

The Griff Branch Railway of the L.N.W.R.

A little known backwater

By PETER LEE



There are very few photos of the Griff branch 'in situ'. This elevated photograph which was taken on 6th April 1968 from Griff Nr 4's colliery tip was five years after the branch was lifted and shows the raw 'cut' of the branch in the centre of the picture. The line used to track from left to right serving the industries it once connected on the way. The road at right angles to it cutting across is Heath End Road. It is hard to imagine in the nearly forty years since this photo was taken how much has changed. Modern houses and industrial estates have been built over the old works and some of the green fields you see here. The branch itself has now been largely filled in. The photographer, Geoff Edmands, has scaled the still burning pit heap and scanned his camera across to show the site of Griff Nr 4 colliery in the foreground. The shafts have been capped and some pit buildings have been removed. Others such as the colliery offices and miscellaneous old sheds remain. The dark heap of spoil in the foreground is probably shale recycled from the pit tip for re-use in housing developments then just starting. In later years use of this cheap and poor quality base material would damage the value of houses incorporating it in their foundations. New industrial buildings are starting to appear on the colliery site including a car dealer fronting onto Heath End Road. Beyond Heath End Road the cold brick-works chimneys of Haunchwood Brick and Tile's Nr 2 yard still stand but not for much longer. In the not too distant future after the photo was taken they too would be replaced by a housing estate. Where the branch goes under Heath End Road is an iron bridge, which carried the road over the railway. Built wide enough for two tracks in the event only one line passed beneath it. Beyond this bridge the line passed through a cutting and then under another bridge carrying Arbury Road before it approached Stanley Bros. Siding where it terminated.

The History

One hundred years ago there were many branch lines and industrial sidings in the Nuneaton area. They have long been swept away due to the abandonment of the coal, stone and brick industries. A little known railway by-way was the Griff branch, which ran from the Coventry and Nuneaton line near Bermuda to Stockingford. The Coventry to Nuneaton branch of the London North Western Railway opened on 2nd September 1850. In the same year a short spur line was put in to connect up to the head of the Griff Arm of the Coventry Canal. The railway company constructed this

line with old stone blocks and rails re-cycled from horse drawn tramways in the area. The outlying Griff collieries were reached by several narrow gauge wagon-ways laid to the gauge of three feet four and a half inches. Mining had been carried out on the Arbury estate at Griff since the 1500's. Between 1694 and 1698 a number of interconnecting pools were dug and filled with pit water to make ornamental lakes, within one hundred years these had been developed into a canal system connecting to the Coventry Canal, completed in 1785. A number of tramways were built on the estate, to save the cost of building canal arms to outlying coal shafts. At Griff there was also a lime works adjacent to the canal basin. The Griff arm of the Coventry canal was 1320 yards long and was completed on 29th July 1787. The new standard gauge spur line terminated at the Griff canal basin.

This short branch sufficed for twenty years. By the 1870's a large increase in coal and brick production, together with the modernisation of mining methods, caused the line to be extended. In 1860 Griff Colliery was the largest coal business in Warwickshire. Deeper pits in the area were gradually replacing more ancient shafts. Between 1872-8 Stanley Brothers leased Swan Lane Colliery and the Nuneaton Colliery in Stockingford. Lack of a rail connection was hampering development of their business so the LNWR. board was contacted to seek the railway company's extension of the Griff Colliery branch from the original Griff Collieries through to Stanley Brothers collieries and brickyards. (In 1865, only 20 tons of coal had been delivered to London from the Nuneaton Colliery on Stockingford Common. This was delivered by canal). In order to expand their operations a rail connection was desperately needed.

On 28th June 1877 an Act of Parliament was obtained for extending the Griff Branch. By 1878 work had begun building the line to Stanley Brothers yards situated about a mile and a half distant from the junction with the Coventry to Nuneaton line. The extension was 2 miles 6 furlongs long, and was built with bridges wide enough for a double track in case a second line of rails was needed in the future. The branch was fenced for its whole length by cast iron railings. (Supplied by Charles Parsons, the Nuneaton ironmonger). Griff lime works was opened in June 1878. On 22nd June 1881 the new railway extension was formally opened. It was two miles, six furlongs six chains long. Several sidings and connections were connected to it. A heavy freight traffic developed. Mostly bricks, tiles, clay pipes, chimney pots and coal. On 11th September 1889 the Midland Railway obtained running rights over the branch as well.



Griff Junction box on 30th March 1958, Griff Nr 4 colliery was still open and there was traffic emanating from Haunchwood Brick & Tile's nr. 3 yard so it was a busy junction. We are looking back towards Nuneaton. Bedworth is behind the cameraman. The line off to the left is double track but reduces to single track near Bermuda crossing. After the Griff branch was closed and the junction taken out Griff box became a 'fringe' box for Nuneaton power box on 5th October 1963. It remained so for another twenty years before being demolished, in the 1980's. The bridge in the foreground carried the line over the Griff arm of the Coventry Canal. As you look towards Nuneaton the 'pegs' are off in both directions. William Griffith's quarry siding was installed to the right of the box, there were three new sidings brought into use on 12th March 1912. There was provision for twenty-five levers in Griff box. By 1978 only five remained in use, the others were spare. (Geoff Edmands)

The steepest grade on the branch was a short section of 1 in 44 about a mile and a quarter from the Griff junction end.

In 1892 a spur off the Griff branch was put through to a new colliery then being sunk at Griff Clara. (Originally called 'New Winnings') Sinking at this location started in 1891. The new line was about three quarters of a mile long with an extensive and complicated array of sidings. The new branch also served the canal wharf and lime-works.

Just past the canal arm there was the Griff Clara junction branch and a level crossing was located here which protected a road crossing at the top of the new pit village of Bermuda which was constructed in 1891 to house people working at the new Griff Clara pit. There was a crossing keeper's and ground frame hut here as well. In later days the shunter working for the main line company (LNWR, later LMS) opened and

closed the gates. These gates interlocked with the branch starter signal, which was pulled off by the Griff Junction box.

Several sidings served the canal basin and nearby were cottages mostly occupied by Griff colliery miners and boatmen on the canal. There was a row of pit cottages called the 'Old Row' which housed several Griff families before Bermuda village was built in 1891. These continued to be lived in until the closure of the pits in the area.

The LNWR. built a house close by, to accommodate the crossing gatekeeper and his family. Beyond the level crossing another fan of sidings accessed the Bermuda works of the Haunchwood Brick & Tile Co. Their Nr 3 yard and a little further along Griff Nr 4 colliery. This was an older pit than Clara. Nr. 4 was sunk in 1851. It was originally served by a horse drawn tramway, which connected to the canal wharf. Where the standard gauge line reached this colliery there was a branch to allow the colliery siding to enter the pit yard and then crossed the Heath End Road by an ungated level crossing. This siding served Haunchwood Brick and Tile's Nr 2 yard and Griff Nr 5 colliery (known locally as 'Metz's pit'). Griff Nr 5 colliery closed in 1900. Later the siding over Heath End Road was used to move wagons into position to tip the colliery waste into disused clay holes worked out by Stanley Brothers.

The LNWR. line continued in cutting under Heath End Road, and further along passed under Arbury Road to approach the reception sidings for Stanley Bros. Nrs. 1,2,3, 4 & 5 yards. The main line company engines could not pass beyond a stop board in these sidings. Stanley Bros. had their own fleet of steam locos to move wagons down to the exchange sidings, and then distribute them around their tightly radiused internal network of lines inside the works. One of these internal sidings crossed Croft Road (formerly Swan Lane), on the level, before it gave access to Nrs 4 and 5 yards. Here the sidings were extensive almost ending near the Griff Nr. 5 colliery head shunt, which they faced a few hundred yards away across an open clay hole.

A short distance beyond Stanley Bros sidings a connection was put through to Nuneaton Colliery. This was an old established business, which dated back before the earliest detectable lease in 1730. It had been worked intermittently for many years before Stanley Bros took it over in 1870. Former lessees were Messrs. Chadwick & Co. and John Rawlins. It was closed and re-opened several times in the 19th century. Before Stanley's acquired the lease the pit with its attendant brick works, was connected to the Coventry Canal by a horse worked tramway. This went down to a wharf on the canal at what is now known as the Cock & Bear Bridge at the junction with Tompkinson Road and Croft Road. This track had been abandoned by 1864, when the colliery lease was offered for sale. An option was available to the new proprietors of the colliery to re-open the tramway (if required). There are no records indicating whether re-opening ever took place. It is possible that this tramway also had a connection at mid point, which went off to Haunchwood Colliery nearby (later served by the Midland Railway). The Coventry canal wharf is still there. The track of the old tram road had gone by the time the 'new' houses were built up in the roadway from the 1920's onwards. The 'new' roads were called Tompkinson Road and Haunchwood Road.

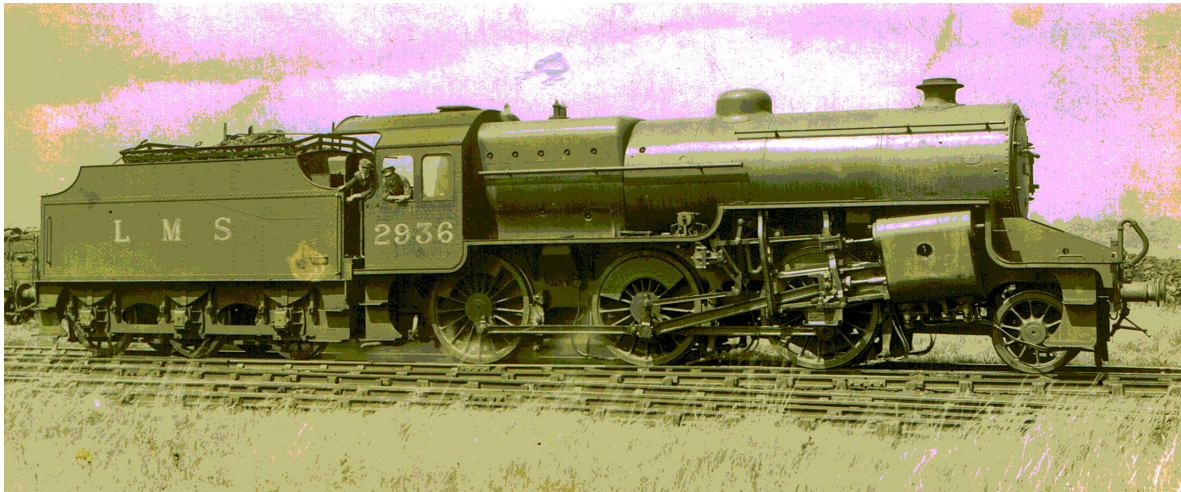
Most of the large industrial concerns referred to have their own steam locomotives. Griff had a total of ten steam engines over the years, which were shedded at both Clara and Griff Nr 4 collieries. In Later years Griff Colliery built its own mineral wagons from parts supplied by the wagon suppliers. These incorporated wooden bodies made in their own joinery shops. Axle boxes, boilers, pit equipment and various iron parts were also made at the Chilvers Coton Foundry on the Bull Ring. At one time Griff had over 1000 wagons in service. They were latterly painted black with GRIFF in large white letters on the side.

Stanley Bros. used their own locos. One of Stanley's industrial shunters with an interesting history was a Manning Wardle product of 1888 named 'Ancoats'. A four couple engine of the maker's standard 'H' pattern which was originally delivered on 19th December 1888 to T.A. Walker, a civil engineering contractor working at that time on the Manchester Ship Canal. Stanley's acquired it before 1900 and kept it until about 1919 when it was laid aside needing extensive repairs. In 1922 it was sold to Thomas E. Gray Ltd who had clay mines at Burton Latimer. They immediately undertook a drastic rebuild by removing the conventional locomotive boiler and erecting a 'Sentinel' type vertical boiler in its place. This 'hybrid' then worked for another twenty-eight years in its rebuilt form, it was finally worn out and laid aside about 1950. It was scrapped during August 1956.

Another local rail connected business, which was served by the LNWR. at Griff, whose siding was adjacent to the branch junction, was William Griffiths & Co. Ltd. Griff Granite Quarries, Nuneaton. They had a narrow gauge line, which went into the quarry complex. The main line siding was out of use in 1954 and was lifted in January 1964, and the narrow gauge line ceased to be used about 1963.

For many years 'trip' working over the Griff branch was carried out by main line locomotives by crews rostered in what was termed the 'Old Man's Link'. This was, for the railwaymen at that time a relatively "cushy" number being regarded in what we would term a '9 to 5' job. The branch was worked in two shifts 7am-7pm. To set off up the Griff branch did not involve getting up before the crack of dawn and be able to knock off at a predictable time, was something of a luxury for Nuneaton men, and at one time was the preserve of old drivers getting near to their retirement. The younger men with families to feed and a mortgage probably did not appreciate the Griff job as they could not make much overtime on it.

In LNWR. most of Nuneaton shed's fleet of freight tender locos would have worked the branch. For many years after grouping a regular was ex-Midland Railway Kirtley 0-6-0 nr. 22567 shedded at Coventry. Latterly, it was mostly the preserve of Nuneaton freight engines, ex-Midland and LMS 0-6-0's, Super 'D' 0-8-0's, Fowler 'Crabs', 8F's being the usual fare into the 1950's. In its last years it was not unusual to find a demoted express passenger engine like a 'Jubilee' or a 'Patriot' pottering around amongst the weeds at Bermuda or Stanley's siding at Stockingford.



One of the few photographs I have seen of an LMS loco on the Griff branch is this fine view of Hughes 'Crab' Nr 2936.. At one time they were used on the Griff branch as their strength enabled them to take away up to 50 loaded wagons of coal at a time. It is pictured in the sidings near Griff Nr 4 Colliery. The crew are having a break during a spell of shunting in the colliery sidings. (courtesy: Mrs. E. Melbourne)

Even in the 1950's, when Griff Collieries were near to closing, they had a considerable output of coal. As many as 150 wagons of coal in five trains per day set out to various power stations and gas-works in the Midlands. Some reached Willesden. The canal wharf at Griff also shipped large quantities of coal to destinations reached by boat.

Loaded trains setting out from the Griff colliery sidings had to be handled with care as they made a run for the junction with the Coventry line. There was a grade up to the junction from Bermuda village crossing which needed good judgment on behalf of the engine crews to drag their heavy load out onto the mainline. If they were held at the signal for the main line they could not get speed up for a run at the grade. In this case the engines set back to the level crossing where they could get a good run at the junction. Speed and handling had to be carefully judged.

Clara pit ceased winding coal on 28th May 1955. The land-sale had to be cleared so rail traffic continued until September 1956. In the intervening period most of the track on the Griff Clara line was dismantled leaving a single line of rails in for emergency use and wagon storage. Griff No 4 closed on 22nd July 1960. That effectively brought to a close the everyday use of the Griff branch. The official closure date was 31st May 1961. All permanent staff were withdrawn from the line from this date. The branch foreman's job was dispensed with and his telephone equipment recovered. A portion of the track was retained as a siding for use by the proposed Nuneaton Trent Valley electrification scheme to store truckloads of engineering equipment. The old crossing keepers hut at Bermuda crossing was taken out of use and any engine crews using the branch had to open and close the gates themselves.

When maintenance ceased the track quickly became covered in weeds. For a couple of years it was used for crippled wagon storage. Track lifting started in November 1963. Dismantlement commenced at the Stanley's siding end, working back to the

junction. This was completed in February 1964. The track bed has now been swallowed up by new industrial estates and in part is used as a footpath.

There is a lack of photographs and records of the branch, and I hope somewhere someone has more particulars, especially during L.N.W.R., days to add to these notes.

For further information see the: Industrial Railway Record No. 47, April 1973. *Griff Collieries* by M.J.Lee