# Making tracks
railways in West Lothian

Before the Railway came

West Lothian sits in the heart of central Scotland. Cross country routes have always passed through this area. Once there were only earthen tracks beaten down by the feet of travellers bound for Edinburgh, Stirling or the west and by herdsmen and cattle heading south to market.

In wet weather these routes turned to mud, which made them impassable to carts and coaches. From 1752 laws were passed to allow turnpike trusts to build well-maintained roads in West Lothian and for tolls to be charged for their upkeep.

Short horse-drawn railways began to appear in neighbouring Lanarkshire from 1805 onwards for the transport of coal and other minerals from the Monklands area to Glasgow.
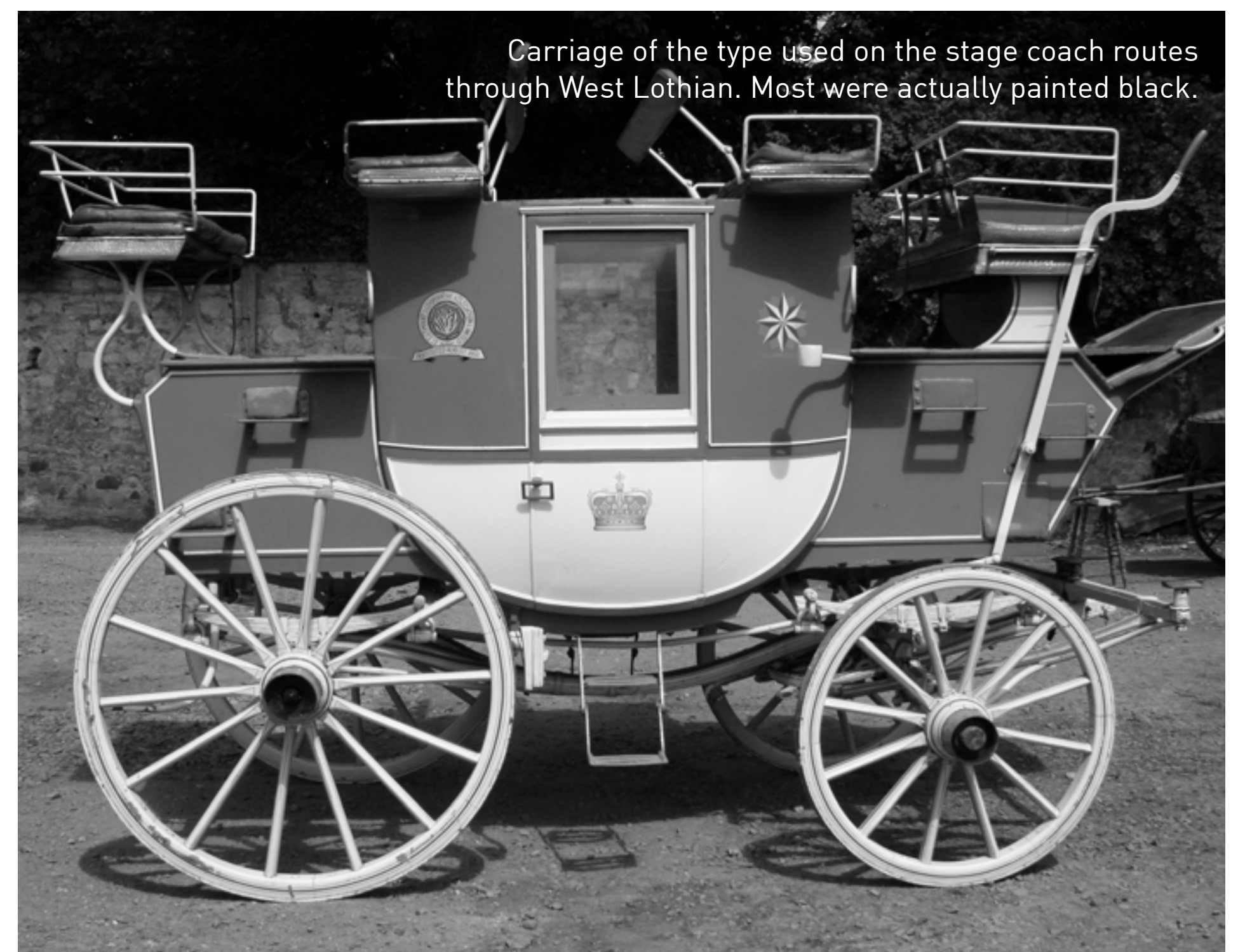
Carriage of the type used on the stage coach routes through West Lothian. Most were actually painted black.

By 1795 four turnpike roads ran through West Lothian from Edinburgh to Glasgow. The coach journey between the two cities took about fourteen hours with stops every ten miles or so to change horses.
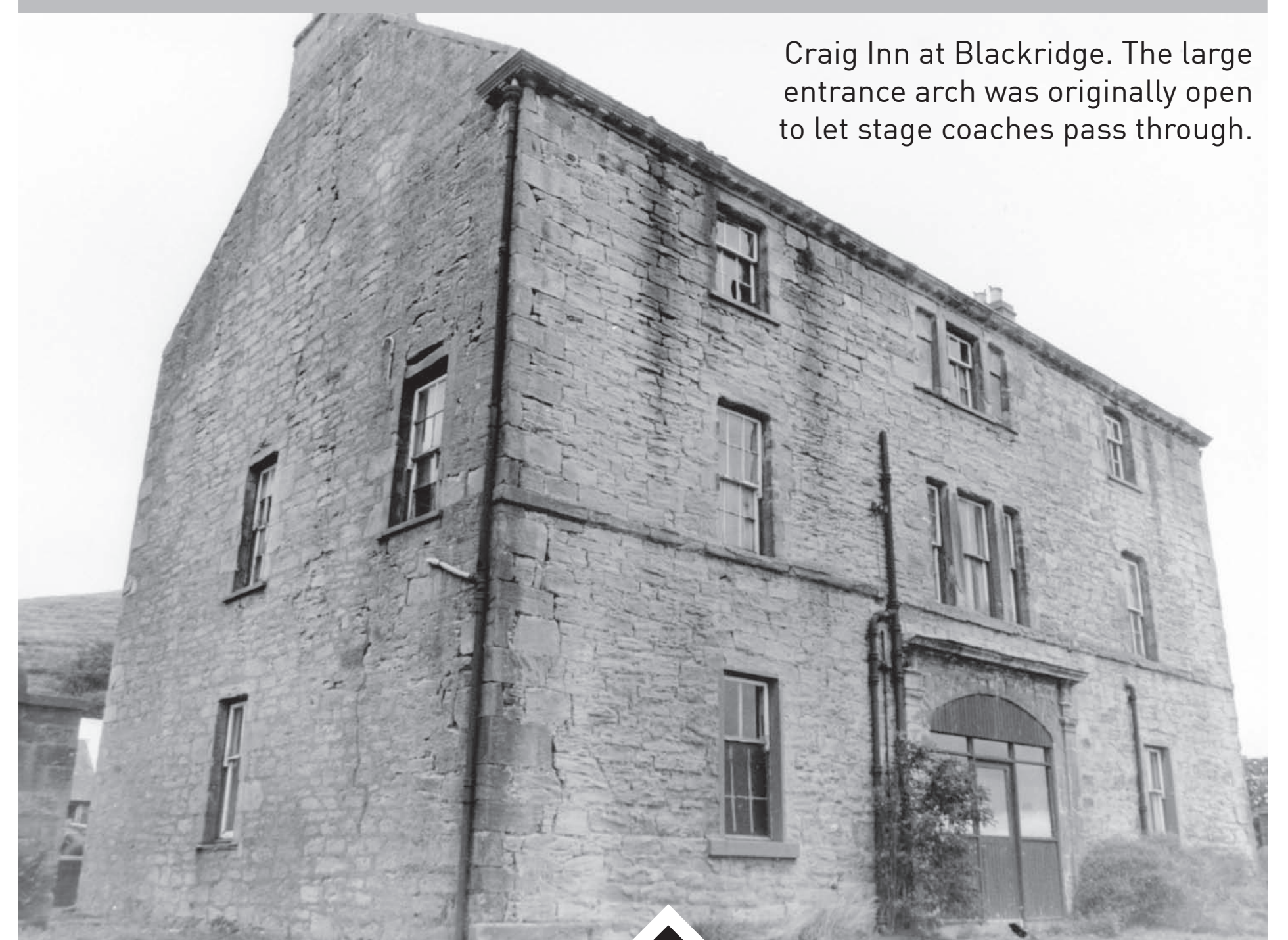
Craig Inn at Blackridge. The large entrance arch was originally open to let stage coaches pass through.

Coaching inns on the Bathgate-Airdrie road included Oatridge Hotel in Uphall and the Craig Inn at Blackridge.

Union Canal

A method of transporting cheap coal eastwards to West Lothian and Edinburgh arrived in 1822 with the opening of the Union Canal. The Forth and Clyde canal already ran from the Clyde to Grangemouth and the Union Canal met it at Falkirk, opening up water transport from east to west.

The canal also carried passengers in some comfort. The journey took 9 hours. Day passengers could enjoy books or music. Night passengers could book a cabin for 7 shillings and a two egg breakfast cost 2½ d.

But in 1842 the railway came, bringing much faster goods traffic and inter-city travel.

The canal at Linlithgow is used for leisure today but was once busy with barges carrying heavy goods.

westlothian.gov.uk West Lothian Council

The First Railways in West Lothian

The first railway between Glasgow and Edinburgh was opened in February 1842.

The line was routed via Linlithgow and Falkirk, which was an important centre for trade and commerce. The new railway was fast and attracted business away from stagecoaches. West Lothian towns and villages along the turnpike roads lost a lot of their income.

In Bathgate the Town Council soon realised that a railway was necessary for the future prosperity of the town. Local coal and other minerals had to be transported cheaply and quickly to market. Financing a new railway was a problem. It was a time of economic hardship. The line via Falkirk had cost nearly twice the budgeted sum due to the viaducts and tunnels needed to carry the new line.

In 1845 plans were laid for a railway which would take a more direct route via Bathgate and Airdrie. It was decided that the Edinburgh & Bathgate Railway (E&B) would meet the existing Edinburgh & Glasgow Railway line at Ratho, nine miles west of Edinburgh and the Airdrie & Bathgate Junction Railway would connect the E&B to Airdrie.
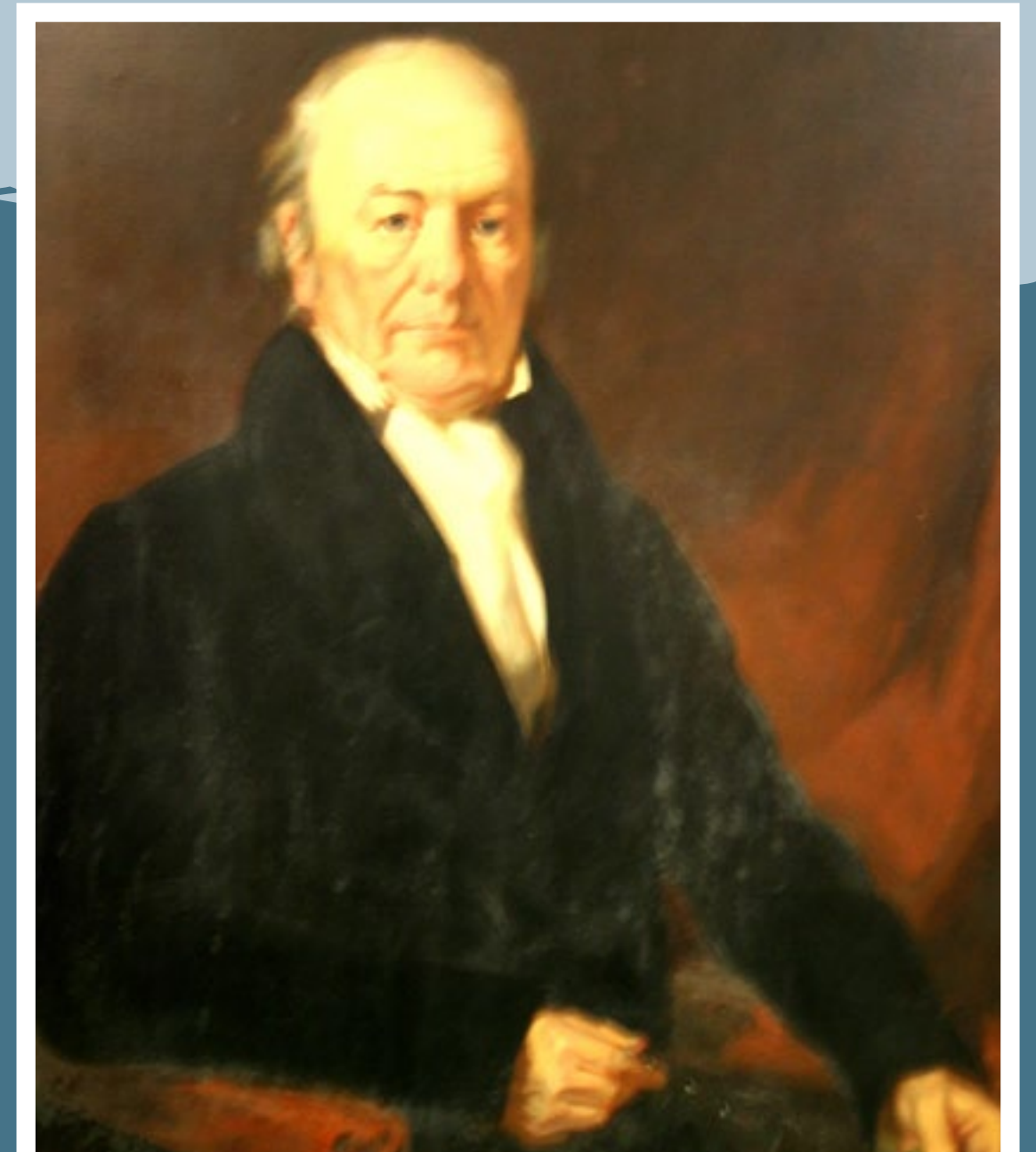
Alexander Marjoribanks of Balbardie was the local landowner who led Bathgate's campaign for its first railway line
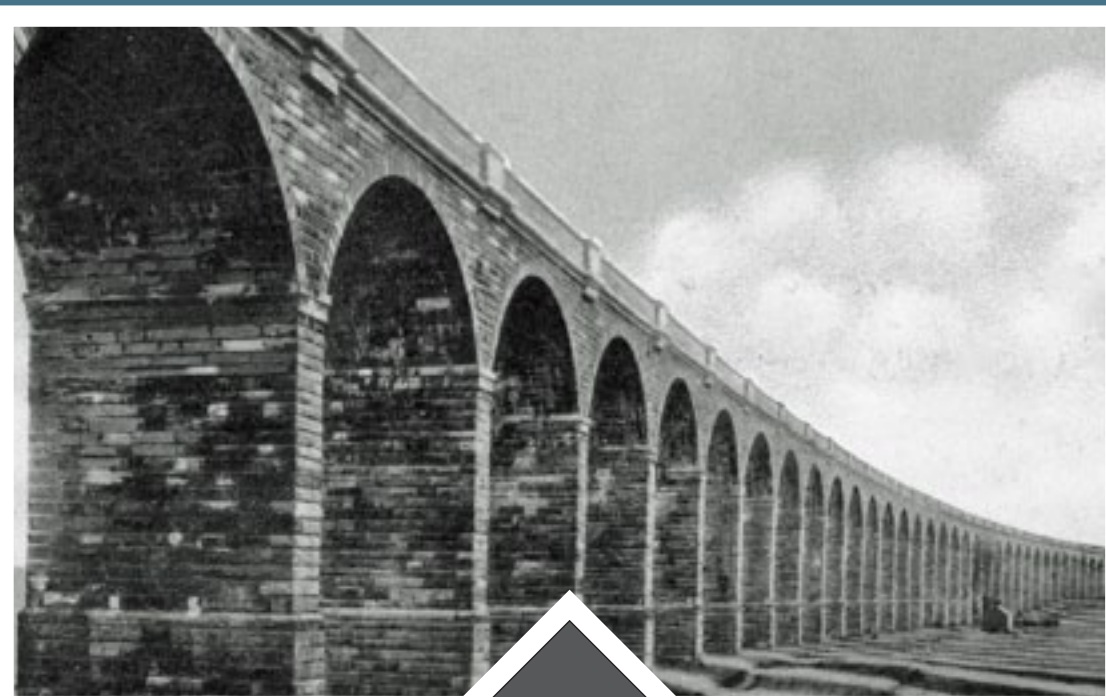
The Almond Viaduct east of Broxburn was built by railway engineer John Miller to carry the Edinburgh – Glasgow line which opened in 1842

There would be no need for expensive tunnels or viaducts on the Bathgate route, despite some steep gradients and the economic recession was easing.

The railway to Bathgate from Edinburgh was opened eventually on 12th November 1849.

Bathgate gained a link to Airdrie, from where Glasgow could be reached by a number of routes, when the Bathgate and Coatbridge Railway opened on 11th August 1862.

The first through trains between Edinburgh and Glasgow via Bathgate ran on 1st April 1871.
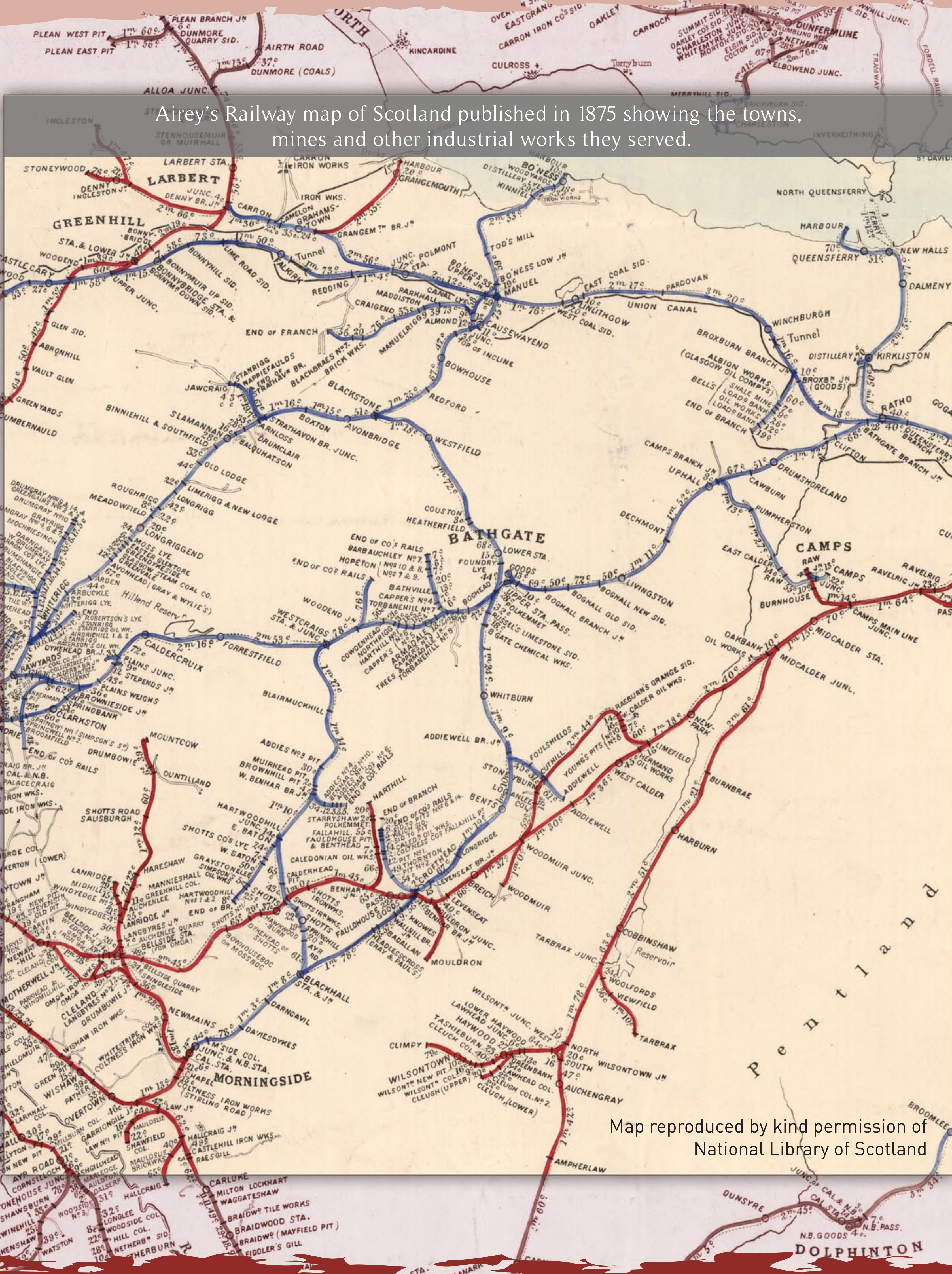

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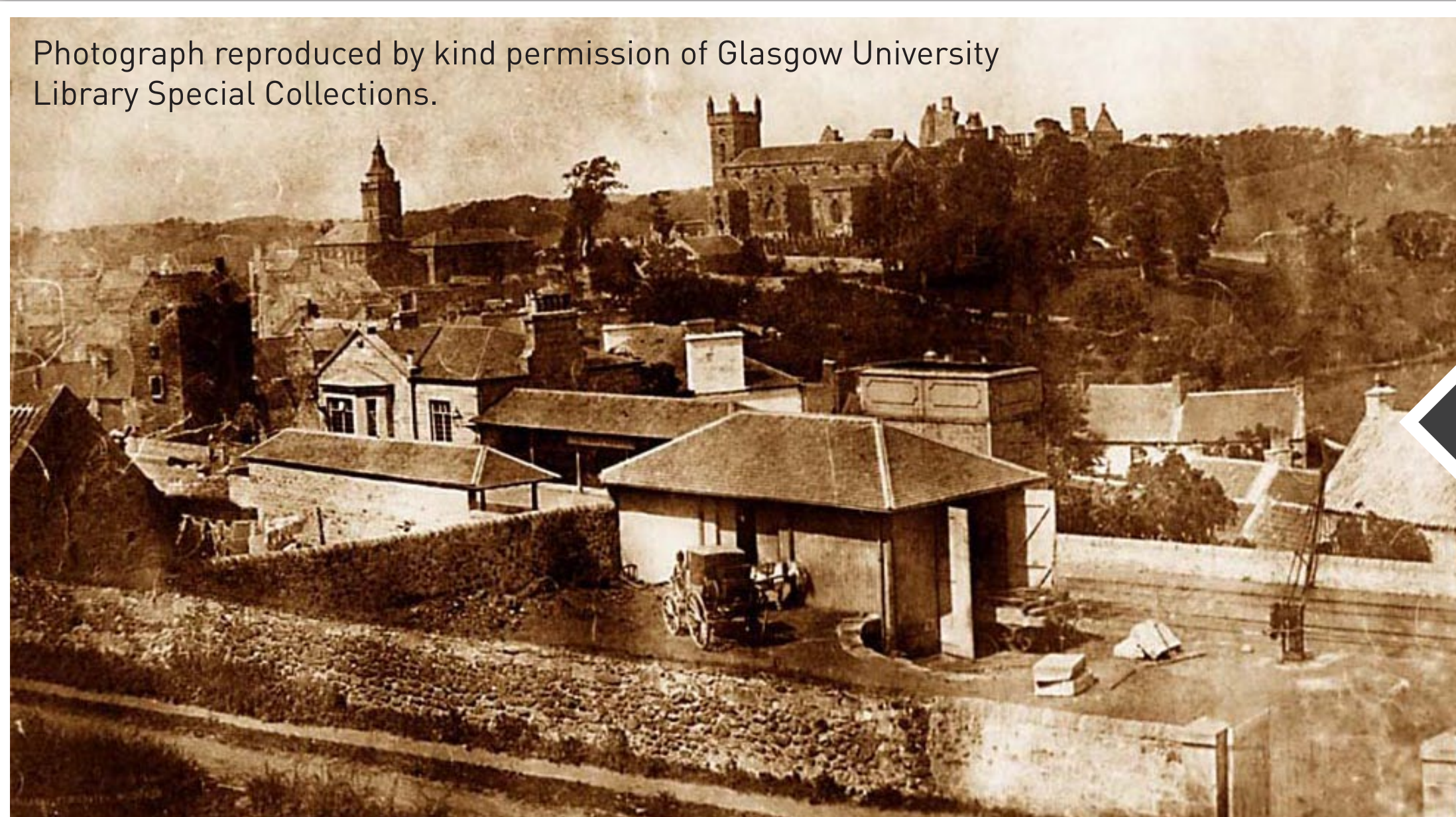
This picture of Linlithgow station taken by Hill and Adamson in 1845 is probably the earliest picture of any railway station in the world.

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The Heyday of the Railways

Airey's Railway map of Scotland published in 1875 showing the towns, mines and other industrial works they served.

Map reproduced by kind permission of National Library of Scotland

The main reason for building new lines between Ratho and Coatbridge was the income to be gained from carrying mineral and goods traffic.

The North British Railway managed the Bathgate line from the mid 1860's and the NBR benefitted from the expansion of the many collieries and ironworks in the local area.

By the turn of the century Bathgate was the origin of around 50 coal and goods trains each day and the shunting yard was becoming increasingly important.

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Growing up on the Railway
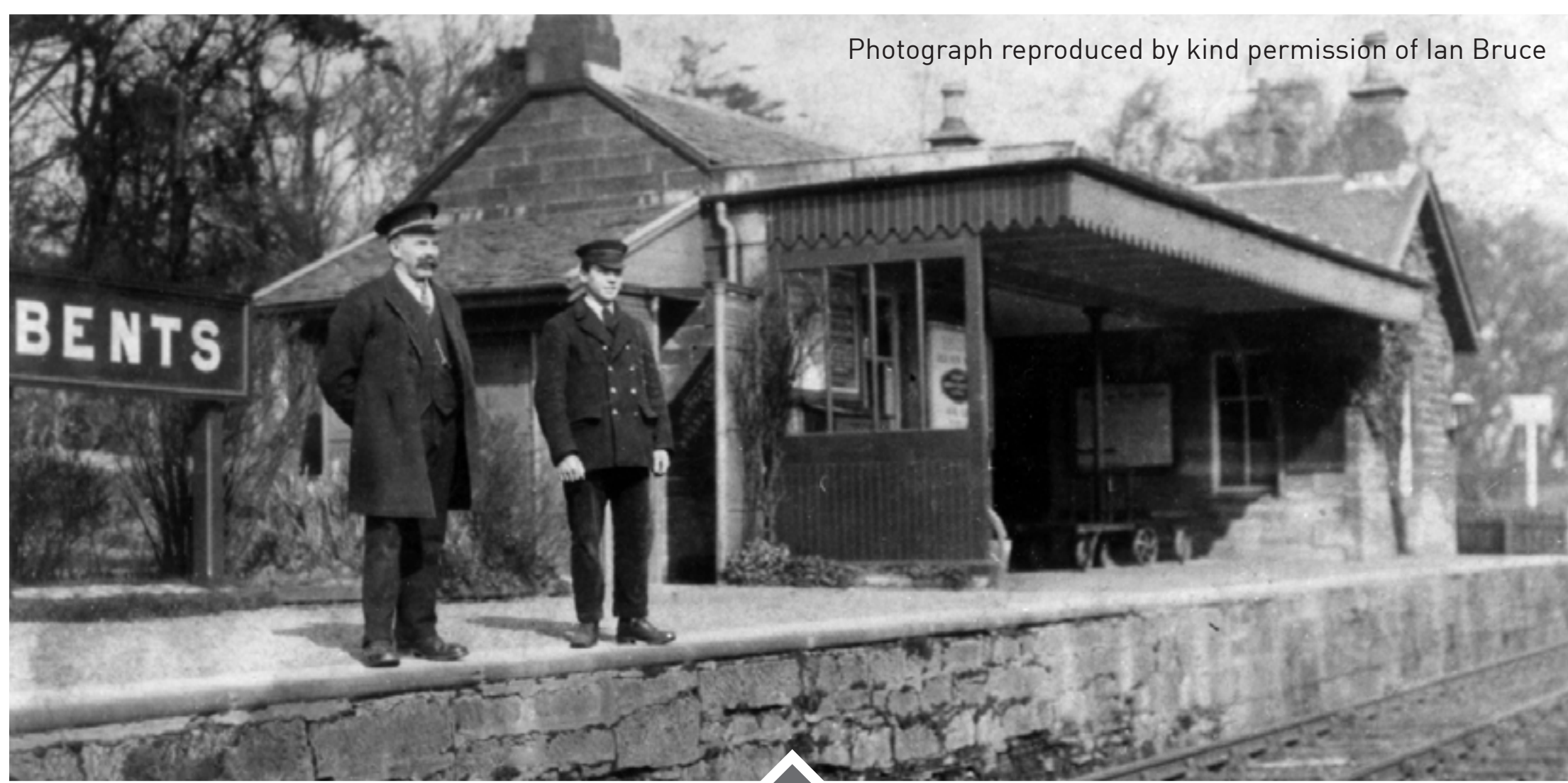
Photograph reproduced by kind permission of Ian Bruce

Bents station in 1922 showing the station master Mr Bolton (left) and Frank Gillies

Ian Bruce was born at Bents Station cottage in 1941. His mother started work on the railway in 1930, the same year that the passenger service to Bents ended. Ian grew up with real trains on the main line and at the two goods sidings behind his home.

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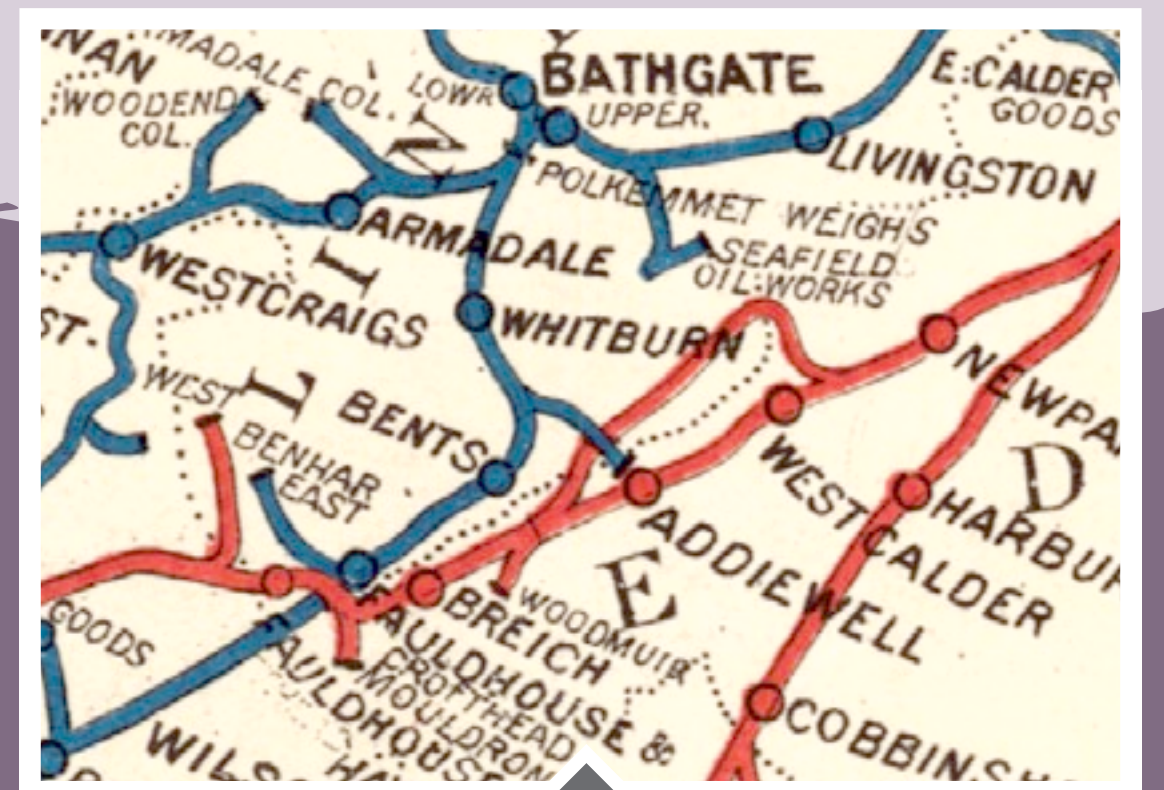
Railway network around Bents station in 1927

His mother was level crossing keeper and Ian helped during school holidays. There were four signals to stop the trains near Bents crossing: two home signals and two about quarter of a mile distant in either direction. There was no electricity. Oil lamps had to be carried to signals in all weathers and raised into position behind the red or green glass by a winding mechanism.

The level crossing was open to trains – road vehicles had to ask for it to be opened. There was a gate for pedestrians. Ian often opened the gates for traffic. He started by changing the distant signals to stop, then the home ones. After that he threw a lever to release the gate bolt, before going down to open the gate.

Railwayman climbing a signal. The chain for raising and lowering the oil lamp for filling and trimming is clearly visible, but the windlass for turning the mechanism would be at the bottom of the signal and is out of sight.
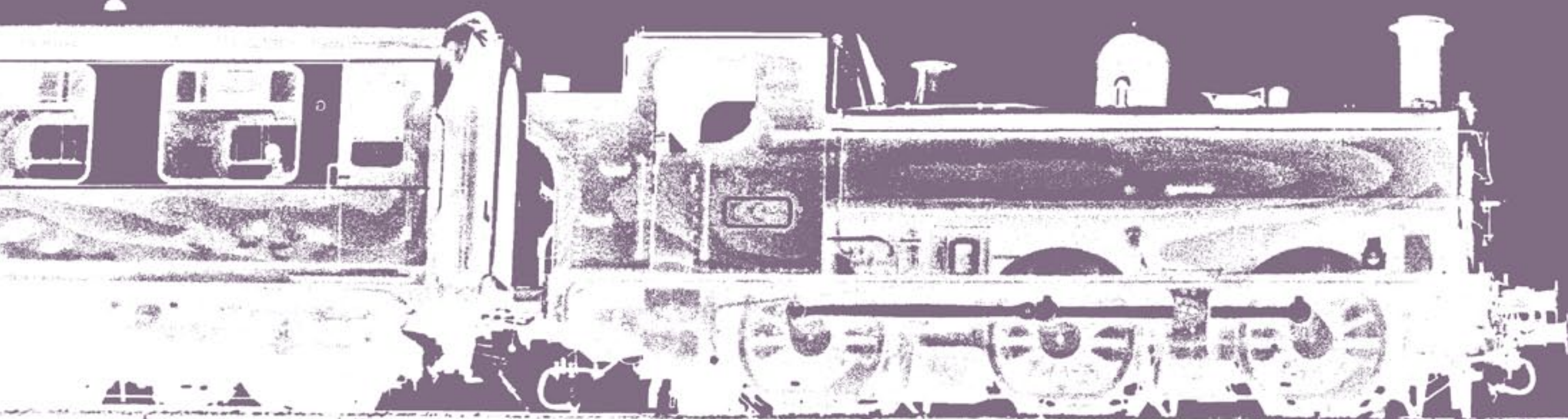
Surfacemen

These surfacemen checked the railway lines and tracks around Blackridge

Ian's father delivered goods from local stations to nearby businesses but he began working on the railway as a surfaceman in the mid 1920s. His job was to check all the fixings of the rails and track were secure and to tap rails for cracks or faults.

Surfacemen fixed detonators to the rails which were set off if a train passed over them. The number and sequence of exploding detonators let the driver know about the work going on down the line.

Egged on by a friend, Ian once took some detonators from the signal box. The boys set them off by dropping stones off the bridge on Hen's Nest Road. The friend went on to become a senior policeman.
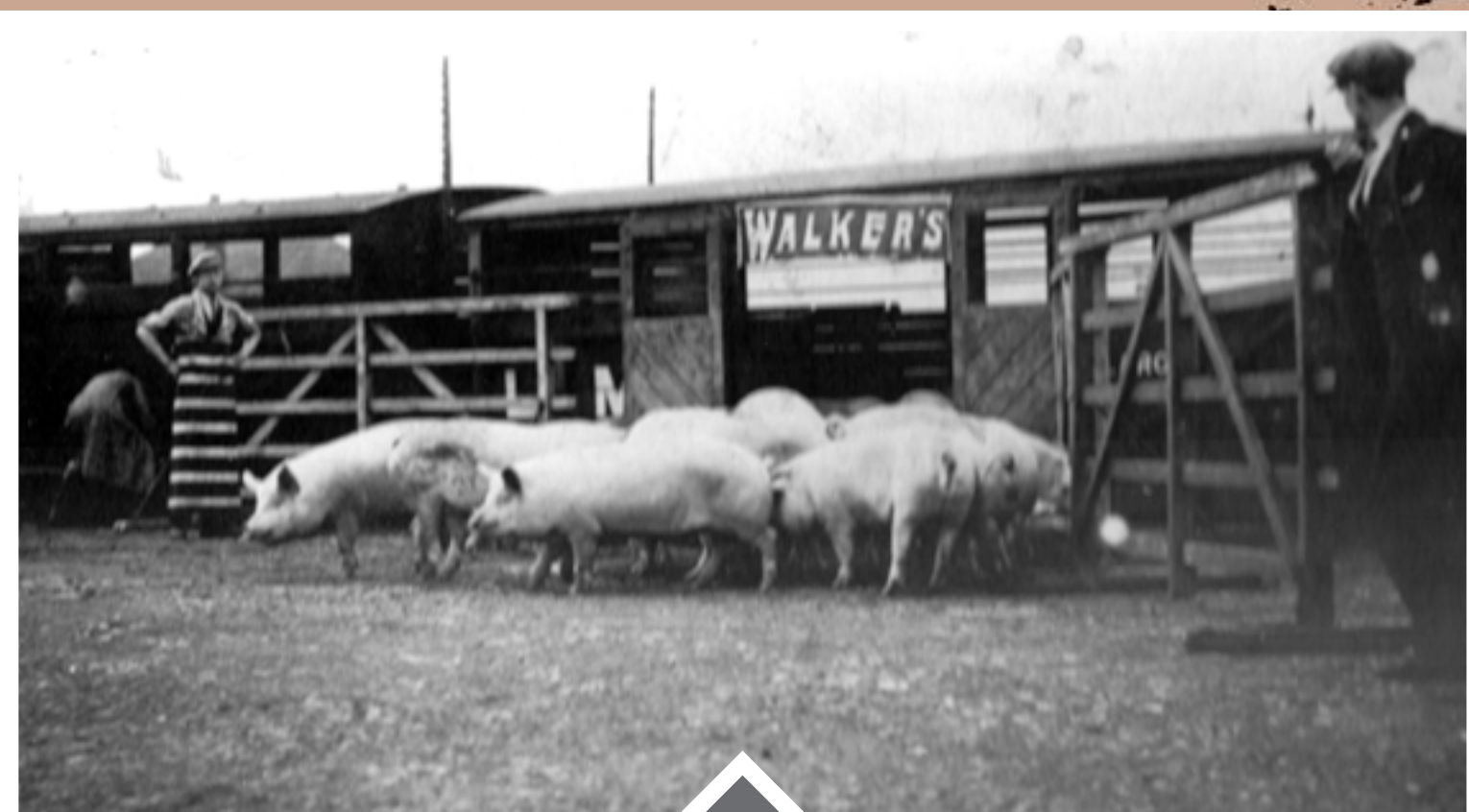
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View of Bathgate Goods yard in the 1950s showing its size and a number of locmotives and coal wagons.
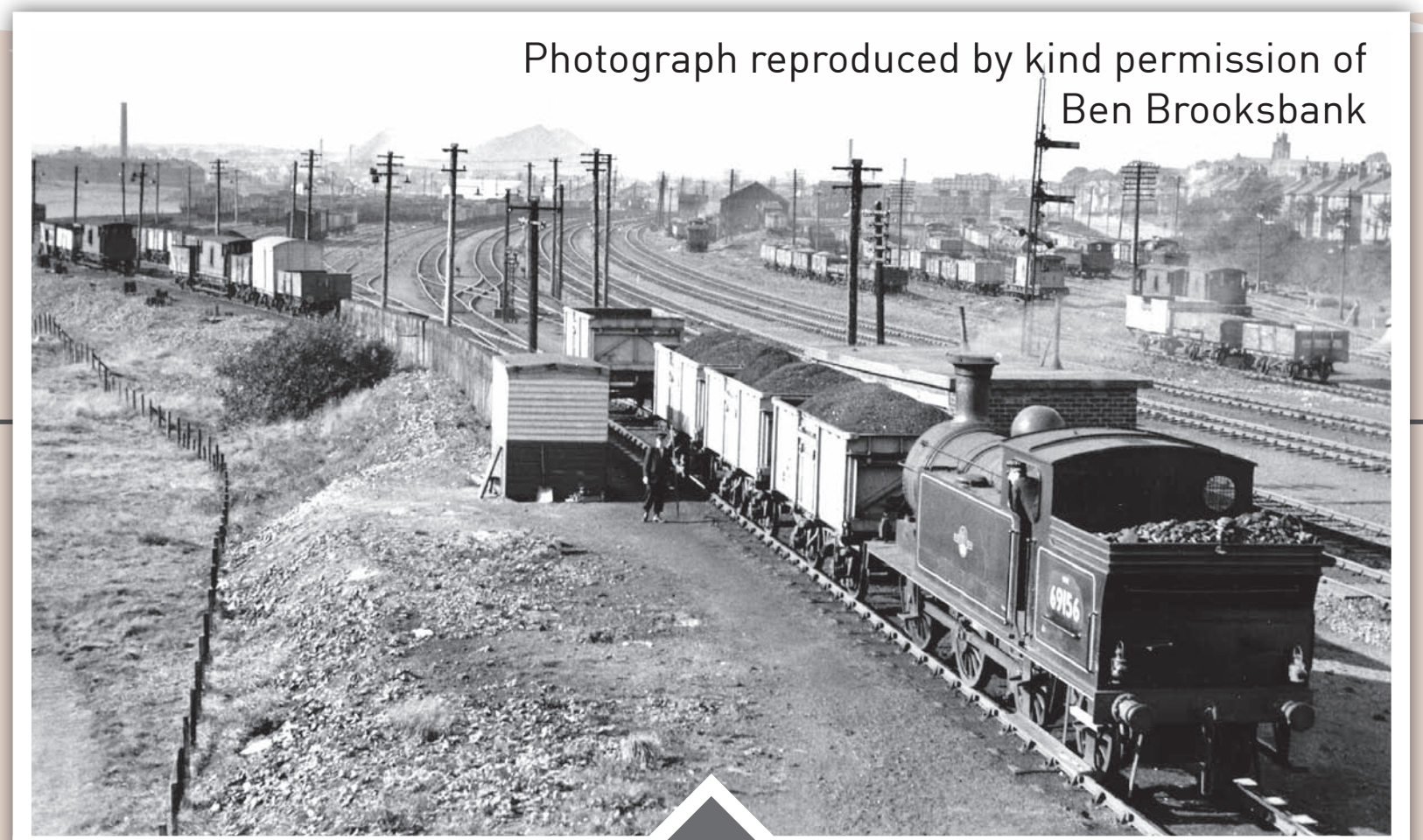
Working on the Railway

Walter Notman started work in August 1947 as a clerk at Armadale depot which was run by the London and North Eastern Railway (LNER). LNER became part of British Rail after nationalisation on 1st January 1948.

Passengers at Bathgate pass the time at the weighing machine in the 1930s

Later that year he moved to Bathgate goods station in Whitburn Road and worked there until he was called up for National Service. Bathgate had a marshalling yard and engine shed with around 30 locomotives. Heavy goods trains heading west from Bathgate were assisted by a rear engine to help the train up the steep gradient at Armadale.

The Bathgate yard handled coal from Riddochhill, Easton, Whitrigg and Woodend collieries; goods from the North British Steel Foundry, Westfield paper mill, Armadale Steel works and Brickworks and Levenseat sand quarry. The yard also despatched cattle and sheep from Bathgate market.

Pigs being unloaded at Bathgate goods yard for slaughter and sale as bacon at Walker's butcher shop.

One of the clerk's jobs was to notify local businesses to come to pick up their goods. Coal merchants bagged their coal at the station before loading it on to their lorries. Everything came by train including fruit and milk. Once a goods van came in to the yard carrying wooden cases of spirits. One case fell and two whisky bottles broke. One of the porters ran for his mug and tipped up the case to catch the amber liquid.

The first passenger train each day to Glasgow and Edinburgh started at Bathgate and the last ones terminated there. At Armadale one train ran to Edinburgh in the morning and one in the afternoon. Two ran to Glasgow in the morning and one the evening. There were more trains on Saturdays than during the week.

Photograph reproduced by kind permission of Lens of Sutton Association

Armadale station in the 1930s

Decline of the Old Bathgate Railway

Passengers were always the poor relations on railways built mainly for trade. At Bathgate it was 1887 before good waiting rooms were built. Another problem was that Bathgate was served by two stations, Upper and Lower, and intending 'through' passengers were faced with a half mile walk until a loop line was built in 1894.

The line was double tracked in 1904 but passenger services were still disadvantaged because of the longer journey times compared to the route via Linlithgow.
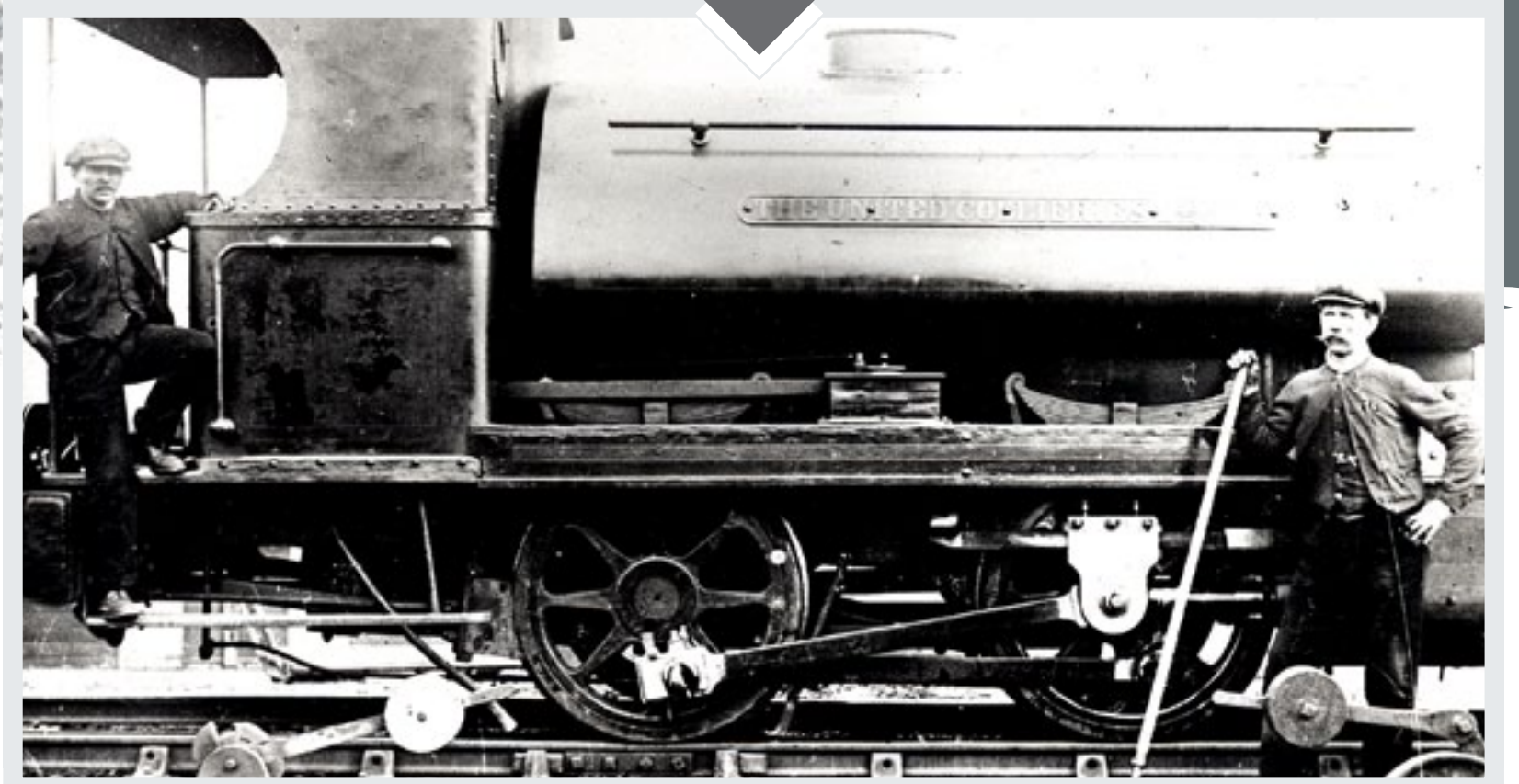
The Bathgate route had a large number of intermediate stations and was shorter but it was also slower because of its steep gradients and tight curves.

Uphall station before the First World War, Notice the sign telling passengers for Dechmont and Bangour to change trains.

Passenger trains also faced increasing competition from local bus services. The bus companies were not responsible for funding road improvements and maintenance, but train companies had to pay to maintain their networks. The First World War placed a tremendous strain on resources and resulted in a neglect of the infrastructure and rolling stock.

United Collieries steam engine. Mining companies once depended on railways to carry away their coal to market.

Signal box near Blackridge. The village now has a station on the new Bathgate – Airdrie line thanks to a vigorous community campaign.
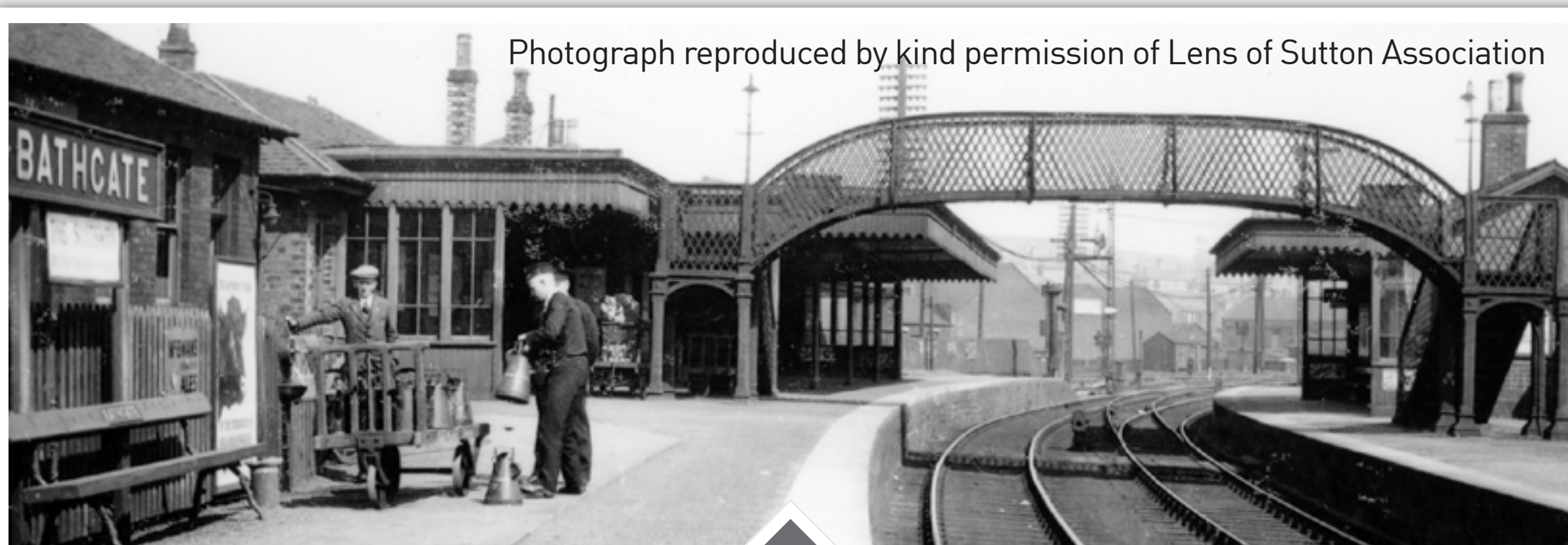

WESTCRAIGS JUNCT

The London and North Eastern Railway took over the Bathgate line in 1923, but could not reverse the fortunes of the Airdrie to Bathgate line. Coal traffic ceased when the mines were exhausted and the line between Airdrie and Newbridge was closed to through passenger services on January 9 1956 after many years of financial losses.

The line between Bathgate and Newbridge was retained for goods traffic serving the shale oil industry and then, in the 1960s, transporting cars produced by British Leyland. The Bathgate to Drumgelloch section was reduced to single track in 1979, closed 3 years later and the former track bed was converted to a cycle path.

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BATHCATE

Bathgate Upper Station in the 1930s.

Making Tracks Into The Future

Secretary of State for Scotland, Malcolm Rifkind (left), re-opens the Bathgate – Edinburgh line on a snowy day in 1986

Following the Beeching Report in 1963 a quarter of the British rail network and half the stations were closed. Many of the axed lines had served industries which were declining or going out of existence.

Twenty years later, widespread unemployment led the government to consider re-opening railway lines to enable people to travel to find work. The Edinburgh - Bathgate line was re-opened in 1986 to serve Bathgate and Livingston New Town where the electronics industry was flourishing.

The Bathgate line was a huge success despite few trains and a single track line. Passenger numbers exceeded estimates fourfold in three years. New economic difficulties hit central Scotland with the decline of the "Silicon Glen" electronics industry and the closure of the Ravenscraig steel plant. It then seemed a good idea to revive a railway right through the area, reconnecting former industrial villages with both Edinburgh and Glasgow.

Airdrie - Bathgate link

The new Airdrie – Bathgate link with dual track, frequent services from Edinburgh via Glasgow to Helensburgh and new West Lothian stations at Armadale and Blackridge became fully operational at the beginning of 2011. New housing and commercial developments are springing up along the line to serve the commuters using the line.
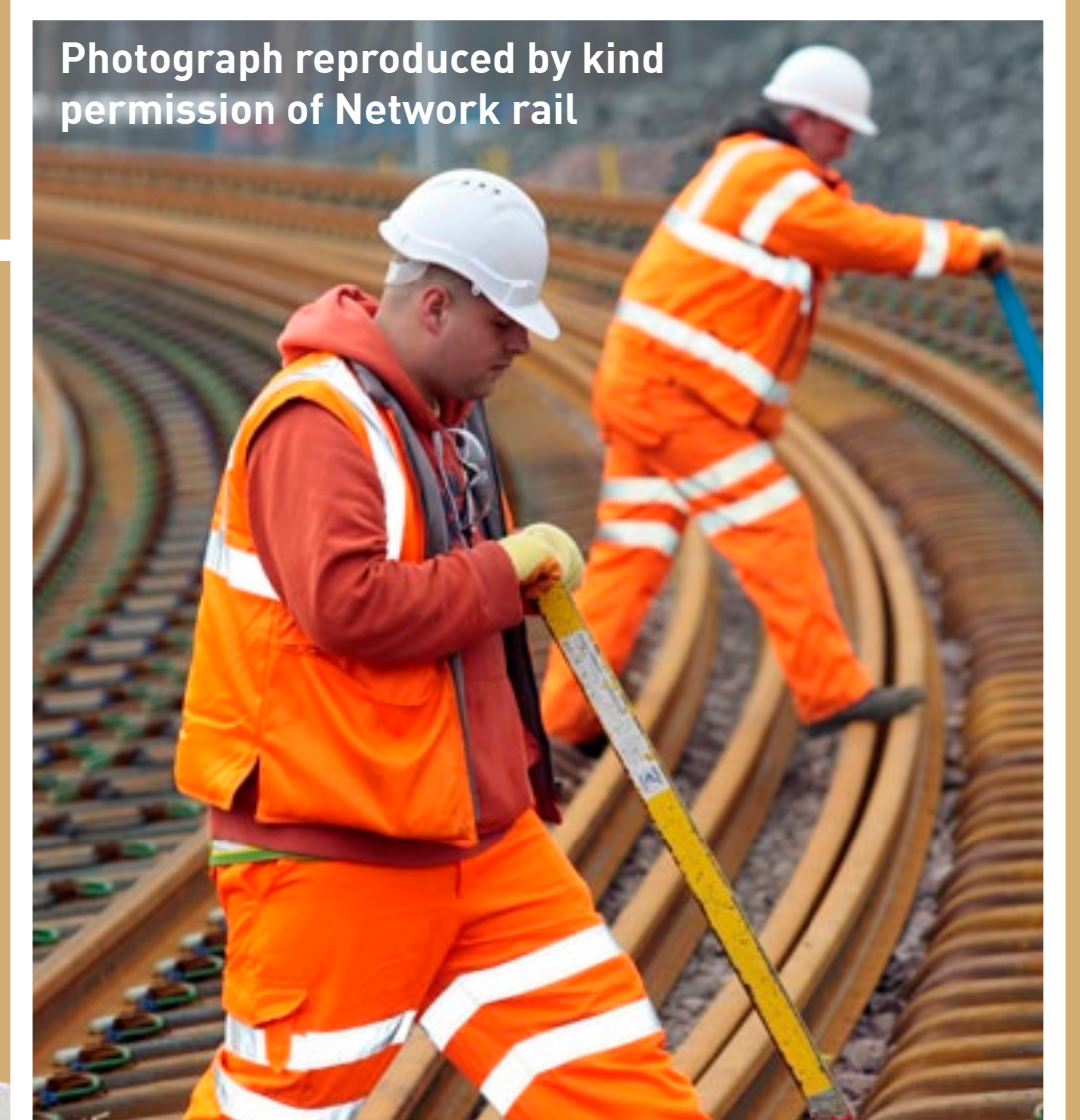
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Track laying for the new Airdrie – Bathgate line near Bathgate

A test train on the Airdrie – Bathgate line.

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