

# The Bustling Alexander

by Les Gilpin

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In Cumbrian Railways, Vol 3, No 15, I told the story of John Brogden, his rise in the business world and his place in Cumbrian railway history. His second son, Alexander, also played his part in the county's industrial and railway history.

Alexander Brogden (Alex to the family and friends) was born on 3rd November 1825 in Manchester. After early education with Mr Hoole of Blackburn and at the New College in Manchester, he went on to study at Kings College, London. Here he obtained a first prize in mathematics. He had intended to follow a career at the Bar but, after spending his spare time away from college looking after the books in his father's London office, he became a partner in the family firm of John Brogden & Sons. The original partners, at its establishment in 1846, were John (the father), John junior, Alexander and Henry (the sons).

Alex's early responsibilities largely involved the supervision of the company's railway construction contracts. These are known to have included the Altrincham branch of the Manchester South Junction & Altrincham Railway, the Ashton branch of the LNWR and sections of the East Lancashire Railway around Accrington.

His move into railway management took place in 1850. In that year John Robinson McClean, the engineer, leased the South Staffordshire Railway. O.P. Neele, who worked on this line, commented in his autobiography "Railway Reminiscences" that soon after the McClean takeover John Brogden, together with two of his sons, appeared at the company offices in Walsall. Alex looked after the books and Henry the locomotives. Certainly, early in 1851 Alex lived near Lichfield and later in that year in Edgbaston, Birmingham.

Nearer to home, in 1851 Alex and his partners in the family firm promoted the Ulverstone & Lancaster Railway. At the same time the partners were investing in the iron ore mines around Stainton (either individually or together). Until his death in 1855, John Junior managed these operations, at first from Millwood, near Dalton, and later from Lightburne House in Ulverston. He was succeeded by Alex, who proceeded to get himself a "marine residence" built at Holme Island, near Grange (this was most probably done using U&LR funds—it is certain that the Holme Island estate belonged to the family firm and not just to himself. The house was completed in 1857, just in time for his furniture to be delivered by the first train ever to reach Grange!

It was Alex who had the responsibility for obtaining financial support for the U&LR during the final year of construction. Money was generally hard to get at this time and it was the Furness Railway which was eventually persuaded to provide the necessary investment. This must have been quite a comedown since, in 1852, the Brogdens and J.R. McClean had offered to lease the FR.

As well as managing the railway, Alex also took over responsibility for the ore mines in Furness. It was he who obtained the lease for the Lindal Cote section of the ore field on behalf of the family in 1857. This coincided with the opening of the U&LR.

From about 1860 John Brogden largely retired from his businesses, leaving the running of John Brogden & Sons to Alex, save for the iron and coal works in South Wales which came under the control of the fourth Brogden son, James. Alex began to further expand the family interests as well as making investments on his own account. In the North West we find him subscribing towards and gaining a directorship on the Lancaster Wagon Company (1863) on which board he sat until 1870. In 1865 he became an LNWR nominee on the board of the Lancaster & Carlisle Railway, holding the directorship until 1875. During the same year the Solway Junction gained its Act of Parliament. Alex was chairman of the company with one James Dees, Engineer, of Whitehaven as a fellow director.

The Solway Junction scheme was effectively a reflection of the Brogden railway in the south of Cumbria. Both were planned as shorter routes for the transportation of ore between the mines and the ironworks, both involved substantial estuarial crossings, the engineer to each was James Brunlees and one of the contractors involved on each project was William Eckersley (probably a Brogden employee at some time). However, where the U&LR was a success both in its aim and financially (if not for the Brogdens, certainly for the Furness), the Solway Junction scheme was a dismal failure with no traffic and no profits. Despite this Alex managed to retain control of the Solway Junction until 1881.

The successful Victorian businessman often increased his standing in the community and in the business world by holding public office. It is not surprising, therefore, to find Alex becoming a Justice of the Peace in Furness in 1860 and, in 1865, standing for Parliament. This first attempt, at Yarmouth, failed due to some form of corruption or other in the Brogden camp. He did, however, succeed in gaining the new seat at Wednesbury (an area known to him from his SSR days) in 1868. He sat as a Liberal until 1885.

In 1869 John Brogden died. Alex inherited the position of head of the family businesses including, for the first time, the South Wales interests. Things were going well for both himself and the family. His investments started to expand overseas. These now included such ventures as the Mont Cenis Railway (where his fellow directors included James Brunlees and John Barraclough Fell of Sparkbridge near Ulverston) and copper works in Finland and Russia. The family even obtained exclusive rights to carry out all engineering contracts for the New Zealand government (James was sent out to manage this—he and Alex weren't the best of friends at this time).

The early 1870s saw Alex seeking out further mineral deposits in Cumbria. Although the Lindal Cote mines were quite extensive, further sources of ore were required. He obtained permission from Lord Lonsdale to sink trial shafts in Ennerdale in 1872. In readiness for the transportation of the expected ore a subscription was made towards the Rowrah & Kelton Fell Mineral Railway, which could, with some difficulty, serve Ennerdale. A seat was gained on the R&KFMR board, being held from 1874 to about 1876 when, one suspects, the Ennerdale shafts were abandoned and he had no further interests in the railway. At the same time attempts were being made, again unsuccessfully, to find coal in Furness.

The second half of the decade was a period of depression in the Brogden industries. The South Wales interests of John Brogden & Sons were becoming less profitable due to increased competition and lack of modernisation. Expected profits as a result of building railways in New Zealand didn't appear, a situation caused by the government there being unable to justify the lack of competition for state works, thus leading to the Brogdens losing most of their contracts. This was made worse because of persistent legal wrangling both outside and within the family firm.

In Furness ground rents for the Lindal Cote mines, now held by the Ulverston Mining Company (with the Brogdens as managers and major shareholders), were not being paid. Profits were apparently shrinking and the agents of the Duke of Buccleuch (who owned the land) were advised not to accept Alex's credit, despite him being highly regarded.

By 1878 the situation had reached such a point that the South Wales interests went into receivership and in 1880, the family company was officially dissolved. The Ulverston Mining Company and Solway Junction Railway investments were disposed of. Eventually, in 1884, Alex and Henry Brogden each filed petitions for bankruptcy. Alex had debts of around £724,000 with Henry's being slightly less. Alex was obliged to give up his seat in Parliament.

If these losses were not enough, in 1887 his younger sister took him, and the other trustees of John Brogden's will, to court for breach of trust. In the will the trustees had been given five years to extract, from the family investments, sufficient to meet the inheritance of each beneficiary. In fact the money was used in further investments and, eventually, in keeping the businesses afloat. Accusations were made that Alex had used some of the money to his own benefit. How else could he have homes in London, Grange and South Wales, large farms stocked with prize cattle and live a very extravagant lifestyle? Over £17,000 was paid in compensation.

In the following years little is heard of the bustling Alexander. The man who, at the height of his career, could have been found "within the space of eight or ten days.. attending to business at Ulverston, Westminster, Cardiff, Paris, in the middle of Holland and at St. Petersburg" was now a sick man. His death in 1892 was widely recorded. The Times notes: "On Wednesday he was sitting by the fire, and, in attempting to stir it, he fell forward against the grate, receiving severe burns to which he succumbed." Of his character, the Midland Advertiser said, "he was one of the most unobtrusive, generous and tender-hearted of men, and when the sun of prosperity was shining full upon him he was always the same - approachable, genial and with none of that inflated style which characterises the parvenu and the plutocrat."

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- "Railway Reminiscences" (Neele).