

Railway Revivals – a little railway buried for decades is uncovered in York

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Having been buried for several decades on the riverside in Fulford, York, a narrow gauge (18 inch, 450mm) railway has been unearthed recently. Although it was never 'lost' in that it was known it was there by elderly residents of the area, it was likely that it would have been forgotten forever had it not been 'revived'.

Built in 1878 to serve a depot of military stores and workshops across Fulford Road from the extant Imphal Barracks, this little railway was man-powered and horse-powered. Separation of an area used for gunpowder storage and cartridge filling from the main barracks was not unusual - for fairly obvious reasons. The barracks received its supply of munitions from Woolwich Arsenal in southeast London and explosive supplies were transported by ship via the River Thames, the North Sea (up the east coast of England), the Humber Estuary, then the River Ouse. For safety reasons, explosives were not carried on Britain's mainline steam railway.

The ship most commonly used was a schooner (a sailing ship with two or more masts) that was officially named 'Princess', although locals often referred to her as 'the powder boat'. Because there was concern about sparks, it came on an archaic wooden sailing boat. It tied up at a jetty and the ammunition was lifted from the boat by a crane and carried into the stores on the railway. It is not known how often the powder boat made deliveries; this was possibly dictated by the demand for ammunition during the various conflicts in which the British Army was involved from time to time. Until the construction of the A64 York by-pass in the mid-1970s, there were no fixed bridges between the sea and Ouse Bridge in the centre of York, most downstream being swing or lift bridges to allow sailing barges access to York city centre.

Despite cross-ties being evident on the surviving rails, it seems that horses were used, at least for the incline from the riverbank up to the floor level of the stores. Man-power was probably sufficient for pushing wagons round the rest of the network. Railways built for horse haulage usually had rails laid on stone blocks, leaving an unimpeded inter-rail space for the horses' hooves, but the 'four foot' (or 18 inches in this case) on this newly-exposed section is filled with ribbed concrete, most likely not original.

Research has shown that the rails and rolling stock were probably supplied by Hudson in Leeds, rather than Hunslet, and this would be the same as that used to take materiel to the trenches in World War 1. Hudson produced 'complete railway solutions' for industrial (and some leisure) uses in the late 19th century and into the 20th century. Hudson ceased trading in 1984, although the assets were bought by Clayton of Derby and they still use the Hudson name for some of their products.

The track layout was simple with a short loop parallel to the river on the jetty, with an equally short unloading spur with a crane, presumably manually operated. The track curved sharply, entering the military compound through a gateway in the boundary wall. There was a passing loop just inside the entrance and two parallel tracks connected by tracks at right-angles, with access through four short (single wagon-length) turning plates. These cross tracks served eight large buildings described as stores/workshops.

As well as being unable to negotiate the short sharp incline from the riverside level to the depot, a rise of some three metres, and because of the obvious risk to gunpowder, steam or diesel locomotives were never used. The Bench Marks (B.M.) on the 1909 map show the depot was built on land gradually sloping upwards from the river bank.

The jetty and railway became redundant at some point during World War 2, or soon afterwards (a definite closure date proves elusive) and the gateway was bricked-up very expertly copying the brick patterns in the original walls either side, which still remain. The land within the boundary wall is now an industrial estate, accessed via Hospital Fields Road.

It is not known if any evidence of the railway within the confines of the old ordnance depot exists. With many new industrial buildings and concreted areas, it is unlikely, although some track could be buried in concrete, to be discovered in years to come! [FFH comment; tracks can be seen in the building used by Fulford Autos]

The earliest map showing the railway was based on the 1889 survey and it was still shown on the 1941 map, although not necessarily still in use although the crane was still marked. Several of the railway's branches within the depot on the 1909 map had gone by 1941.

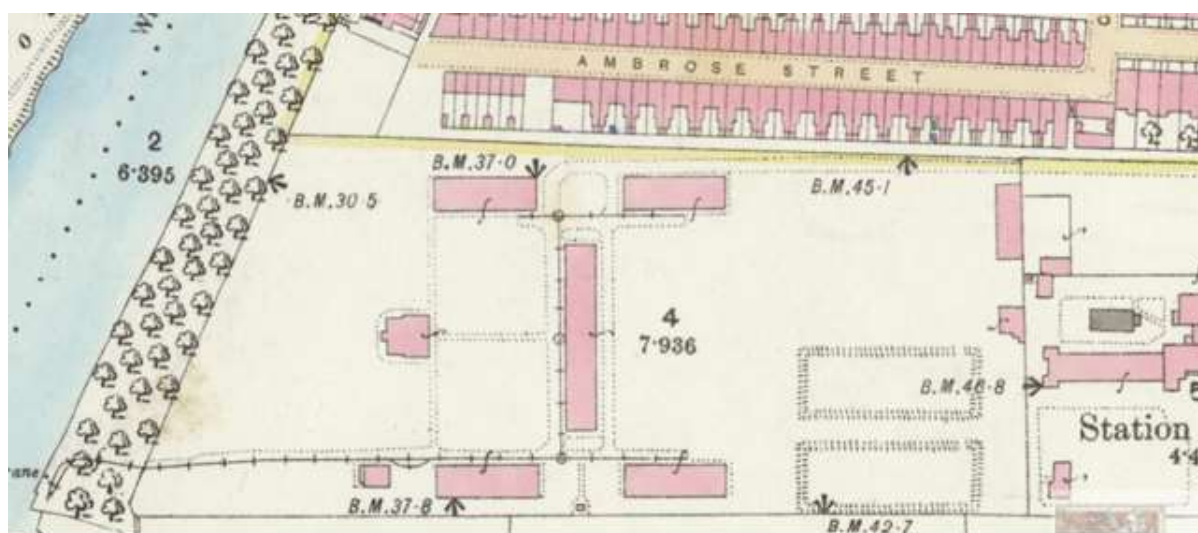
The rails along the riverside jetty and across New Walk (a pedestrian/cycle path alongside the river) were buried, it is thought, soon after the railway was no longer needed. Frequent flooding along this stretch also deposited layers of silt and debris over the years. The crane marked on old maps is of course long-gone, but the question remains, why was the track not taken up and sold for scrap? Probably just not worth the effort. The track remained buried from the mid-1950s until it was exposed in 1999 during the site works associated with the

construction of the Millennium Bridge some 50 metres downstream of the old railway. A plaque describing the railway and the powder boat was constructed when the bridge opened.

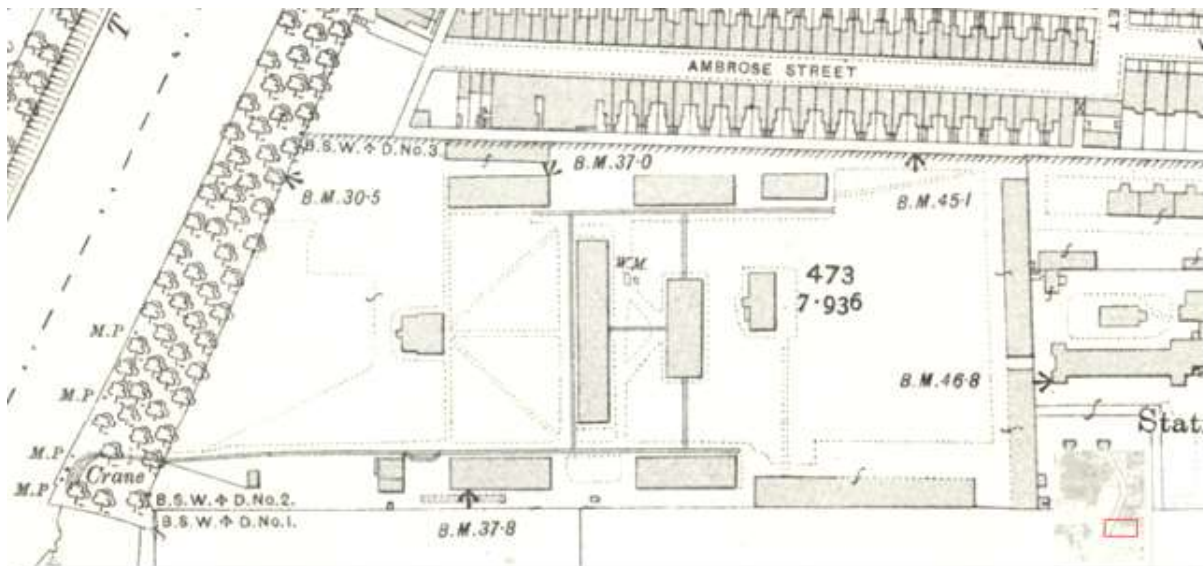
More of the track has been uncovered recently and The Friends of New Walk, together with the Fishergate, Fulford and Heslington local history society, received a small grant from Fishergate ward councillors to help pay for a plaque to commemorate the railway; the plaque was unveiled on 17 July 2021 by former National Railway Museum director Andrew Scott.

This article was first published in the spring 2022 edition of the Friends of the National Railway Museum magazine. FFH is grateful to Russ Rollings and the Friends for permission to add it to the FFH website.

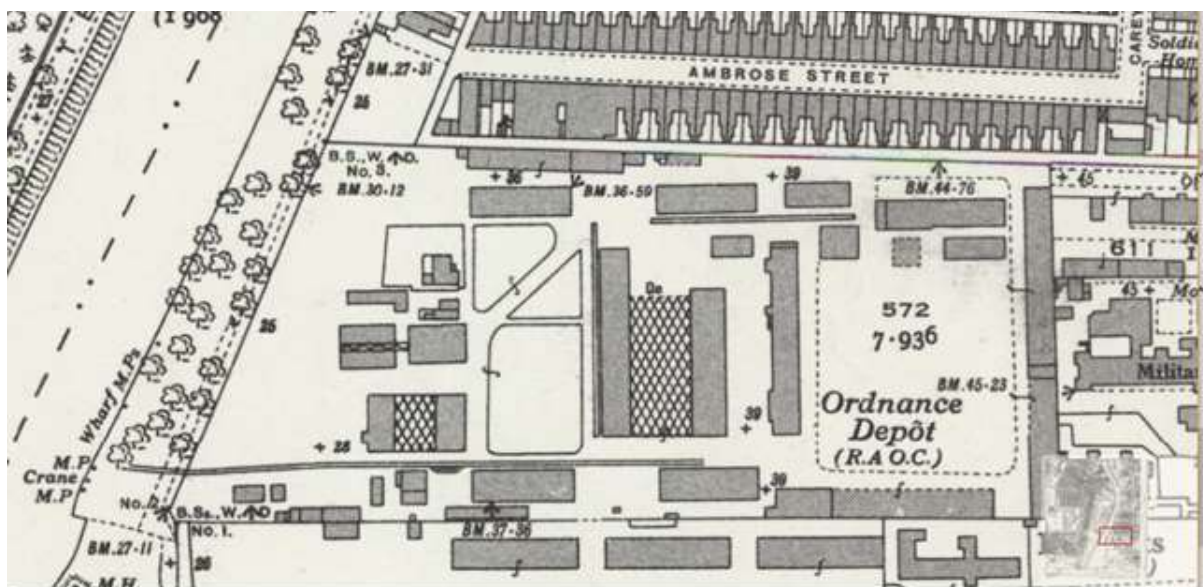
Maps and Illustrations



The 1892 Ordnance Survey map shows the crane, and a simple H shaped network within the depot. The turning plates to turn the wagons 90° are shown.



The 1909 OS map shows several more buildings and the network had expanded to serve them. Note the BM of 30.5ft above ordnance datum (mean sea-level) in the woodland alongside the river rising to 46.8ft at the eastern end of the depot.



The 1941 OS map no longer shows the rails alongside the jetty, although the crane is still marked. The network within the depot has also been cut back considerably, with isolated sections of track alongside some buildings. Was the railway now out of use?



Fulford, looking towards the river showing the Millennium Bridge, the ribbed concrete between the rails and the points. The river level even after a few days' rain is already rising and it's likely that 'the powder boat' was often unable to make deliveries and the railway would often be submerged, resulting in having to excavate it from accumulated silt after each flood.



Looking towards the bricked-up entrance to the depot. Apart from the old gateway finials, the brickwork matches in perfectly with the wall either side, and it would be difficult to discern where the gateway was. The new green plaque can be seen to the right of the old gateway. A roof of one of the new industrial units on the site of the old ordnance depot can be seen behind the wall and unkempt hedging.



Millennium bridge plinth describing 'the powder boat'.



The 'Ordnance Depot Railway' plaque unveiled on 17 July 2021 by Andrew Scott.



A similar narrow-gauge railway, possibly from Hudson's in Leeds, being laid near Arras during the First World War. A First World War report by Sir Eric Geddes (NER) resulted in an order for 7000 miles of 600mm (1 ft 11⁵/₈ in) gauge prefabricated track for the war effort, together with locos and rolling stock. Judging by the size of the soldier's boots, this looks like 600mm rather than 450mm gauge. Courtesy: SSPL

All photos by the author unless otherwise stated. Maps courtesy www.maps.nls.uk

2022

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