

The Muskerry Tram

a rail link closure tinged with sadness

By Tim O'Brien

It huffed and puffed its way through the dales and valleys of Mid-Muskerry from 1887 – the line even survived much damage to bridges etc in the Civil War era - but when the Muskerry Light Railway ceased operations in 1934 there were many expressions of regret.

The train service was affectionately known as the Muskerry Tram – it was sometimes called the Hook 'n Eye or the Blarney Express – and its closure brought back a flood of memories from the thousands of people, including those in industry and the farming community, who had availed of journeys to Cork City and elsewhere.

One of those travellers was Most Rev Dr John J. Scanlan – a former student of Vicarstown National school in Matehy, later Bishop of Honolulu – and, in the course of an interview in the Evening Echo in May 1968, he had this to say on his secondary school days at North Monastery when the Muskerry Tram was the only means of transport. He resided on the family farm at Cloughphilip and would have caught the train at Tower Bridge.

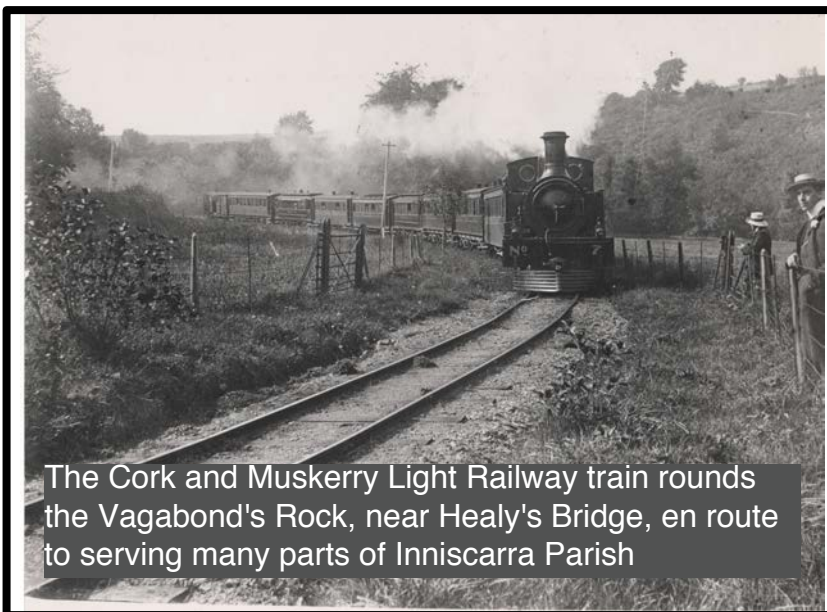
“The period of my school days from 1919 to 1923 was probably as interesting as any in the history of this famous rail road. We had the troubles, the black and tans and the civil war” he said.

“For example”, said the bishop “ during this time, the bridge at Leemount, near the Anglers Rest, was partially demolished in an explosion during the Civil War and no train or car could get across.

“There was one place in the middle of the bridge over which pedestrians could pass. So everybody got out of one train to make the hazardous trip across to the other train. Footwork had to be steady, else one might find oneself in the pleasant waters of the River Lee, many feet below” he said.

The Leemount bridge damage, referred to by Bishop Scanlan, was to have a big effect on the fortunes of the Muskerry Light Railway Company as goods and livestock traffic from Coachford, Donoughmore, Blarney and other Mid-Cork areas was badly hit and the financial loss was substantial.

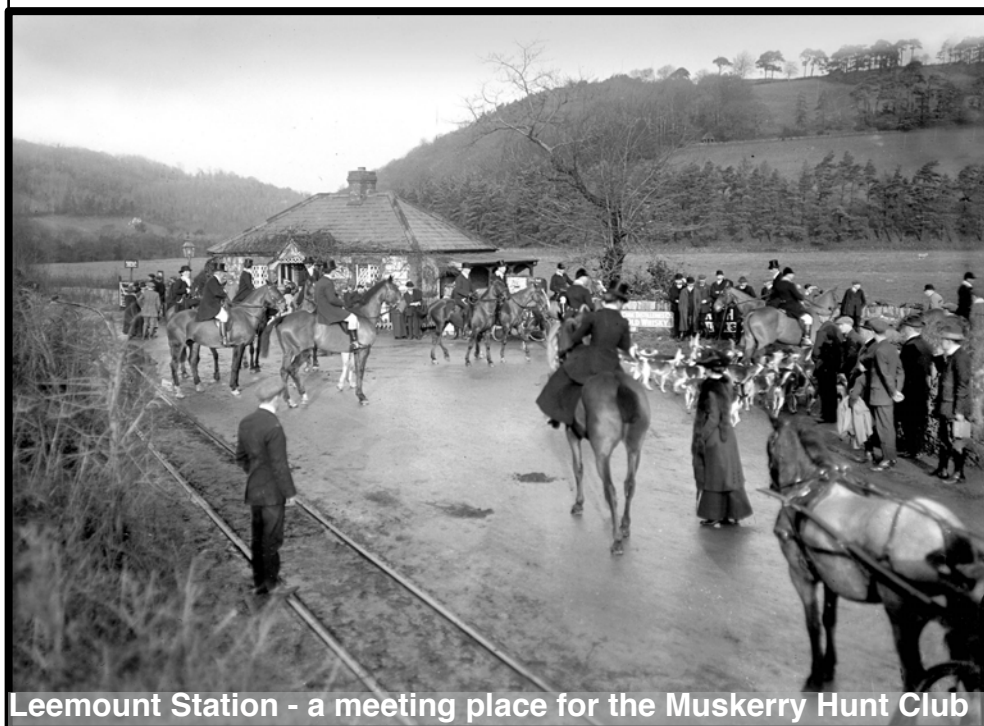
It was decided to run an emergency train service to each side of the damaged bridge, in order to accommodate the people of the district as much as possible.



The Cork and Muskerry Light Railway train rounds the Vagabond's Rock, near Healy's Bridge, en route to serving many parts of Inniscarra Parish

During the bridge repair work, there was no means of replacing the outside engines or bringing them into Cork for repair.

Passenger traffic saw a decrease of 32,824 and in money terms, the loss suffered was £2,494. The company was also unable to handle any of the harvest produce. Likewise cattle, sheep, pigs, butter, fowl and eggs.



Leemount Station - a meeting place for the Muskerry Hunt Club

Bishop Scanlan also referred to the train ticket collectors.

“They were known as guards” he said “and they had to be very careful. When the guard finished checking the tickets in one carriage, he had to go outside that carriage to get to the next one. “This was done while the train was moving” he added “The doors were at the end of the cars and opened in, so he pulled the door after him as he went out.

“He supported himself by hanging on to the iron bars attached to the car, standing on the narrow steps just outside the door. Then he swung himself onto the next car, supported himself the same way, pushed the door in and proceeded with his work in that car” added Bishop Scanlan.

A further memory of the tram is

contained in an Evening Echo article of some years back by journalist and historian the late Walter McGrath. He had this to say:

“The 10 o’clock Sunday morning train from Cork in the 1910 era was the ‘Golfers Special’ and these nattily-dressed plus-foured people heading for the Muskerry course near Cloghroe were the exclusive patrons of the comfortably upholstered first class carriages.

“In the lowly third class went the hurlers for Coachford or Blarney; the bowlplayers for Cloghroe or Dripsey; the harrier men for Tower Bridge and the birdcatchers for the valleys of the Shournagh and Sheep rivers.

“The golfers, however, were often the victims of swift retribution when derisive epithets were hurled at them from moving carriage windows as they played along adjacent fairways and God help the golfers of eccentric stance, lanky limb or over-generous posterior when those candid mobile onlookers were in merry mood” said Mr McGrath. The Muskerry Tram line’s years of service came to an end on December 29th 1934 and the final journey from the Cork terminus at Western Road was reported on Monday’s Cork Examiner as follows:

Amidst exciting and touching scenes, the last Muskerry ‘Tram’ steamed slowly out the Western Road station shortly after 6 o’clock on Saturday evening.

The train carried a large number of passengers, many availing of the opportunity of making the final trip, and there were whistles, calls, and ‘lamentations’ as it moved slowly off, and so severed the connecting link with the old days.

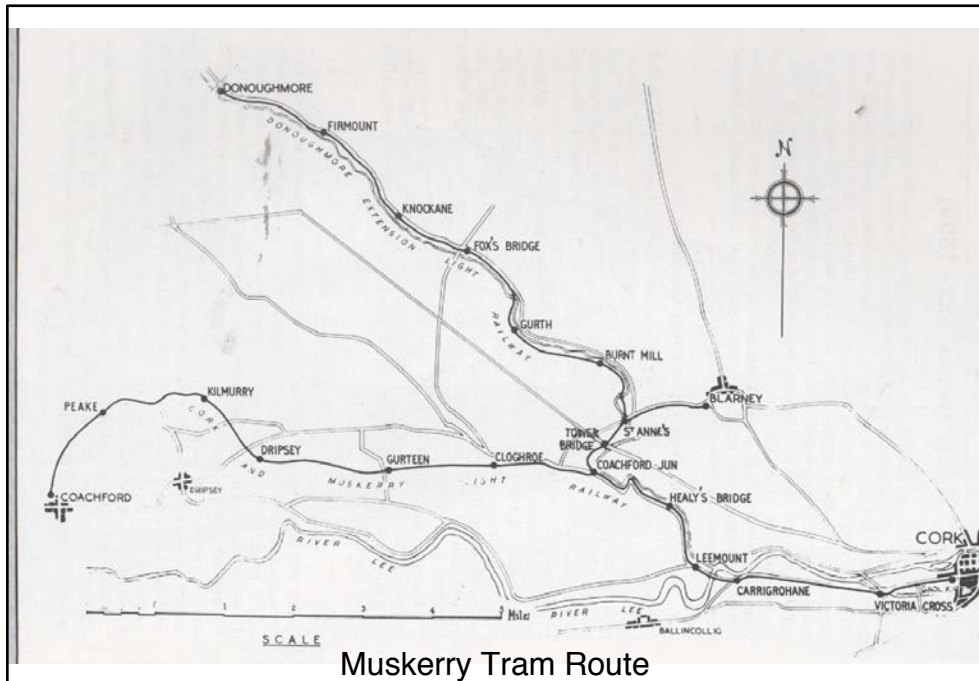
Signals exploded on the line as the train travelled towards Victoria Cross, and the engine driver and fireman did their part in returning the salute – the bell and whistle of the train being made full use of to the city’s bounds.

The return journey from Donoughmore, via St Ann’s, Tower, Coachford Junction and Leemount, was made some hours later and many expressions of regret at the passing, as it were of an old friend, were heard when the train, for the last time, entered the Cork terminus.

Unfortunately, the railway had been a non-paying proposition for several years past, due to increasing competition by rival services, and the directors of the Great Southern Railways, with which it had become amalgamated, decided to close it down and to substitute a road transport service.

Commenting on the closure, the Cork Examiner noted that the Muskerry’s Sunday excursions were ‘unsurpassed in popularity’ as they brought people to the beauty spots of Mid-Cork – to centres that up to then were only known to them by their place names.

The Examiner report added: The introduction of motor traffic changed everything. The railway lost its popularity and long trains



Muskerry Tram Route

Farewell lament to the Muskerry Tram composed at the time of its demise

Good-bye, good-bye old Hook an' Eye
Farewell o harnessed power;
We knew full well the strain would tell,
At fourteen miles an hour !

Sometimes you'd touch fifteen – too much,
You couldn't well outlast 'em;
When there were snails between the rails,
You very often passed 'em.

They're sick and sore at Donoughmore,
They weep at Coachford Junction;
Away out west by the Angler's Rest,
Their fishing rods won't function.

While at St Ann's the porter scans,
The up-line vainly hoping;
Men sit and groan with hearts of stone,
At Blarney, grimly moping.

Your own old bell has tolled your knell,
You've lost your head of pressure;
One final blow – then off you go,
Good-bye old friend – and bless you!

of crowded carriages gave place to one or two coaches with a handful of passengers. The closing down was inevitable but it will not be unaccompanied with a feeling of regret for the severance of another link with a more leisurely and more carefree age.