

Historic Structure Assessment

Killough Railway Bridge, County Down



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Introduction

John Cronin & Associates have been commissioned by Tetra Tech Consulting Ltd to prepare a desktop Historic Structure Assessment (augmented by a site visit) for a section of former railway bridge at Killough, County Down. The subject site consists of a portion of railway bridge on the former BCDR Branch Line between Downpatrick and Ardglass, located at the north end of Killough Harbour (Figure 1).

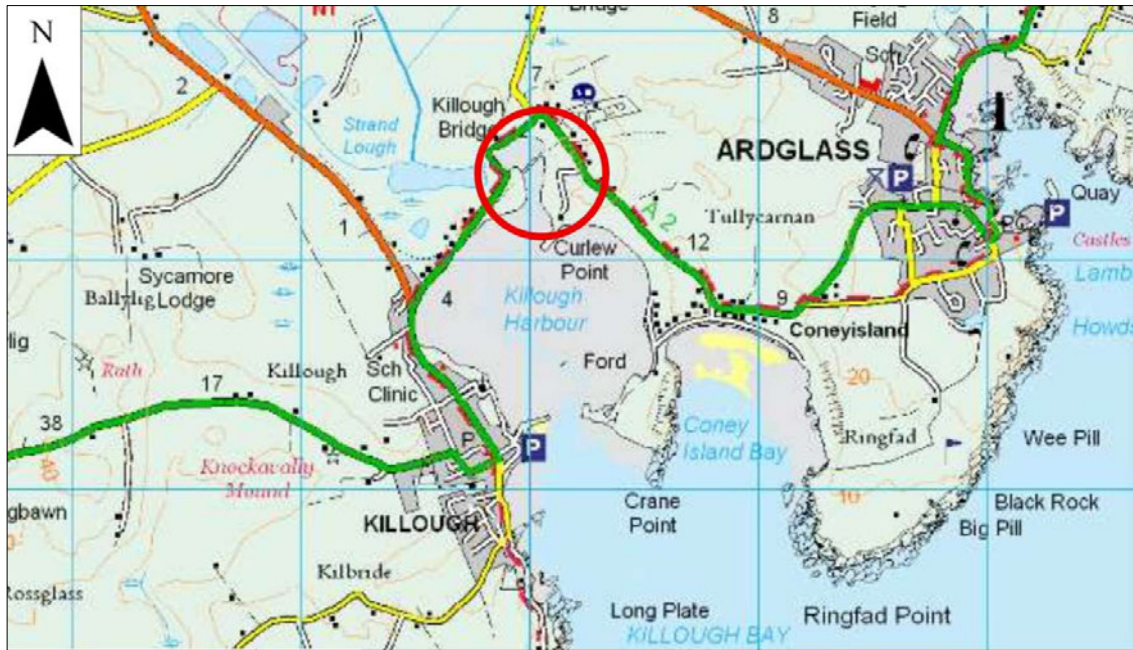


Figure 1: General location of subject site circled in red (Source: PRONI Historic Maps)

The Newry, Mourne and Down District Council Local Development Plan 2035 - Draft Plan Strategy (June 2025) contains a number of Objectives and Policies in relation to the historic environment, including the following:

LDP Objectives

The LDP strategic approach to the historic environment is set out within the LDP's objectives. These objectives take account of regional policy detailed within the RDS and the SPPS. The LDP objectives relating to the historic environment are as follows:

- To protect, conserve and, where possible enhance the historic environment to achieve quality design and support economic opportunity;
- To protect conserve and enhance the district's heritage assets and promote their sensitive re-use; and
- To protect, conserve and enhance townscape character, delivering high-quality design that helps to create a sense of place.

These objectives are supported by Strategic Policy ENV51 Protecting, Conserving and Enhancing the Historic Environment and the operational policies set out in Part 2 of the Plan Strategy.

Policy HE15 Enabling Development Proposals involving enabling development relating to the re-use, restoration or refurbishment of significant places will only be permitted where it can be demonstrated by the applicant in the submission of a Statement of Justification to accompany an application for planning permission that all of the following criteria are met:

- a The significant place to be subsidised by the proposed enabling development will bring significant long-term benefits according to its scale and location;

- b The conservation of the significant place would otherwise be either operationally or financially unviable;*
- c The impact of the enabling development is precisely defined at the outset;*
- d The scale of the proposed enabling development does not exceed what is necessary to support the conservation of the significant place;*
- e Sufficient subsidy is not available from any other source;*
- f The public benefit decisively outweighs the disbenefits of departing from other planning policies;*
- g It will not materially harm the heritage values of the significant place or its setting;*
- h It avoids detrimental fragmentation of the management of the significant place;*
- i It will secure the long-term future of the significant place and, where applicable, its continued use for a sympathetic purpose; and*
- j It is necessary to resolve problems arising from the inherent needs of the heritage asset, rather than circumstances of the present owner, or the purchase price paid.*

In considering enabling development proposals developers are encouraged to enter into pre-application discussions with the Council. In all cases proposals must not prejudice road safety. The benefits to be derived from the conservation of the significant place will be secured either by conditional grant of planning permission or conditional grant accompanied by a Section 76 Planning Agreement.

Context

Location

The subject portion of railway bridge is located at the north end of Killough Harbour in the townland of Tullycarnan, approximately 1km north-northeast of Killough Village and 1.5km west of Ardglass, County Down (**Figure 1**).

Historical Context

The former railway bridge which spanned the northern part of Killough Harbour carried the Belfast and County Down Railway Company (BCDR) branch line from Downpatrick to Ardglass via Ballynoe, Killough and Coney Island, crossing the harbour from the townland of Killough in the west, to Tullycarnan in the east. At the time, the principal landowner in Killough was Viscount Bangor and in Tullycarnan it was Aubrey de Vere Beauclerk. Both men were compensated for the lands taken for the building of the railway which was seen as a mechanism for improving the economic viability of the fishing industry in both Ardglass and Killough (*Northern Whig* 21 November 1891). Viscount Bangor was a particularly vocal supporter of the railway from Downpatrick to Ardglass as he saw it as a further measure to enhance the economy of Killough Harbour which had been the subject of several improvements in the preceding decade (*Northern Whig* 18 December 1888).

The Belfast and County Down Railway Company (BCDR) had been incorporated in 1848 and ran a 'not inconsiderable system of lines covering most of the county of Down, lying to the east and south of Belfast' (Casserly 1974, 223). BCDR was the smallest of the three main standard gauge railway operators in the north of Ireland running rail lines from Belfast to Bangor and Newcastle, with branches to Donaghadee, Ballynahinch as well as to the fishing port of Ardglass (McCutcheon 1984, 174) (see **Figure 2** below, The BCDR route map).

BELFAST & COUNTY DOWN RY; GENERAL MAP.

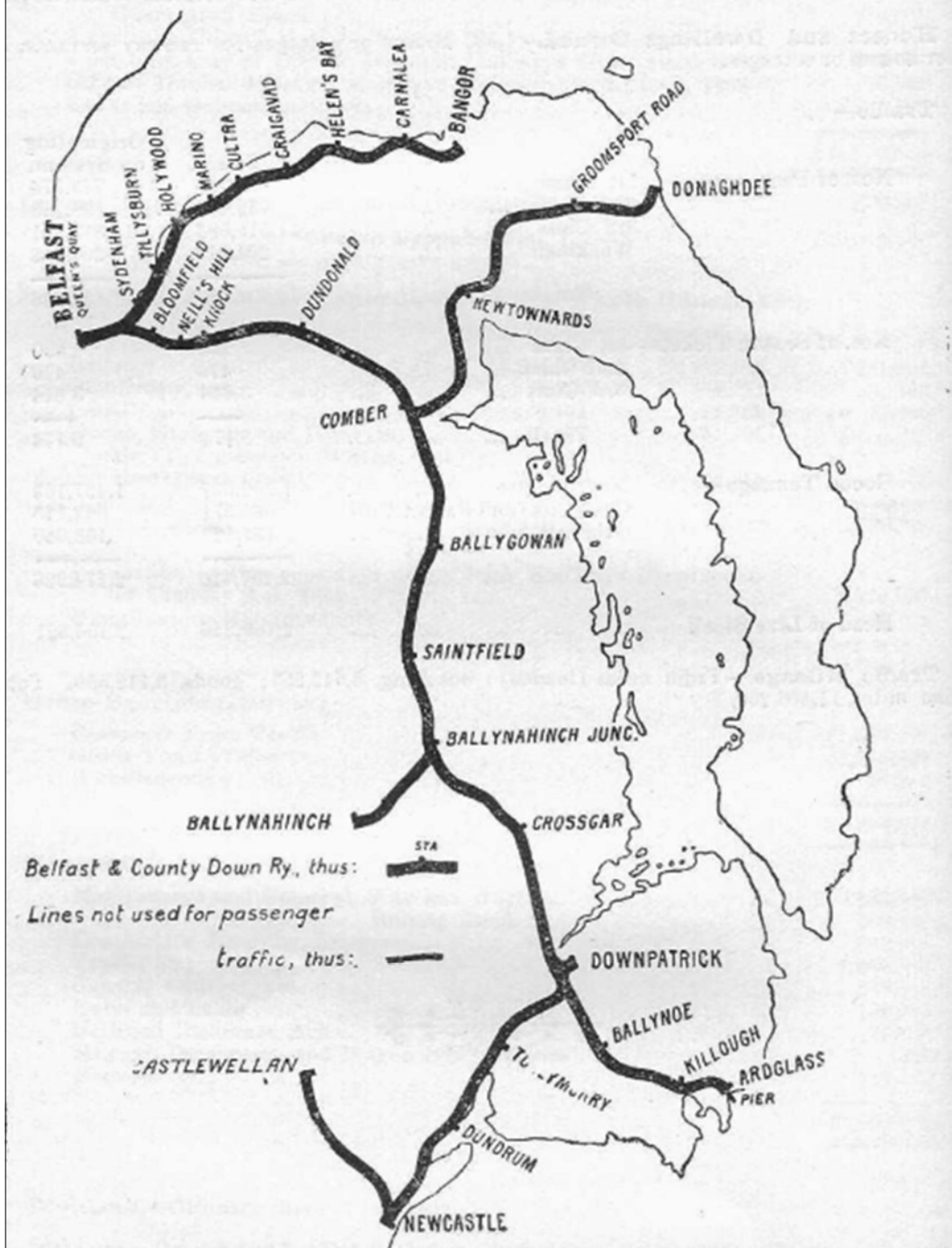


Figure 2: The route map of the Belfast and County Down Railway Company. (Source: The Railway Yearbook 1926/ Wikimedia Commons)

The branch to Ardglass was first mooted in the late 1880s when meetings were held to discuss the project and a case was made that the line would help the fishing industry locally by allowing the herring catch to reach Belfast quickly avoiding the spoiling of the fish as had often been the case before (*Northern Whig* 25 January 1890). The line was built with little capital investment from BCDR, but instead was funded 'under the powers provided by the Light Railways (Ireland) Act' and the cost was met 'by a Government grant, supplemented by a substantial baronial guarantee' (*Belfast News-Letter* 6 June 1892).

The first sod was cut in December 1890 (*Ulster Echo* 6 October 1890) and construction of the 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ mile track began in May 1891. The line was built using the standard Irish gauge of 5' 3" so the rolling stock used on the main line and branch line could be interchanged. Therefore, technically the Ardglass line was not a light railway. Furthermore, the Light Railways Act was designed to help congested districts (McCutcheon 1984, 221), but this part of County Down did not fit the criteria (*ibid*, 153). Notwithstanding these issues, the railway was built and connected Ardglass to the rest of the BCDR network, joining the main line to the south of Downpatrick.

Some of the terrain proved challenging during construction. An article in the *Belfast News-Letter* in April 1891 gave details of the progress of the railway and some of the difficulties faced at Kingsfield and Killough. Work at Kingsfield was delayed due to the concrete-like ground encountered and the site of the Killough Goods Store further to the east had required the 'cutting away of a hill to the depth of some twenty feet' (*Belfast News-Letter* 25 April 1891). The article continued:

About a quarter of a mile further along towards Ardglass workmen are busily engaged preparing the foundations for a bridge across an arm of the sea, and where at high tide there is water of about seven feet deep. This will perhaps prove the most formidable piece of work in connection with the whole undertaking, and will require not only considerable time, but very heavy outlay to accomplish. There is very little doubt but that by the time this bridge is constructed the other portions of the railway will be finished, so that with the erection of it the entire line will be completed.

In June 1892, the *Belfast News-Letter* declared works on the line to be complete (*Belfast News-Letter* 6 June 1892). The help that the line would bring to the fishing industry was noted and the engineers, Mr. Culverwell and Mr. Reynard were commended for their efforts. The newspaper looked forward to the rail line being passed by the government inspector whereby the responsibility for running the service would pass to 'Mr. James Pinion, the efficient and popular manager of the County Down Railway' (*ibid*).

The line began to operate for goods in June 1892 and opened to the public with much fanfare on 9th July (McCutcheon 1884, 152). However, the economic return from the line proved to be disappointing. 'The district through which the line passed was very sparsely populated and apart from the fish traffic, potatoes were the only commodity carried in any quantity' (*ibid*, 153). Despite these challenges, the line remained open until 1950 when the entire rail infrastructure in Northern Ireland was rationalised leading to 'the final closure of the greater part of the railway network' (*ibid*, 153).



Figure 3: Engine No.28 of the Belfast and County Down Railway Company (Source: Downpatrick and County Down Railway Company/ Casserly)

BCDR ran the first ever diesel-electric locomotive in Ireland which was built by Harland and Wolff (Casserly 1974, 230). A second diesel-electric locomotive was leased from the Belfast company and used on the Ardglass line. This engine known as No.28, was withdrawn from the Ardglass service when the railway was closed but continued to operate in Belfast's Great Victoria Street station until it suffered a mechanical failure in 1970 (Downpatrick and County Down Railway Company website 2026) (see **Figure 3** above).

In 1985, a group of enthusiasts attempted to revitalise the line between Downpatrick and Ardglass (*Belfast Telegraph* 13 July 1989). However, restoration of the entire line proved impossible. Today the Downpatrick and County Down Railway Company operates Ireland's only full-size heritage railway on a short run of track near Downpatrick (Downpatrick and County Down Railway Company website 2026).

Cartographic Review

The railway was constructed between 1890 and 1892, so the Griffith's Valuation map, which is based on the revised first edition Ordnance Survey (OS) map of 1863 does not include it. However, when cross-referencing with the valuation, published for this area in 1863, it is worth noting that Lot 1 in the townland of Killough was in the possession Michael Cotter who was leasing his land from Viscount Bangor. The railway would pass over this stretch of land towards the bridge. In Tullycarnan, Lot 1 and 3, which is where the bridge would make landfall, was owned by Aubrey de Vere Beauclerk (Griffith's Valuation 1863, **Figure 4**).

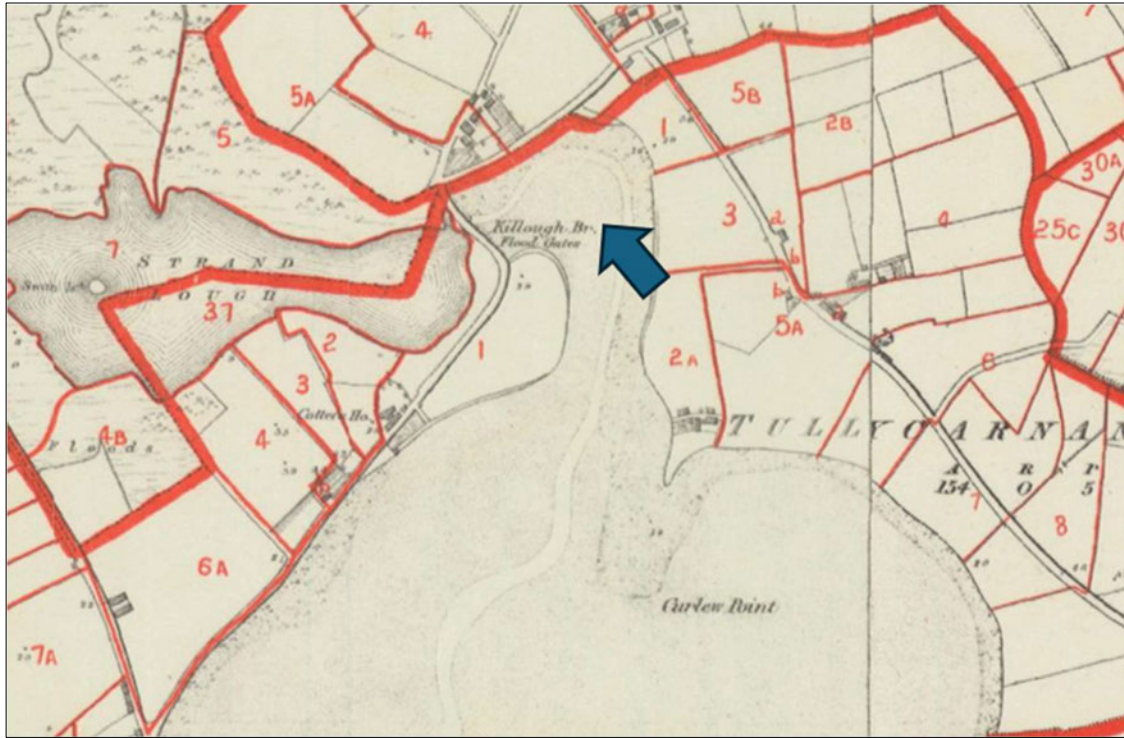


Figure 4: An extract from the Griffiths Valuation map which was based on the OS revised edition map printed in 1863. The blue arrow shows the location of the future railway bridge (Source: Ask About Ireland)

The third edition OS map, surveyed in 1900, shows the railway bridge crossing the water at Killough Harbour (**Figure 5**). There appears to be some railway sidings on the Killough side also. The research demonstrates that traffic on this stretch of the BCDR line was light at this time. The fourth edition map surveyed in 1920-21 shows the railway line and bridge (**Figure 6**). The railway sidings on the Killough side seem to have been removed perhaps indicating the lack of significant railway activity at the time.



Figure 5: An extract from the third edition OS map surveyed in 1900 (Source: PRoNI Historical Maps)



Figure 6: An extract from the fourth edition OS map, surveyed in 1920-21 (Source: PRoNI Historical Maps)

The OS 1:10,000 Metric Scale Irish Grid map surveyed in 1977-78 (see **Figure 7** below) shows that the railway, which closed in 1950, had been largely removed by the time of surveying. Only the causeway built for the bridge is shown to survive at this time.



Figure 7: An extract from the OS 1:10,000 Metric Scale Irish Grid map surveyed in 1977-78 (Source: PRoNI Historical Maps)

Description of the structure

A site visit was carried out by a suitably qualified archaeologist and cultural heritage specialist, Camilla Brännström of John Cronin & Associates on 28 July 2026. The site visit included a visual inspection of the structure at low tide and the compilation of a photographic and written description of the structure.

The subject site consists of a c.10m-long section of railway embankment/causeway between stone abutments on the eastern side of the inlet leading to Strand Lough. The site is set within the marine environment, and although not at a high-energy environment, tidal forces, along with periodic storms and inundation, as well as neglect have resulted in incremental damage to the embankment over time. A section of the embankment has eroded away, leaving a large void under a section of the parapets (unsupported parapets), which are suspended precariously between the stone abutments. The parapets consist of large stones set within a concrete matrix, coarse rendered, with rounded tops, measuring c.0.5m in width and 0.8m in height (**Figure 8-11**). Large cracks have formed due to the pressure caused by the weight of the parapet structures and the lack of underlying support. Recent erosion of the soil and gravel fill within the abutment adjoining the parapet to the west was also noted during the site visit (**Figure 12**). A section of supported parapet, attached to the northeastern abutment is overgrown but appears to be structurally sound at present (**Figure 13**). However, over time, this portion of causeway/embankment will also succumb to erosion. The masonry of the adjacent stone abutments are visually in good condition, although the internal fill is subject to erosion.



Figure 8: Photograph of the eroded section of embankment/causeway, with the parapets suspended between the stone abutments, facing west (Source: Client)



Figure 9: Photograph of the failed parapet suspended between the stone abutments, facing southeast



Figure 10: Photograph of the stone embankment/causeway below with the parapets suspended between the stone abutments, facing northwest



Figure 11: Photograph of the battered stone buttress/foundation to the base of the embankment/causeway below the parapets and abutment facing northeast



Figure 12: Photograph of erosion within the stone abutment adjacent to the parapet, facing southwest



Figure 13: View of section of supported parapet and northeast abutment, facing northeast

In terms of heritage value, the subject bridge does not appear to be a recorded heritage structure. There are two bridges nearby that have Industrial Heritage Records, Killough Bridge (IHR03471:000:00), a road-over-river bridge in the townland of Killough/Strand to the west and (IHR03350:023:00), a road-over-rail bridge in the townland of Tullycarnan to the east (see **Figure 14**). However, although the subject bridge is not recorded on the Industrial Heritage Record, it is a feature of the industrial heritage of the area and is of local importance. The removal of the parapets will not involve the removal of the entire bridge structure, as the stone abutments, which appear to be in good condition will remain intact.



Figure 14: Map showing the location of the portion of parapet to be demolished and the nearby Industrial Heritage Record (IHR) sites (Source: DfC: Historic Environment Map Viewer)

Proposed works

A *Structural Report* produced by BWM Structural and Civil Consulting Engineers has assessed the condition of the section of parapet and states the following in its conclusions 'The section of wall currently suspended in the air with no support along its base has structurally failed, and is in an unsafe condition, with a full collapse inevitable with time.' This report recommends that this unsupported section of parapet should be removed as a matter of urgency and that a further 10-15m section of supported parapet, adjoining to the east should also be removed to avoid similar issues in the future.

Conclusions and recommendations

Although this structure has no protected status and is not recorded in the Industrial Heritage Record, it is part of the industrial heritage of the area and is of local importance. The portions of the feature to be demolished and removed have been visited and a photographic and written description has been taken (see above).

The *Structural Report* for the project recommends that the unsupported section of parapet should be removed as a matter of urgency. It is agreed that the unsupported section of parapet should be dismantled to make the site safe.

While noting the recommendation within the *Structural Report* for a further section of supported parapet to be removed at this time, this portion of parapet appears to be in good condition currently and therefore would preferably be retained and further protected. However, given the intertidal location, the potential for storm events, *etc.* it is likely that erosion over time will damage this section of parapet in a similar manner, leading to a need for further demolition and removal works in the future. Therefore, as recommended in the *Structural Report* the section of supported parapet should also be dismantled at this time.

The dismantlement and removal of the sections of parapet should be undertaken in a controlled manner. Care and precaution should be taken to ensure that the dismantlement does not damage the retained structural elements, including the stone abutments.

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