

**24 Interesting Facts - Donegal Railways**

1. Co. Donegal had 225 miles of narrow gauge which was the largest railway network of its type in the British Isles
2. The County Donegal Railway operated one of the first railway vehicles, Railcar No 1 with an internal combustion engine, one of the first in the world! It was built in 1906 in Birmingham only a few years after the petrol-driven road car was invented.
3. Narrow Gauge was 3ft across and Irish Standard Gauge was 5ft 3inches across. Only Ireland and Australia have this gauge of railway, and it was introduced to Australia by and Irish engineer F.W Sheilds. UK standard gauge is 4ft 8 inches.
4. The first railway line built in Donegal was the Finn Valley Railway from Strabane to Stranorlar, completed in September 1863 and was Broad Gauge.
5. After the success of Narrow Gauge in Co. Antrim both in construction and operation, particularly for cost saving benefits, the decision was made to switch to narrow gauge. Construction started in Donegal started with the first railway opened to Druminin (later renamed Lough Eske) in 1882, and was to continue to Donegal Town but the money ran out! As they were 4 miles short, passengers had to resort to horse and carriage to complete their journey. It wasn't until several years later that the railway was eventually extended to Donegal Town in 1889.
6. Over the next 20 years saw the peak of construction of the narrow gauge, and during this time the decision was taken to convert The Finn Valley line to Narrow Gauge, which miraculously was completed over a weekend in July 1894.
7. Unusually, the railway line from Derry to Strabane, in Northern Ireland, was operated by a company across the border, the CDRJC, however it was owned by the NCC who were owned by the Midland Railway. For this reason it was always operated by steam engines and never operated by railcars
8. In the early 1900's a train leaving Strabane for Stranorlar encountered a cart horse on the line. The frightened horse ran along the track in front of the train and jumped 2 5ft high crossing gates before galloping off. The horse went on to win the 1924 Grand National as "Master Robert
9. The last Narrow Gauge railway line in Donegal was constructed between Strabane to Letterkenny opening in 1909, and after some ongoing financial difficulties, this led to the railway being operated by a joint committee formed in 1906 that was jointly owned by the Great Northern Railway (Ireland) and the Midland Railway of Britain.
10. During the lifetime of the railways in Co. Donegal the CDRJC had 6 different classes of steam engines which depended on wheel set and size. The Class 5 series of 5 engines were built between 1907/8 costing £2,475 each and included the famous engine “Drumboe” and weighed 43.5 tons.
11. The Class 5 engines were renamed and renumbered in 1937 from 16 Donegal to 4 Meenglass, 17 Glenties to 5 Drumboe, 18 Killybegs to 6 Columbkille,19 Letterkenny to7 Finn and 20 Raphoe to 8 Foyle
12. In January 1968 ERNE was scrapped in Letterkenny it was the last surviving 4-6-4T or Baltic steam engine in the British Isles.
13. There were 2 major accidents that occurred on the CDRJC. The first was in 1913 when a late evening train on a Sunday from Londonderry to Strabane derailed in Donemana station killing one person. The train was doing 40MPH derailing locomotive 17 as the speed restriction was only 6 MPH and the accident was blamed on the driver who had spent too much time in the pub before driving the train home. It was over 30 years before the second accident occurred in August 1949 just outside of Donegal Town near Hospital Halt when a railcar driver (on Railcar 17) and 2 passengers lost their lives when it and locomotive No. 10 Owenea, collided. The railcar was destroyed completely.
14. On the Londonderry & Lough Swilly Railway line (Letterkenny and Burtonport Extension Railway) an accident took place on the night of 30 January 1925 on the Owencarrow Viaduct . The disaster occurred at around 8pm when winds of up to 120mph derailed carriages of the train off the viaduct causing it to partially collapse. The roof of a carriage was ripped off throwing four people to their deaths.
15. One of the best-known passengers on the rail network in the 1950’s was the Donegal Station agent’s dog who liked to travel frequently on its own between nearby stations!
16. The County Donegal Railway survived without any rail closures until 1947, which was due in good part to the General Manager, Henry Forbes from 1910-1943, who introduced many economies, not least was the introduction of the diesel railcars for most passenger trains, a first in the British Isles and only the second in Europe! Bernard Curran manager from 1943 to 1966 continued the legacy of Forbes.
17. The first closure was at Glenties branch in 1947 to passengers and then for goods in 1952, which was followed by ongoing closures eventually leading to complete closure on the Donegal network on the 31st December 1959
18. Although the railways closed, several enterprising locals continued to operate trains for a number of weeks on the Ballyshannon branch until the management were informed, who then immediately arranged for the railcar to be moved in the middle of night!
19. The South Donegal Railway Society Restoration Society was formed in January 1991 and in 1995 changed its name to the Donegal Railway Heritage Centre and opened its museum in 1995 in the former Donegal Town Station, uniquely the only museum of its type in the North West of Ireland based in original station buildings.
20. The museum today incorporates railway stock, artifacts, models railways, a video presentation, and a shop
21. The railway museum buildings you see today are, as you look at them from the front entrance, formally the agent's house (2 storey building to the left) who was the local representative of the railway, and the single storey to the right which was the booking office, waiting room and other facilities
22. The railway buildings are said to be haunted, but they haven't left yet; still waiting on the next train!
23. Donegal Railway Museum currently fundraising through crowdfunding to restore and return the famous Donegal steam engine back to Donegal Town at a total cost of €100,000. Funding is nearly complete with the steam engine expected back on site in early 2021. If you would like to contribute and be part of the success story, check out our Facebook or website
24. There are lots more interesting facts, but we don’t have enough paper for them all, so just come up to Donegal and visit us to find out more!

For more information, or to make a donation contact the Manager at Tel: 074 9722655 or email manager@donegalrailway.com