



Translink

A History of Belfast

Great Victoria Street Station

1839 — 2024



Great Victoria Street Station Through the Years



18 September 1950
Photo by E M Patterson © Charles P Friel collection



Platform 5 Bus Stands
Photographer unknown - Charles P Friel collection



Great Victoria Street Station at Christmas.
21 Dec 1961
UTA Official photograph © Charles P Friel collection



Passengers. 12 July 1960
UTA Official photograph © Charles P Friel collection



Carriageway between Platforms 4 and 5.
5 Sept 1962
UTA Official photograph © Charles P Friel collection



New Customs Hall on Platform 2 as seen from
Platforms 4 and 5. 15 Sept 1962
UTA Official photograph © Charles P Friel collection



Great Victoria Street Passengers. 12 July 1960
UTA Official photograph © Charles P Friel collection



AEC 116 at Platform 3. 6 April 1964
Photo by Derek Young © Charles P Friel collection



NIR Railcar 134 Great Victoria Street. 10 June 1967
©Archive of the Irish Railway Record Society



30 October 1968



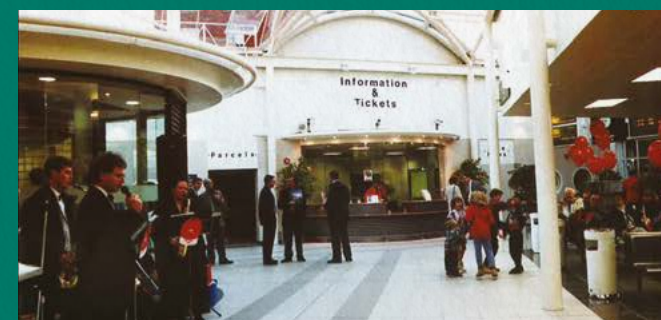
Opening of New Great Victoria Street Station. Autumn 1995



NIR Hunslet 101 Great Victoria Street. 12 Sept 1970
©Archives of the Irish Railway Record Society



Opening of New Great Victoria Street Station. Autumn 1995



Opening of New Great Victoria Street Station. Autumn 1995



Great Victoria Street Station. 1999

From the early 1800s Great Victoria Street Station has played a leading role in Belfast's rich history - making its mark on two World Wars and ever evolving through industrial revolutions until 2024 when it closed its doors for the final time.

Belfast's first railway terminus Glengall Place opened on 12th August 1839, on the site of a former linen mill. Trains belonging to the Ulster Railway first ran as far as Lisburn reaching Portadown in 1842 and Armagh in 1848.

A new station building was constructed in 1848 to a design by the Ulster Railway engineer John Godwin. It was renamed "Belfast Victoria Street" in 1852 and then in 1856 "Belfast Great Victoria Street" - the name that remained until closing in 2024.

A through train to Dublin was first made possible in 1853, after the viaduct over the River Boyne was temporarily used to bring people to the Great Industrial Exhibition in Dublin. The permanent viaduct was opened in 1855 and the station became a terminus for the Belfast-Dublin line.

At Durham Street, the railway was originally crossed at street level via a level crossing before the construction of the Durham Street Bridge in 1863. This bridge was itself replaced in 1936, with a wider one constructed of reinforced concrete and steel, which became known as the Boyne Bridge.

By 1875, the Belfast Central Railway had opened, allowing the lines on the County Antrim side of the River Lagan to be joined with those in County Down at the newly-formed Central Junction at Donegall Road.

In 1876, the Ulster Railway became part of the Great Northern Railway (Ireland) (GNR(I)). Expansion of Great Victoria Street station continued with three new platforms added, bringing the total to five, as well as new sidings for perishable goods traffic. By 1895, Great Victoria Street had 32 departures on weekdays, serving locations including Clones and Cavan via Armagh; Bundoran via Enniskillen; Newcastle via Banbridge; Cookstown; Antrim; Drogheda and Dublin, as well as Derry-Londonderry via Dungannon and Omagh.



GNR goods yard at Great Victoria Street around 1905

Then in the early 1900s, a third rail line was added to the existing two running out of the station in the Lisburn direction. This line ran parallel to the main lines as far as Balmoral. It was used by goods trains and eased congestion on the increasingly busy main line, which was now being used by commuters, as well as the longer-distance trains.

The overall site of the station also included an extensive Railway Goods Yard adjacent to the Grosvenor Road and "The Pond", owned by Ulster Spinning Company. The "Pond" was later filled in after the station had closed in 1976, and the Westlink A12 is now built over this area.



July 1932
JAGH Coltas

Significant role during World War 1 and World War 2

During the First World War, Great Victoria Street Station facilitated ambulance trains on Platform 5. Provided by the GNR(I), the ambulance trains were staffed by the Royal Army Medical Corps and included a pharmacy car and a Dining Car. Up to 120 injured servicemen were transported on each of these trains which ran about 30 times between Dublin (North Wall) and Belfast.

The ambulance trains were met in the station by ambulances and cars provided by the UVF, the Red Cross and many private individuals. Injured personnel were moved to many hospitals in the greater Belfast area for convalescence. By the Second World War, the station boasted a silver service restaurant in the Grosvenor Rooms above the main entrance.

During the War, the station greeted a huge influx of American troops, in training for D-Day. After landing in Belfast, many of the American troops marched through the city to Great Victoria Street to board trains at a cordoned-off platform 5. Before the troops arrived, American welfare officers would throw in liberal quantities of cigarettes, iced donuts, US newspapers and magazines as well as soft drinks, the likes of which had never been seen in Belfast before!

Special trains also operated to bring tradesmen and workers to the Belfast shipyards, the aircraft factory and other manufacturing plants in aid of the war effort. Workers' trains also ran from Great Victoria Street to a huge American aircraft assembly base at Gortnagallon near Crumlin.

The trains frequently suffered from pilfering and busy railway staff had to try and replace light fittings and luggage racks on an almost daily basis. In the end, it was decided to send the trains back out without such fittings and this trend eventually stopped.

Trains were also used to bring parcels, mail, newspapers, fresh food - ranging from bread and fish to rabbits and mushrooms - and even cinema films - with many timed to bring mail and perishable goods to the ships, sailing nightly to Liverpool, Glasgow and many other ports in Britain.



Boyne Bridge. 1937

Belfast to Dublin Enterprise Express launched

1947 saw the introduction of the Belfast to Dublin Enterprise Express which offered first and third-class accommodation! The non-stop journey took 2 hours 15 minutes, with customs clearance in Belfast and Dublin. This helped avoid the lengthy delays at the Border. It had become quite common for Dublin to Belfast trains to be delayed by 45 minutes at Goraghowood by customs checks. The train was either 5 or 7 carriages long, depending on the time of year and demand. It included a dining car and the ladies' toilets boasted a full-length mirror.

In 1948, the railways entirely within Northern Ireland were nationalised, a move intended to co-ordinate rail and bus services under the newly formed Ulster Transport Authority (UTA). The GNR(I) escaped this nationalisation as it served both sides of the Border.

From 1950 onwards, the Great Northern Railway (Ireland), began to introduce AEC mainline diesel railcars on the Belfast-Dublin line and between Belfast and Clones and Belfast to Newcastle. In 1957, more powerful BUT railcars also entered service taking over the Enterprise Express workings and operating a fast service to and from Enniskillen via Omagh.

By 1954, however, the GNR(I) was in huge financial difficulties and its management was taken over by the Great Northern Railway Board with representatives of both governments and a chairmanship which alternated annually between north and south.

Sadly, loss-making continued and on 30th September 1957, the line from Portadown through Armagh to the Border near Tynan, the line from Newtownbutler through Enniskillen to Omagh and the branch to Belleek, the famous Fintona horse tram and the goods-only line from Goraghowood to Markethill all saw their last trains.

The Great Northern Railway Board's assets were divided between the Ulster Transport Authority North of the Border and Córas Iompair Éireann (CIE) south of the Border.



System Map above Booking Office. 9 August 1957
Photo by E M Patterson © Charles P Friel collection

Integrated Train and Bus terminus

In 1962, the Ulster Transport Authority removed platform 5 at Great Victoria Street to create a bus station under the former railway canopy thus creating the city's first joint bus and rail terminus. At this time, Belfast to Dublin Enterprise services moved to Platform 2.

On 4 January 1965, the line from Goragwood to Newry, and onwards to Warrenpoint, closed. This was followed by the Belfast to Derry-Londonderry line via Omagh and Strabane on 15th February 1965.

Investment came in 1966 in the form of funding to the Ulster Transport Authority for "70 Class" trains with Diesel Electric Railcars from English Electric, to operate between Belfast and Dublin and Belfast and Derry-Londonderry. The updated version of the "70 Class", came in the form of the "80 Class" introduced in 1974, with further sets delivered in 1978.



Frontage on 25 November 1967
Photo by Derek Young © Charles P Friel collection

The changing face of the station

Part of the original 1848 Great Victoria Street station façade was demolished in 1968 to make way for the new Europa Hotel, which opened in 1971 and remains popular with travellers from across the world today. The remaining parts of the station were then damaged by two separate bombings in 1972.

In April 1976, the station was closed, with all rail services moving to the newly-built Belfast Central Station, now renamed Lanyon Place. This new station was a major project for NI Railways, replacing both Great Victoria Street and Queen's Quay stations at a cost of £1.2 million.

After the closure, the site of Great Victoria Street was cleared except for the original station canopy at platforms 4 & 5 which continued to serve as a bus station for Ulsterbus. The former track bed area was tarred and provided bus parking, fuelling and maintenance facilities. Later, in 1991, came the new Europa Bus Centre and Great Northern Mall shopping area.

History was again made with a new Great Victoria Street Station opening on 30th September 1995. The new Great Victoria Street station became part of a combined upgraded facility with the Europa Bus Centre, representing investment of £6 million – approximately 75% of which was funded by the EU. The train station, designed by architects Robinson and McIlwaine comprised 4 platforms, a concourse, waiting area, sales and information office and quick and easy access to the Europa Bus Centre for bus connections across Northern Ireland.

As well as the new station building and rebuilding of the track, the project also included the construction of a new connecting line in the direction of Belfast Central Station, creating a triangular junction just beyond the end of the station platforms which allowed the new station to be used by trains to and from Dublin and Portadown, Bangor, Larne Harbour and Derry-Londonderry.

Operations ceased at Great Victoria Street station on May 10th 2024, making way for a new integrated transport hub, Belfast Grand Central Station.



Use of former railway platform canopies
by Ulster Transport Authority Bus Services

Belfast Grand Central Station

The new Belfast Grand Central Station is the third station proposed to be built on this site. The Great Northern Railway (Ireland) in the 1920s had proposed a new station, leading off Durham Street, next to the Grosvenor Road. This proposal was tabled before the rebuilding of the Durham Street Bridge in 1936. The second station proposal was by the Ulster Transport Authority in 1953. This was to serve the Belfast Central Railway to Bangor and Comber. Neither of these proposals was developed.

This hugely important Northern Ireland Executive Flagship project, funded by the Department for Infrastructure, will bring about a step change in public transport. It will be the main transport gateway to Belfast, enhancing local and international connectivity with rail, bus and coach connections across Northern Ireland and beyond.

The impressive high-quality Belfast Grand Central Station will offer an enhanced user experience for around 20 million customer journeys every year. There will be double the number of rail platforms which had been available at Great Victoria Street from four to eight and a total of 26 bus stands from the 16 that had been at the Europa Bus Station.

The modern, spacious, transport facility with mezzanine level will also be a destination retail space. Outside there will be a new exciting public realm space – Saltwater Square with a strong emphasis on arts and culture which has potential to become a focal point for everyone to use and enjoy.

An important city regeneration project, Translink has partnered with MRP to deliver Belfast's transformational Weavers Cross – the new city neighbourhood surrounding Belfast Grand Central Station with the potential for 1.3 million square feet of mixed-use office, life sciences, residential, student housing, hotels, and retail/leisure space.

Belfast Grand Central Station will open for passengers in the autumn, 2024, while the full project, including dedicated public realm space, will follow in 2025.







With thanks to:

Charles P. Friel

Jonathan Miller