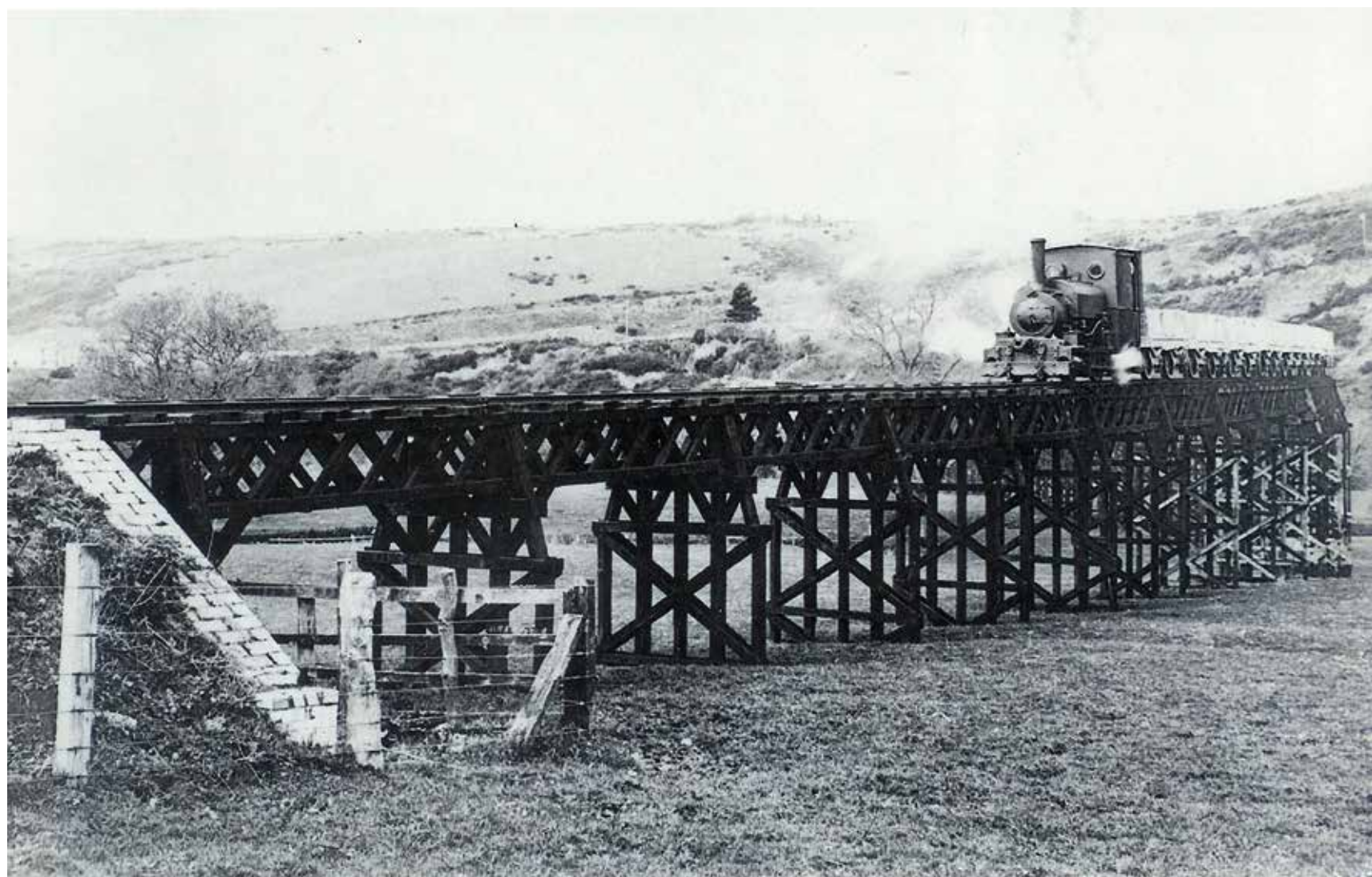


The North Devon and Cornwall Light Railway

The last railway branch line to be built in Devon was the light railway from Halwill to Torrington which opened in 1925

Approval for a railway joining the town of Torrington to Halwill, where trains from Okehampton already divided to run to Bude and to Launceston had originally been given in 1909. Mr Stephens, the engineer and proposed managing director, had just completed a light railway from Bere Alston to Calstock which had made him known in the county. But because of funding difficulties and the war it was not until 1921 that the project, under the now 'Colonel' Stephens, was revived.



The original narrow gauge railway south from Torrington for ball clay traffic

The case for the railway was strong. It would improve the transport of clay between the pits at Marland and the coast. Removing the transport of heavy goods and farm animals from the roads would reduce the need for road repairs. The project would reduce unemployment, which had risen to 23%. It would make for speedier journeys from Plymouth to north-west Devon and would reduce rural isolation.



Ball clay loaded at Peters Marland

After a good deal of discussion about how the railway should be funded, the Ministry of Transport offered a grant of £125,000 if a similar amount could be raised locally. Local authorities promised funds, and Lord Clinton, the most significant landowner in the area, invested, and also donated land, but much was raised by small investors encouraged to lend money at public meetings around the area.



Colonel Stephens

The work began with a turf-cutting ceremony on 30 June 1922. Progress was slow. There was an extremely wet summer in 1923 which made it difficult to lay out the steep curves and embankments.

Some of the workers said that conditions were worse than on the Western Front. The trenches they cut filled three foot (one metre) deep with water. Much of the work was far away from any village shop or pub or lodgings. Some of the men lived in bell tents. There was no heating and no running water.



A 460 class express passenger locomotive waits at Torrington Station. Built by Robert Stephenson, entered service as LSWR 473 in June 1884, it was renamed 0473 and transferred to Southern Rail in January 1923 and withdrawn from service in October 1928.

Finally by the summer of 1925 the line was completed. Colonel Stephens took a party of official dignitaries and landowners on a trip down the line on Friday 23 July, stopping at each station to inspect the construction. On Monday 27 July the official timetable began with the 06.30 down from Torrington.



The railway was never as busy as expected. Road traffic became more popular. The speed restrictions for light railways meant that the trains took an hour and a half to make the complete journey. Although the clay industry kept the northern line busy the through trains remained at three a day, never increasing to the five originally proposed.

An impromptu boxing match takes place in Torrington goods yard

DEVON IN THE 1920s