

***'The present new station at Preston is one of the finest in existence'***

**Anthony Hewitson, 1883**

### **A History of Preston Railway Station**

The construction of a line to Wigan marked the start of passenger railways in Preston. An Act of Parliament authorised the Preston & Wigan Railway in 1831 and, in 1834, the company merged with the Wigan Branch Railway to become the North Union Railway. It was the first railway amalgamation of its kind to be sanctioned by Parliament.

On the 31 October 1838, the line was officially opened. Spectators gathered at the newly built station to view the trains departing and arriving. According to one, the first train to leave *'hissed and boiled'* and *'scattered her cinders like the volcanic crater of Etna'*.

In the following years, further railways were constructed, including lines to Lancaster, Fleetwood, Longridge, Bolton and Blackburn. Consequently, Preston had five stations operated by different railways in the 1840s.

The station, built on the site of today's Preston station, originally consisted of two platforms, a train shed, and a main entrance built in the Italian style. By 1844, most companies were using the North Union station and, in 1847, the building was extended to make room for six tracks and four platforms.

There was considerable chaos and confusion in the early days. The Preston Guardian reckoned that more trains arrived and departed from there than any other station in the country, and it was considered unsuitable for the amount of traffic passing through it. Delays were common, partly due to the lack of co-operation between the companies.

So intense was the rivalry that the North Union actively obstructed connections with the East Lancashire Railway and, in 1852, Isambard Kingdom Brunel was called in to help settle the dispute. To add to the mayhem, passengers on long-distance journeys were given a short break at Preston, where they rushed to make use of facilities and consume refreshments.

The station itself didn't have a much better reputation, at least not initially. *'Ugly, dirty, and ill-arranged'* was one verdict, with the only possible conclusion that Preston *'is a mean and uninviting place'*. It was also notoriously dangerous; before the building of a footbridge in 1855, the only way for passengers to cross between platforms was by walking on the railway lines.

Station improvements were rejected by disputing companies in 1856. Ten years later, two porters and a woman passenger were injured when part of the roof fell in, bringing further complaints. Eventually, in 1873, the companies agreed that change was needed, and construction began on a new £250,000 station.

Formally opened in 1880, the new station had spacious island platforms. In his 1883 *'History of Preston'*, Anthony Hewitson described the station as *'one of the finest in existence.'* The station was now much better equipped to deal with traffic, except perhaps during the week of the Preston Guild, which had been a source of difficulty at the station since the beginning.

Other problems also persisted; an accident at a dangerous bottleneck just north of Preston Station killed one and injured thirteen in 1896.

Between 1915 and 1919, a group of local volunteers operated a free buffet service at Preston Station, providing refreshments for 3.5 million WWI soldiers and sailors passing through the station. The service returned during the Second World War.

Electrification of the West Coast Main Line saw the track layout of Preston Station simplified and, in 1972, the East Lancashire platforms were demolished and replaced by a car park. Electric trains came to Preston on July 23, 1973, leaving the station two and a half hours from both London and Glasgow.

**Written by Billy Burton, Clitheroe Royal Grammar School, during his work experience at Lancashire Archives & Local History**

Billy is indebted to the following sources:

'Preston Railways', 1831-46

'Wigan Branch and Preston Railway Amalgamation Act 1834'

'North Union Railway Act 1846'

'Railways in the North' by David Joy

'Preston Railway Album' by Chris Snow

'In Focus: Railways in the North West' by Peter Hill

'Railways around Preston' by Gordon Biddle

'Lancashire Railways' by Mike Hitchens & Jim Roberts

'The London and North Western Railway around Preston' by Bob Gregson

'Preston and Junction Railway Acts', 1837

'History of Preston' by Anthony Hewitson