11th June 1852 when the E&WID&BJR Directors sought and eventually bought a piece of land from the Governors of Saint Bartholomew's Hospital. The powers for the Bill was passed on 8th July 1853 but the part for constructing the short line were deleted, largely because of opposition from the Marquis of Camden, although the rest of Bill was passed. However, in the following year another attempt was made, largely with the assistance of the L&NWR and Eastern Counties



Maiden Lane yard, looking east in April 1964. Coal staithes can be seen on the left just beyond the two Bedford lorries.

London Midland Region, British Railways

Railway, and this was duly passed. However it was then decided to build a more temporary station on the south side of the line, which the railway owned. This was completed on 1st April 1854 and opened on 3rd May 1854, although the market itself was not opened until 15th June 1855. All went well until 1st January 1859, when a bullock careered onto the line and caused the derailment of a passenger train. The land on the other side of the formation which had been bought by the railway in 1854 was finally sold to the L&NWR in October 1860, after some years of discussion. Sometime around 1861, probably quite early on, they began to lay out a coal depot on the site, and left space at the front for a cattle station. It was opened by July 1862. The cattle depot was not yet in use but it was ready on

24th June 1867, when it was opened for L&NWR traffic only. At the same time, the staff were transferred to the L&NWR. The GER and Tilbury traffic remained at the old depot for a little longer - perhaps as late as January 1868, and in April 1868 work was started on the new sidings. With a number of additions, between c1894 and 1920, the depot soldiered on until 8th February 1965 when it was closed. This was not the end of the story, for it was then opened as York Way Freightliner Terminal, on 15th November 1965. It was electrified but then, on 2nd August 1972, it was closed, when the much larger terminals took over.

CALEDONIAN ROAD

At Caledonian Road, plans for a depot were originally on the north side of the

line. Then later, when the new station was built, a plan was produced for new coal drops. This was discussed with Messrs Mason and Findlay of the L&NWR and Mr. Mansel of the NLR about a larger coal trade at Caledonian Road in March 1868. A temporary depot, costing £700, was put up in 1869, as the old building was no longer safe, but the new depot was later removed to a different place. This was on a plot recently purchased from the GNR on a piece of land at rail level south of the line and west of the main road. The L&NWR were asked to give early consideration to this, which they did. In August 1870 4,687 square yards with a frontage were sold for £2,210, with the NLR contributing £1,150 towards a new depot, but the coal drops were located on the east

side of the line, until the late 1880s when they were removed. The other yard was retained until closure on 6th September 1969.

HIGHBURY

At Highbury, the railway reported that for £694 it could make a depot suitable for inland coal, and subject to the L&NWR paying 2d. a ton extra it would do so. This they did, and in January 1856, the tender was given to Messrs Hack for £687. Later the old coal station which was too difficult to manage, was rebuilt on the other side of the line, when the formation was widened to four tracks. On 1st August 1870, Highbury (or Islington) was rebuilt and a sale of land to the L&NWR was agreed. The plot included four houses and 6,300



Looking east from the Liverpool Road bridge in the 1950s, with Highbury depot on the left and the passenger station on the right. Unfortunately the original print is unsharp, but it is the only shot known to your editor which provides an overall view of the depot.

Jim Connor collection



A goods train, hauled by an LMSR Class 3F 0-6-0T, passes the signal box at Dalston Eastern Junction, sometime in the 1920s, with part of Kingsland Yard just visible beyond the open door on the left.
Locomotive & General Railway Photographs

square yards of pasture and garden and cost a total of £5,200. The sale was completed on 9th December 1872, so the whole depot was owned and built by the L&NWR who opened it on 20th February 1874. Apart from a few alterations, it remained there until closed by BR on 4th August 1969.

KINGSLAND

At Kingsland some additional work was also needed and, on the 13th April 1854, the engineer was instructed to obtain tenders for an addition to the coal depot which was also as required by the initial contract. They were obtained in May 1854, and let to Messrs Hack &

Son, the lowest, for £6,044, and in May 1855 Mr. James Knight was given the tender for laying a granite roadway to the street for £290. In April 1866 a plan was approved, at an estimated cost of £650, and later some re-arrangements were caused by the Eastern curve of the City Extension. However in March 1868 an arrangement was agreed whereby the L&NWR would take over the depot. On 31st May 1870 it was agreed with Mr. F. Wood to take the land for £5,000. On 27th March 1871 the receipt of £5,159 11s. 2d was reported.

The land and structures were detailed as follows:

Land 12,248 square yard	£4,284
Sidings	£1,037
Turntables	£240
Machinery	£600
Coal stages	£1,000
Wooden structures	£1,500
Total :	£8,661

A completely new depot covering both goods and coal was opened on 17th November 1870 although the actual agreement with the L&NWR was sealed on 22nd June 1871. The

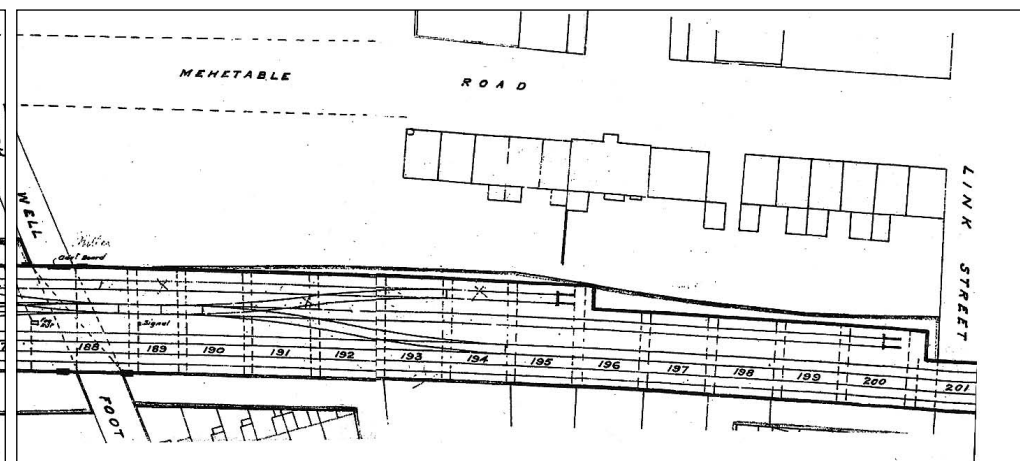
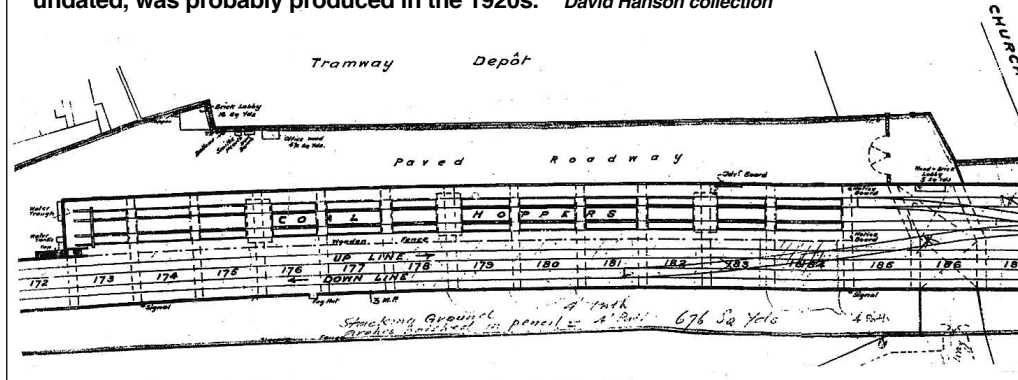
depot remained here until closed by BR on 7th August 1972.

HACKNEY

At Hackney, the old depot was, again very small. A plan and estimate for a new coal depot was tabled in March 1868 costing £12,000 and referred to the L&NWR. That company's minute, No 22,143, recorded that Mr Baker submitted a plan of the proposed new depot estimated to cost £15,500, and this was agreed. Here the work was to be done by the contractor doing the station which was being re-sited at the same time. On 29th August 1870, the property consisting 3,343 square yards of land on the north side of the line was sold for £1,000, and 18 arches leased at £5 each a year. However on 20th April 1871, the work was almost complete and it could be ready for opening on 1st June 1871. On 13th July, the entire scheme was opened.

Apart from some bomb damage during the Second World War it kept going until closure by British Rail on 4th October 1965.

The coal drops at Hackney, as shown on a plan, which although undated, was probably produced in the 1920s. *David Hanson collection*



OLD FORD

On 29th April 1868, two plots of land at Old Ford were offered to the L&NWR for £3000, and on 24th December 1868, these were sold to them for £2,175, in order to construct a goods depot. The subsequent history is somewhat uncertain. It was owned by the L&NWR. and closed by BR from 6th November 1967.

On 15th. December 1892, a piece of land was bought on the west side of Old Ford and by 20th March 1893 was in use as a small coal depot by Tredegar Road. This closed in 1940.

BOW and POPLAR

As before, in March 1852 the Northumberland and Durham Coal Company proposed another two depots at Bow and Poplar for which they would contribute £1,500. These two depots were soon built (although we do not exactly when). The land at Fairfield Road was only leased to the L&NWR, when the rest was transferred, and was to be terminated at any time, at £100 per annum should the NLR need it. This subsequently happened sometime around 1876 when the land was wanted for some proposed sidings which would be needed to obviate using the main line to run round trains for Tilbury Branch services. £800 was required for this work in April 1876. It was completed on 22nd January 1877, and the coal depot closed.

In February 1861 Messrs Ricketts, Smith & Company signalled their interest *"in building a small coal station at Devon's Road just beyond Bow."* The outlay was estimated at £480 for

which they will pay a rental of £30 per annum the coal sent at ordinary rates. In September 1862 the platform was lengthened here for £20. The firm asked for the repayment of £140 of outlay of money spent on some work done at the depot, but allowed reduction in wharfage. The location was going to be required for other usages later, and the old depot was closed on the 24th October 1874. 3½ acres of land abutting the Lea Cut, was bought by the NLR, to be sold at cost. Here it remained until the depot closed on 2nd November 1964.

At a meeting held on 5th December 1857, Messrs Cory & Sons offered to send 100,000 tons of coal per annum to be loaded at a wharf on to Lea Cut Canal. The Engineer had estimated the cost at £860. Hack's tender of £869 was accepted, and the River Lea Trustees would reduce fees from 3d. to 2d. The work was completed on 25th May 1858, and in June 1861, a coal weighing machine was bought. But notice was given to terminate in December 1862. (The weighing machine was later bought for £30 by the NLR.)

This depot was built at the same time as the one at Fairfield Road. At first the depot was let to the Cannock Chase Coal Company but in September 1855 a Mr. W. H. Lord took it over. Later still, in July 1857, Messrs Parry took it over. On 15th June 1867 an agreement was signed with Messrs Parry regarding the removal to a new site of the depot at Poplar. By 28th February 1866, a plan had been completed by Thomas Matthews for stables & offices for a new coal depot at Poplar as per

Parry's requirements. The estimates for these were: £500 for just offices, or £650 including dwelling, and it was explained that to carry out extensions of sidings at Poplar, Parry's had to be transferred from their present position to a new site adjoining Prestons Road. No compensation was to be paid, but the accommodation afforded at the new depot was to equal that at the old. However, Parry's now wanted improvements, and the secretary was told to tell Parry that it will cost 7½% of Company's extra outlay. Parry's proposed to use the present stable at Poplar and to pay extra cost of new office and dwelling at depot estimated at £650. And by 30th May 1866 Axford's tender of £885 was accepted.

DUNLOE STREET

Dunloe Street was the last depot to be built. Originally intended for a goods station for the Columbia Market

further away from the line but not used for this, and later transferred to the L&NWR. The old signal-box was in the way and was moved to the other side of the line. The work of constructing the depot was started on 25th August 1891. It was partially opened in March 1893, and fully on 4th April 1893. The depot closed on 3rd June 1968. Dunloe Street catered for both goods and coal. The signal box itself lasted until 1985.

WORSHIP STREET

Worship Street was opened some time before but did not last for long. The Chartered Gas Company's works in Curtain Road (near Broad Street), which had provided a good source of income, closed down on 26th January 1871. Some land was sold on 2nd June that year for widening of the main line, then on 6th March 1872, nine arches and 14,000 square feet were



Looking north towards Dunloe Street in July 1953, with the depot on the right and the signal box to the left.
London Midland Region, British Railways



The entrance to Worship Street depot, as it appeared after closure, with the line into Broad Street carried on the bridge to the right.

David Hanson

sold. The cost of these was £11,281 plus £1,000 for removing a gasholder, when the land was wanted for a coal siding. The sale went through on 9th December 1872, and the depot was built by the L&NWR. This depot lasted a little longer than others on the line, but closure was finalised on 3rd March 1969.

**David Hanson with
additional research by
Peter Bloomfield**

Notes and references

The primary sources of this article were the NLR minute books held at the National Archives. The references are too detailed to give as notes, but can be supplied to anybody who is interested.

1. According to H.V. Borley *London Railway Chronology*. I can find no reference in the

Company minute books to confirm this.

2. Both H.V. Borley *The Memories and Writings of a London Railwayman*, and Michael Robbins *The North London Railway* imply that the Railway Company ended the contract. This story may have originated in the up-beat report to shareholders, or from a pertinent paragraph in the *Railway Magazine* volume 52, 1923 pages 250-251.

3. These legal obstacles are not defined. Maybe one can see the hidden hand of the L&NWR behind this proposal?

4. The agreement makes no mention of the number of engines or wagons, but the returns for June 1859 show an increase of 4 goods engines and 314 coal wagons, indicating that they must have repaid the L&NWR loan. The real enigma here is that all other sources indicate that five engines were acquired. One wonders whether they were all serviceable, as in May 1858, the NLR had applied to the London and Blackwall for three of them to be approved as fit for use on their line on the Haydon Square traffic.