

## **Memories of Lower Largo and Lundin Links**

**by Robert Drysdale**

Our family used to spend the summer holiday in the same cottage in Lower Largo from the mid-1950s until 1962, after which the owner of the cottage moved away and sold up. After that we flitted between Lundin Links and Elie until our whole family moved south to Kent in March 1965 – just six months before the railway from Leven to St Andrews via Largo and Crail was closed to passengers.

The cottage was ‘Kinraig’, a name which it still carries, located near The Temple, facing out to sea. It had a garden on the south side of the road with steps down to the beach, and a great many of our family holiday snaps were taken in that garden. In the back garden was a very small shed into which the owner of the cottage, I think called Mrs Robertson, moved while we stayed in her home. I don’t remember her featuring much during our stay, but she must have had to come through the cottage every time she wanted to go out.

Preparation for our holiday – which was usually for at least two weeks and sometimes for four, and varying between June and August – would begin in the front room of our house in Morningside, Edinburgh, where the large trunk would be placed on the carpet, ready for packing. I think the packing took several days, and then, a day or two before our departure, the British Railways van would arrive to collect it – a process known as ‘Luggage in Advance’. On our arrival at ‘Kinraig’, the trunk would be sitting on the living room floor waiting for us, as if by some miracle.

The customary practice when using ‘Luggage in Advance’ was that you would then travel by train to your destination, without having to carry suitcases. Oddly I have no memory of those journeys, or of the arrival at Largo by train and the walk along to ‘Kinraig’ – only the sight of the trunk sitting waiting for us. There would then follow the unpacking process, and the placing of our clothes into chests or drawers in the cottage – which was very small, and had no fixed bath, only a portable tin one which would be produced at bathtime and placed in front of the fire in the living room - quite a novelty.

My father worked for the National Commercial Bank in Edinburgh, and did not get a great deal of holiday leave, so he would often shuttle between Edinburgh and Largo by train, something I would have loved to do. After 1961 we acquired a car – a Ford Anglia, VSG 542 – so trips to Fife from then on were made by road, despite having very long waits for the ferry at Queensferry until September 1964 when the bridge opened – so my family were among many of those whose changing travel habits contributed to the loss of the East Fife Railway.

Although the beach just across the road was the main feature of these holidays, the railway also demanded a great deal of my attention as a young boy, as the line ran on an embankment immediately behind the cottage. I have a vivid memory – which is probably a blend of many memories – of running out the back door of the cottage to catch sight of a train passing by, high above the cottage. The sight of the locomotive’s huge wheels and the

pistons driving them, the engine driver leaning out to watch for the signal on the approach to Largo Station, the noise of the clanking of the wheels on rail joints, and the smell of coal and oil as the engine passed, were all imprinted onto my young memory. Even if I wasn't quick enough to get outside to watch the train rumble by, the vibrations inside the cottage from all that tonnage of locomotive and carriages had a dramatic impact.

One frustrating aspect of this experience was that, if we were sitting in the garden across the road, or down on the beach, it was impossible to catch even a glimpse of a passing train; one had to be content with its sounds, vibrations and smells. You could tell from the noise which direction the train was running, and sometimes, if the noise you heard was a westbound train heading into Largo Station, there was the possibility that you would then hear an eastbound train a few minutes later, as Largo was a passing place on the otherwise-single line of the East Fife Railway. As I grew older, and in later years when we stayed in Lundin Links (the Manderlea Hotel), I realised that you could get a better view of the train from the beach at Lundin Links, where the line crossed the golf course. Also, if you were on the beach and looked east towards Elie, you could spot the train coming a long way off, because of the smoke from the engine's chimney rising into the air – although even this excitement was gradually eroded as diesel trains took over from steam.

Another good spot for watching the train was just along the road from 'Kincraig', by the net factory, as the railway embankment had only the car park in front of it here, so was not obscured from view, and you could watch the train either emerge from or disappear behind Cardy House, just a few feet away from the house's windows. I would have loved to watch the passing train from the rear windows of that house, so close that you would have been able to clearly see the faces of the train's passengers and the brightly glowing, roaring fire in the engine's firebox.

Although in those days children were given greater freedom to wander than they are now, nipping off from our cottage to visit Largo Station was not an option for me, aged five or six, as the walk involved walking on the narrow road, with no pavement, around the tricky blind corner by Cardy House (where my father always used to hoot his horn when driving), and even then it was quite a walk along the Main Street to reach the path which led up from the street to the station. On the rare occasion when such an excursion was possible, the experience of turning off Main Street and onto the narrow path up to the station, with its iron hand rail and its view of the station building high up on its perch above the village, was hugely exciting. Even after the railway closed and, as a teenager, I made a few return trips to Largo, walking up that path to the now-abandoned station still generated quite a thrill, although of course it was a sad experience to emerge onto the deserted platform and see the empty trackbed, with just ballast where the rails had been. The footbridge was still accessible, so one could climb up the steps, imagining crossing the line to catch a train to Anstruther or Crail, and enjoy the view across Largo Bay.

In the summer of 1964, when we were staying at the Manderlea Hotel in Lundin Links, my paternal grandmother visited us from Edinburgh and stayed at the Beach Hotel (now the Old Manor), which was her favourite place to spend a few days. I loved visiting her at the hotel, as its rear sun lounge provided a great view of Lundin Links Station and the railway line in

both directions. During her stay she took me down the hill to visit the station on a very hot sunny day, and I can vividly remember the smell of the tarmac on a section of the platform, hot and almost melting from the sun. Almost all stations still had staff in those days, the high cost of which contributed to their downfall, and we were greeted by the duty stationmaster or porter, who was happy to chat – and my grandmother always loved a conversation. I can remember his words *“They’re closing us down next year”*, which is intriguing, as no final decision had been taken to close the line by then – although perhaps the porter had given up hope. The hearing into objections to the closure had been held in February of that year, and on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1964 the committee responsible for analysing the objections had advised the Minister of Transport in London that closure of the line between Thornton Junction and Crail would cause considerable hardship to holidaymakers and businesses in the East Neuk – giving hope to local people that the line would be saved at least as far as Crail, even if the Crail to St Andrews section was to be lost. It was not until the following February that the Minister, Tom Fraser MP (Labour), ruled that the line should close, having concluded that bus services along the coast would suffice, but on condition that good interchange facilities between bus and rail would be provided at Leven Station – which was to remain open. Needless to say, even Leven Station and the rest of the branch from Thornton Junction closed in October 1969, putting an end to the notion of bus/rail interchange at Leven, and forcing travellers to put up with the bus journey all the way to Kirkcaldy Station to catch a train there. Thankfully the Leven closure is on track to be reversed by 2025.

Lundin Links Station only had one platform and a single track, in contrast with Largo which had double track, two platforms and a goods yard. However there was a siding at Lundin Links, which for several years was used to park a camping coach for the holiday period, and during one summer some friends of ours from Edinburgh booked the camping coach and came over to stay for a week. We were given a ‘guided tour’ of the coach, which did not take long, but which was my idea of heaven – staying and sleeping in a railway carriage at a station, immediately next to an operational railway – sadly I was not able to persuade my parents to try out the idea. During our visit we were treated to glasses of lemonade while sitting at the table in the dining section of the carriage, enjoying the uninterrupted view of the sea across the golf course.

In the summer of 1966, by which time my family had moved to Kent, I returned with my uncle and cousins to Largo for a day trip, while on holiday in Edinburgh. As my uncle drove us down Emsdorf Road and turned the very tight left-hand corner over the railway bridge and onto Drummochy Road, I caught a glimpse of the railway line below. The track was still there, but the rails were rusting and becoming overgrown with weeds, as even the goods trains had stopped running by then. The feeling of remorse at that sight remains with me today. The bridge over the railway remained in place for a few years until the decision was taken to demolish it, infill the cutting and straighten the road alignment, so that Crescent Road into Drummochy Road became the main road. Another bridge – the red-painted iron footbridge at the corner of Victoria Road which allowed people to cross the railway and head down to the beach – lasted for a few more years. That bridge was another great vantage point for watching the trains, and for feeling the heat from the engine as it passed underneath and sent steam swirling around the folk standing above it.

In August 1969 I walked from the still-standing Lundin Links Station along the trackless railway to Largo, passing under the red iron bridge and the road bridge at the top of Drummochy Road, and then along to the viaduct. To my dismay, a row of railway sleepers had been erected vertically across both ends of the viaduct, so there was no way of getting across; in the end, after deciding I did not want to retrace my steps, I managed to slide down the embankment on its north side to reach the road.

Lower Largo itself was very much a holiday village in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the Main Street eastwards from the Crusoe Hotel had several shops on both sides, selling beach toys, rubber rings, buckets and spades, sweets and ice creams. There was also a gobstopper-dispensing machine on the pavement near to where the footpath led up to the station. However the only place to buy ice cream so far as I was concerned was the Rio Café, just south of the Railway Inn and across from the Crusoe Hotel, which remains in use today as a convenience store. The café was run by Mr Forte, who had jet-black 'brylcreemed' hair slicked back along a very straight hairline above his tanned wrinkled forehead, a black moustache, always wore a white coat, and I think was fairly small, so he did not emerge all that far above his counter (and I would have been quiet small as well, on the other side).

Mr Forte had what in those days was a revolutionary new machine for dispensing his home-made ice cream. This looked like a double-height fridge-freezer, and had two handles on the front of it which, when pulled, produced a stream of vanilla ice cream which Mr Forte deftly directed onto the cones he was holding – very similar machines still exist today, usually selling 'Mr Whippy' ice cream. Mr Forte also had a row of nozzle-topped glass bottles on a shelf, each filled with different flavoured sauces for adding to the ice cream; the favourite was always raspberry. He also had a giant model of an ice cream cone parked on the pavement outside, complete with pretend chocolate flake sticking out of the pretend ice cream. I seem to remember the interior of the café being rather 'American diner' in style, with lots of shiny chrome finishes and red leatherette upholstery, although we rarely sat indoors, preferring to take our ice creams off to the beach. We were not really a 'dine-in' family in those days, even if the weather was poor.

Further along Main Street, possibly even beyond the Robinson Crusoe statue, on the south side of the street was a bakery run by Mrs Dyke, who sold very fresh bread, morning rolls and sticky doughnuts. At the foot of Durham Wynd, just below where the railway crossed the road on a flimsy-looking girder bridge, was a shed occupied by a fishmonger, usually with a huge array of fish displayed for sale – the shed was still there when I last visited. Directly opposite this, on the corner leading down to the slipway where the boats were stored, was a shop which Mr Forte's family took over as another Rio Café, although this was after we stopped visiting annually and I don't think lasted very long – others will no doubt have better memories.

Lower Largo and Lundin Links remain very close to my heart, with so many happy childhood memories. They were magical places back then and, despite the loss of the railway, remain so now.



My mother in the garden at 'Kincraig', Lower Largo, 1956. The house on the right now has a second floor dormer, and the telephone pole has gone



My grandmother with me outside 'Kincraig', 1958



Outside 'Kincraig', 1958  
The cottage now has a conservatory at the front



In the garden at 'Kincraig', 1959  
The cottage is in the background,  
and the railway on the embankment  
hidden behind the cottage. My  
sister is mowing the lawn!





On the beach at Lower Largo, 1957. I am fairly sure that the steps behind me are the ones leading up to the garden of our holiday cottage 'Kincraig', but if they are, then the beach level has risen considerably in 63 years - see below.





In the small front garden at 'Kincraig', 1958. Behind the wall is the road, and then the main garden leading to the beach. The modern house in the background can be seen today, somewhat altered but with the same recognisable roof pitch.



With my mother and infant sister in the garden at 'Kincraig', 1958, with the cottage visible behind. The adjacent two-storey house now has a much brighter finish (see previous colour photo)!





Largo Station, 1969, four years after closure to passengers. The indentations left by the railway sleepers can be seen imprinted in the ballast. When the line was first opened on 1<sup>st</sup> February 1857, Largo Station only had a single platform, on the left, with a simple station building. In 1894 the passing loop and second platform were added, together with a more substantial building and canopy on the westbound platform. The goods yard was to the left, behind the original station building. Largo remained a passing place for trains until closure on 6<sup>th</sup> September 1965.



The view looking west from the Drummochy / Emsdorf road bridge towards Lundin Links, 1969. The red iron footbridge leading from Victoria Road to the beach can be seen further along the track.



Looking east from Lundin Links Station towards Largo in 1969. Most of the platform fencing has been pulled down, but the frame for the station sign is still standing. After demolition of the station the land was bought by the golf course and the embankment swept away, allowing the two divided parts of the course to be united.



My paternal grandmother (second from left) taking tea with friends at the Beach Hotel, Lundin Links. The railway can be seen crossing the golf course in the background. The station building was just to the right, out of picture.