

Portobello Station: a brief history

Portobello first saw rail service when the Leith branch of the Edinburgh and Dalkeith Railway opened early in 1835, the embankment alongside Duddingston Park and Baileyfield Road being a remnant of its route. A newspaper notice of November 1835 headed "Edinburgh and Dalkeith Railway and Leith Branch Railway" stated: "The Railway Coaches to Dalkeith, Fisherrow, Portobello, etc, depart from Edinburgh Depot at 8, 10, 12, 2, 4, 6, and a quarter after 8." The Edinburgh Depot was at St Leonards.

In 1844 the North British Railway obtained Royal Assent to its Act for a line from Edinburgh to Berwick. The North British took over lines of the Edinburgh and Dalkeith Railway, one objective being that a "junction with the Leith Branch should be formed near Portobello".

When the North British Railway opened its Edinburgh to Berwick main line on 22 June 1846, Portobello was one of the stations. There was to be a temporary building at Joppa to ascertain whether traffic justified a permanent station.

The number of local train services at Portobello increased when the Edinburgh Suburban and Southside Junction Railway opened in 1884. The station was rebuilt in 1887 (as stated, for instance, by Margeorie Meikie in "Old Portobello," 1999 (page 4)).

During its lifetime, as rail services evolved, Portobello was served by most passenger trains running out of the east end of Waverley including stopping trains on the Berwick and Carlisle main lines and through trains to the various branches, e.g. Musselburgh, North Berwick, Gifford, Glencorse, Penicuik, Polton, Dalkeith.

There was a service to South Leith from a separate platform till - following the opening of Leith Central in 1903, to which Edinburgh south suburban circle trains via Portobello ran - the South Leith service was withdrawn in 1905.

Competition from tram and bus services had become evident by the 1920s, both within Edinburgh and beyond. Rail services to Gifford and Glencorse ended in 1933, to Dalkeith in 1942, and to Penicuik and Polton in 1951.

Although the station was accessible from residential areas in several directions, most people found tram and bus services from the High Street more attractive. Until the end of operation some of those commuters for whom the service was convenient continued to travel home for lunch, a benefit from their season ticket purchase but of no financial benefit to the railway.

After the Second World War local rail services were generally confined to serving travel to and from work – morning, lunchtime and evening.

Diesel trains replaced steam trains in 1958, first to North Berwick and to Galashiels via Peebles, and then on other local services around Edinburgh, as was happening elsewhere on British Railways. With dieselisation BR introduced a wider spread of operation over the day on local services (except on the south side circle) in a last effort to stimulate some additional traffic. There were even, for a few brief years, summer Sunday services to North Berwick which called at Portobello, but these were well-used only when the weather was good.

There was minimal increase in passenger journeys and revenues as a result of dieselisation. The services to Galashiels via Peebles ended in February 1962 and on the South Side Circle and to Rosewell in September 1962

After that, the rail service at Portobello was provided mainly by the Edinburgh-Musselburgh and Corstorphine-North Berwick services and remained reasonably frequent. Though the Corstorphine-North Berwick service was roughly hourly, the service overall was irregular and manifestly difficult for any potential casual user of the service to remember train departure times.

Portobello was not included in the list of stations proposed for closure in the "Reshaping of British Railways" report of March 1963. On Tuesday 27 August 1963 a notice in "The Scotsman" stated that Portobello was to be added to the list. Notices at stations and in the press on Friday 6 September 1963 proposed withdrawal to take place in December of the Edinburgh-Musselburgh service (with the closure of Abbeyhill, Piershill, Portobello, Joppa and Musselburgh stations)

The Transport Users' Consultative Committee had the role of considering whether hardship would be caused by withdrawal of a service, and reporting in the light of objections to the Secretary of State for Transport who made the final decision. The Tucc hearing on the Edinburgh-Musselburgh service took place on 31 January 1964. The Tucc found that no hardship would arise from the closure of Piershill and Abbeyhill stations but that the closure of Portobello, Joppa and Musselburgh stations would cause hardship to existing commuters.

On 14 July 1964 Ministerial consent was announced to the withdrawal of the Edinburgh-Musselburgh service, considering that, if existing bus services were duplicated as necessary to carry all the passengers displaced from the rail service, any residual hardship would be insufficient to justify the cost of retaining the service.

The last day of rail service at Portobello was Saturday 5 September 1964 when the Edinburgh-Musselburgh service ended.