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The wrong track? Neyland and Milford Haven, a study of two towns in competition for success

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**The wrong track? Neyland and Milford Haven, a
study of two towns in competition for success.**

Jennifer Startup

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List of Abbreviations

GWR Great Western Railway

SWR South Wales Railway

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Introduction

“Why then did the SWR, the most important railway proposal of that time, not fully appreciate Milford Haven's superior qualities?”¹

This is the question posed by Stephen K. Jones, expert on the engineering works of Isambard Kingdom Brunel across South Wales, in his third volume of extensive works on the subject.

Neither Jones, nor any other historian, has gone far towards answering this question to justify why Brunel chose Neyland as the location for the South Wales Railway Terminus over the arguably more suitable location of Milford Haven. This essay intends to fill this gap in historiography, and add to an under-developed area of research regarding urban-rural development in West Wales. This essay shall argue that by creating the railway town of Neyland, Brunel started a development war between the town and its near neighbour which would see only one of them surviving with their intended primary function, as a port, still intact.

Brunel was unquestionably an outstanding and pioneering engineer, but his 'original genius' often led to 'costly experiments, for which the company employing him had to pay dearly'.² This essay shall argue that Neyland can be seen as one such experiment, although perhaps not as costly as some projects attempted by Brunel as Neyland did not immediately fail. However it can be argued that it was not as successful or long lasting as it might have been had Brunel been able to complete his intended ambitious plans for the port and terminus. Several factors contributed to the unrealised vision of greatness that had been anticipated for Neyland, as shall be explored. Nonetheless the town was created solely as a result of Brunel's decision to place the terminus on its shores. This decision is significant as an example of how human agency can affect a whole community and dictate where urbanisation takes place. The rise of the town was directly due to the contingent event of one individual's decision, in this case Brunel, and is an example of how entrepreneurs and

¹ Stephen K. Jones, *Brunel in South Wales Volume III: Links with Leviathans*, (Gloucestershire, 2008) p. 84.

² Jones, *Brunel in South Wales Volume III*, p.13.

engineers were keen to capitalise on the fruits of the industrial revolution.

As argued by Geraint Jenkins it is difficult not to overemphasize the importance of industrialisation and urbanisation in nineteenth century Wales as it was during this time that the country changed more dramatically and quickly than any other period in its previous history.³ Transport and communication were major factors in industrialisation. Up until the end of the eighteenth century inland transport had been by means of canal, river and horse-drawn traffic. This was revolutionised by the steam engine which had deep roots in Wales, with the first steam engine designed by Richard Trevithick making its maiden voyage from Merthyr in 1804. It was several more decades before the railway era really took off, and by the 1830s businessmen and merchants were realising the potential. Railways changed the economic prospects of Wales, and between 1840 and 1870 1400 miles of tracks were laid, bringing together markets, industrial towns and tourist resorts, and crucially, connecting rural communities with the wider world.⁴

From the 1850s coal became the primary industry across Wales, and the increasing numbers of steam engines and steam boats only added to the astonishing demand for Wales' highly rated steam quality coal. The need for improved port facilities linked to railways became prominent. By this time the railways were making quick progress across England. The Great Western Railway Company (GWR) was formed in 1835 with a plan to connect London to Bristol, and this was accomplished in 1841. Under instruction of Chief Engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the GWR then made plans to head west into Wales and connect London and Bristol to the Irish Sea. This was primarily for Irish and near continent trade and travel, but with aspirations of transatlantic trade. The South Wales Railway Company (SWR), with Brunel as chief engineer, was formed in 1844 with the objective of constructing a railway through South Wales to Pembrokeshire, where a

³ Geraint Jenkins, *A Concise History of Wales* (Cambridge 2006) p.173.

⁴ Jenkins, *A Concise History of Wales*, p. 176.

terminus would be established and a ferry service to Ireland started. It was decided that the railway would pass through Chepstow, Newport, Cardiff, Bridgend, Swansea, Carmarthen and into Pembrokeshire, hitting all the major South Wales industrial towns, with the potential of securing much of the mineral traffic in South Wales.⁵

The question of where to place the Pembrokeshire terminus was debated heavily, and is the main focus of this essay. Brunel and his team surveyed many sites in the county, and it became apparent that no one line would meet the needs of both sides of Pembrokeshire due to its topography, with the Milford Haven Waterway virtually splitting the county in half. There were strong cases put forward by the towns of Milford Haven and Pembroke Dock, both situated on the Milford Haven Waterway. However Brunel's first choice was Goodwick, near Fishguard on the North Pembrokeshire coast due to a shorter sea crossing to Ireland, and his plans were given parliamentary approval in 1846. The Admiralty of the Royal Dockyard at Pembroke Dock were placated by a proposal to build a branch line via Narberth to the town. Milford Haven lobbyists were left disappointed. However due to the disaster of the 1845 to 1849 potato famine destroying all hope of a prosperous trade with Ireland, combined with a lack of confidence within investors to the railways, the SWR directors cancelled all railway plans west of Swansea in 1848. Brunel tried again with a second proposal terminating the railway at Abermawr, four miles west of Fishguard, but this too was rejected. An agreement was finally made in 1851 when Brunel proposed to place the terminus somewhere on the Milford Haven Waterway as it was a more economic option.⁶

Chapter one of this essay will research the position and status of two locations on the shores of the Milford Haven Waterway at the time of deliberation: Neyland, the then small fishing village chosen for the location of the terminus, and Milford Haven, the competing town and arguably the more

⁵ Davis, *The end of the line*, pp. 7-9.

⁶ Davis, *The end of the line*, pp. 9-10..

obvious choice, as an established town and port in need of railway connection. The case put forward by Milford Haven and the various evidence supporting its claims shall be explored to answer the question: why Neyland?

As already alluded to, there is virtually no secondary scholarship on Brunel's decision to build at Neyland, although several works do briefly touch upon the matter. Most of the writing centres around either one town or the other, and the most substantial work on Brunel's accomplishments in Wales, by Jones, as discussed in the opening of this essay, only lightly attempts to answer his own question. Jones quotes from a pamphlet produced in 1846 calling for Milford Haven to be the chosen location of the terminus, which suggests that Brunel 'overlooked' the town.⁷ This essay sets out to argue that this was not the case, and aims to establish what other factors played a part in the decision to build the terminus at Neyland. Desmond Davies hints at the possibility of influence from the Lordships of the Royal Dockyard at Pembroke Dock.⁸ Although there is no evidence to support this suggestion, the Admiralty were directly responsible for the rejection of Brunel's ambitious extended plans for the port and terminus, as shall be explored in chapter two. Therefore it can be argued they were to some degree responsible for it not reaching its potential and the eventual failure of the port and terminus.

Chapter three will explore the competitive development between Neyland and Milford Haven after the terminus was built at the former, and argue that the factors that led to the unfulfilled vision anticipated for Neyland revolved around the inadequate port facilities, which after Brunel's death other engineers unsuccessfully tried to rectify. Developers at Milford Haven fought back and substantial plans were put into place to compete with the new town.⁹ Competing dock schemes in the 1860s only worsened the situation at the already struggling Neyland, and one blow after another

7 Jones, *Brunel in South Wales Volume III*, p.84.

8 Davis, *The end of the line*, p.11.

9 For a timeline of key events during the period under discussion please see appendix.

led to the eventual closure of the station as part of the infamous Beeching cuts in the 1960s.¹⁰

A note should be made regarding confusion surrounding the names of the two locations under consideration in this essay, which has often hampered research. Before the arrival of the railway they were the village of Neyland and the town of Milford. In 1856 with the opening of the terminus it was decided to call Neyland 'Milford Haven', which led to confusion with Milford being just a few miles away, so in 1859 Neyland was renamed 'New Milford' and Milford was renamed 'Old Milford'. This became particularly problematic when 'Old Milford' got its own railway in 1863, causing huge issues for booking clerks at Paddington and passengers often ending up at the wrong town.¹¹ In 1894 'Old Milford' became 'Milford Haven' and in 1906 the name 'New Milford' was finally dropped and the then town returned to its original name of Neyland. Neyland and Milford Haven are the names used throughout this essay to avoid further confusion. This fascinating, albeit bewildering matter is unfortunately outside the scope of this essay, however the impact of this issue on the people and businesses of both towns could warrant further research.

¹⁰ Davis, *The end of the line*, p.120.

¹¹ Davis, *The end of the line*, p. 22.

Chapter One

“If they go to the wrong place at first they will be forced to the right place at last. Therefore with regard to rails and docks at Milford it is a question of time.”¹²

This statement was made by Colonel Greville while the debate of where to place the terminus was at its peak in the early 1850s. Greville was a major landowner in Pembrokeshire, including the Milford Haven Estate, during the railway mania that swept across Britain during this period and this statement demonstrates his belief that Milford Haven was the correct location for the terminus. In order to understand why it can be argued that Milford Haven was the obvious choice for the terminus it is necessary to examine the status of the two locations under consideration at the time of the debate, as well as the case put forward by them after the Fishguard plans had collapsed in 1848 and the focus moved to the Milford Haven Waterway.

The Milford Haven Waterway has a rich maritime history dating back centuries and with its deep water qualities and sheltered position it had not gone unnoticed. An American pamphlet published in 1873 to promote slumbering business interests in Milford Haven discusses early recognition that the waterway had received, starting with a quote on its inner cover by William Shakespeare, who in the work *Cymbeline* quoted 'Tell me how Wales was made so happy as to inherit such a Haven?'¹³ Oliver Cromwell did not fail to recognise in the importance of the Haven, making it his 'place of rendezvous' and 'by way of Milford [Haven] he kept his communication with England, receiving his supplies with great promptness.'¹⁴ Lord Nelson realised the potential of the natural advantages of the Haven when visiting in 1801, and discussed the 'inestimable advantage' it held, with the pamphlet arguing that had Nelson lived longer, Milford Haven would have been the Liverpool of

12 McKay, *A Vision of Greatness*, p. 92.

13 Anon, *Milford Haven as a commercial port and harbor of refuge: its national importance, its claims as a dépôt for the western mails and terminal port to the railways of Great Britain* (New York, 1873).

14 Anon, *Milford Haven as a commercial port*, p.9.

the world.¹⁵ This pamphlet was produced to show the Haven, and particularly Milford Haven Port as comparable, if not preferable, to Liverpool Port. It uses evidence from interviews with American steam ship captains to discuss the advantages of the port over the port of Liverpool in terms of speed of travel, safety of travel and money saved on wages and provisions.¹⁶ Brunel himself had recognised the waterway being a potential location for the terminus of the railway as early as 1836, as discussed in a letter to the railway directors, before his original Fishguard plans had been made.¹⁷

The letter, addressed to the Committee of the Gloucester and South Wales Railway, details results of findings from surveys Brunel had been instructed to carry out in order to establish the 'most practical' railway route from Gloucester, through Monmouthshire and 'terminating at Milford Haven' and estimate expected traffic on each.¹⁸ Fishguard clearly wasn't featuring as an option at this point as it is not mentioned at all, with the two options discussed both terminating at 'Milford Haven', referring to the waterway rather than the town, which at this time was known as Milford. The intended terminus on the Haven at this point seems to be Pater (modern Pembroke Dock), however Brunel makes it clear that from 'an engineering point of view, advantages to the public, and the amount of traffic, I should recommend Swansea or Neath as the present terminus'¹⁹ due to the difficulties in crossing the land between those locations and the Milford Haven Waterway. This could explain why further surveys led to Fishguard becoming Brunel's preferred location in the 1840s. It can also be considered unwitting testimony for the railway company preferring the idea of a terminus on the Milford Haven Waterway from the beginning, and explain why after Brunel's Fishguard plans collapsed it was the only location they would consider. Davies argues that Brunel

15 Anon, *Milford Haven as a commercial port*, p.9.

16 Anon, *Milford Haven as a commercial port*, p.12-15.

17 Isambard K. Brunel, Letter about the Gloucester and South Wales Railway (1836) University of Bristol Library Special Collections, ref DM162/10/2/folio 56-64. Available at <http://oac.lib.bris.ac.uk/dserve/dserve.exe?dsqServer=its-calmdbp.cse.bris.ac.uk&dsqIni=Dserve.ini&dsqApp=Archive&dsqCmd=Show.tcl&dsqDb=Catalog&dsqPos=13&dsqSearch=%28%28text%29%3D%27Milford%20Haven%27%29> (accessed 7th May 2019).

18 Brunel, I. K. *Letter about the Gloucester and South Wales Railway*, folio 56.

19 Brunel, I. K. *Letter about the Gloucester and South Wales Railway*, folio 63.

had misgivings about his original choice of Fishguard from the start, and insinuates he preferred the idea of terminating the railway on the Milford Haven Waterway.²⁰ However this letter portrays something quite different: that Brunel was sceptical about a Milford Haven Waterway terminus from the beginning. Nonetheless that was the parliamentary approval that he received in 1851, so he had to make the best of it, and the growing town of Milford Haven was not going to let itself go unnoticed.

With the Admiralty at Pembroke Dock satisfied that they were to receive their own branch line, the focus shifted to the north side of the waterway and the town of Milford Haven. Established by an Act of Parliament in 1790 enabling land owner Sir William Hamilton to build 'quays, docks, piers and other erections to establish a market',²¹ Milford Haven had highs and lows during its early years. Primarily a successful whaling port early on, a small Navy dockyard had been established in 1802, adding some importance to the town. However tenancy disagreements led to the dockyard moving to Pembroke Dock in 1814, followed by the loss of their Irish Packet Service to Hobbs Point near Pembroke Dock in 1836. Alongside these bitter blows the whaling industry had virtually disappeared, leaving Milford Haven in a state of gloom by the 1830s.²² However the coming of the railways fed the ambitions of the town's developers, and during the debates of the 1840s regarding where to place the Pembrokeshire terminus it was the claims of Milford Haven and Fishguard that were of paramount importance.²³ When the debates arose again in the early 1850s after the Fishguard plans had been abandoned the case for Milford Haven still stood strong.

An anonymous pamphlet produced in 1846²⁴ gives clear significant evidence as to why Milford Haven was arguably the most suitable choice for the location of the railway terminus. Although the

20 Davis, *The end of the line*, p. 9.

21 McKay, *A Vision of Greatness*, p. 8.

22 McKay, *A Vision of Greatness*, p. 82.

23 McKay, *A Vision of Greatness*, p. 86.

24 This is the same 1846 pamphlet quoted from by Jones discussed in the introduction of this essay.

author attempts to present an unbiased view, arguing that the issue was too important for 'unworthy argument' the fact that it was written solely to convince the Government that Milford Haven was the correct location for the terminus must be taken into consideration. The pamphlet details the natural advantages of Milford Haven over other ports throughout England and Wales, including its accessibility at all times and tides, safety, shelter and depth of water, and uses maps to show its unrivalled position on the most southern and western point of Wales. It goes into detail about the harbour as a port of refuge and uses illustrations and charts as evidence to support its claims. It argues that the only barrier to Milford Haven's success is the need for internal communication, and the arrival of the railway would bring down this barrier.²⁵

There were in fact already plans in place to bring the railway to Milford Haven at this time, with the Manchester and Milford Haven Railway having been proposed in 1845, which the 1846 pamphlet makes reference to,²⁶ however these plans made no progress. In 1853 the prospectus for the proposal was amended, stating that 'a railway in such a district must, undoubtedly, prove a remunerative project', and that an Act of Parliament had already been obtained to construct docks of 'great magnitude' and that 'railway communication alone' was needed to make it 'the first outpost in the kingdom'.²⁷ These ambitious plans could only realistically go ahead if at least one, but preferably both, of the SWR and Manchester and Milford Haven termini landed at the port of Milford Haven.²⁸

Even if another port could be created elsewhere, argued the author of the 1846 pamphlet, 'every

25 Anon, *Remarks on the pre-eminent natural advantages of Milford, as the western terminal port to the railways of Great Britain* (London, 1846) pp. 5-7.

26 Anon, *Remarks on the pre-eminent natural advantages of Milford*, p. 7.

27 Anon, North and South Wales Railway connecting Manchester and the North with Milford Town and Haven – with map (1853) National Archives Ref RAIL 1075/89/29A.

28 McKay, *A Vision of Greatness*, p. 90.

mile that Milford is to the Westward of it, is an invaluable advantage'.²⁹ The author argued that the location, added to the 'vast natural superiority in every way of the Haven itself, requiring none of those extravagant outlays which a reckless spirit of competition or ambition but too often encourages',³⁰ makes it the 'most convenient place in the British dominions' for trade³¹. It can be argued that this is exactly the type of ambition that led Brunel to select the neighbouring location of Neyland for the terminus, requiring 'extravagant outlay', just four miles eastwards of Milford Haven.

In comparison, Neyland was a small fishing village on the shores of the Westfield Pill, opposite Pembroke Dock, with a small landing area and a salt refinery opposite at Barnlake. Part of the Parish of Llanstadwell, Neyland had a population of 386 according to the 1801 census. With rapid expansion of the dockyard opposite after 1813, Neyland's population rose to 905 by 1851.³² The Pill hadn't gone completely unrecognised as a suitable shipping location. In 1759 a shipyard at Westfield Pill was constructing ships for the Navy, until support was withdrawn in 1765 due to concerns with its defence.³³ By the time the decision was made to locate the terminus at Neyland the village boasted a private shipbuilding yard employing some of the locals, a local school, two churches and at least three public houses catering for a small community of people, none of whom could have had any idea of what was about to happen to their peaceful little village.³⁴

29 Anon, *Remarks on the pre-eminent natural advantages of Milford*, p. 6.

30 Anon, *Remarks on the pre-eminent natural advantages of Milford*, p. 6.

31 Anon, *Remarks on the pre-eminent natural advantages of Milford*, p. 7.

32 Davies, *End of the Line*, pp. 4-5.

33 Davis, *The end of the line*, p. 4.

34 Davis, *The end of the line*, p. 6.

Chapter Two

“ [...] it was ultimately Brunel's decision where to build his terminus and it was he who created the town of Neyland.”³⁵

As Davies argues, however obvious and suitable Milford Haven may have seemed, Brunel chose Neyland. But what were his reasons? Davies states that Brunel's motto was 'nothing but the best',³⁶ and it can be argued that Brunel saw limitations at Milford Haven that would not obstruct him at Neyland in creating the transatlantic port that he desired. By understanding Brunel's ambitious plans it becomes clear that this is exactly the type of location he needed to create his vision; ample room for expansion, few inhabitants to disrupt and boasting the same deep water attributes found at Milford Haven.

Brunel was an ambitious and pioneering engineer, perhaps too ambitious and ahead of his time, it has been argued.³⁷ His triumphs were soured with defeat, for example the 'battle of the gauges', with George Stephenson's narrow gauge tracks becoming the standard over Brunel's broad gauge tracks, primarily because more had been laid,³⁸ and he could not put into practice his experiments with atmospheric railways.³⁹ It can be argued that Neyland is one such failed experiment, though not because of mistakes made by Brunel, but as a result of outside influences destroying his plans and halting the 'vision of greatness' anticipated for the terminus and port.

35 Davis, *The end of the line*, p. 11.

36 Davis, *The end of the line*, p. 13.

37 John Moore, 'The Brilliance of Brunel, (Worth a detour)', in *Professional Engineering Magazine*, Vol 31 (4) (2018) p.56.

38 Sian Ellis, 'Isambard Kingdom Brunel' in *British Heritage*, Vol 27 (2) (2006) p. 31.

39 Ellis, *Isambard Kingdom Brunel*, p. 32.

His engineer's report to the SWR in 1856 gives clear evidence of the reasoning behind his decision. Several months after the line between Haverfordwest and Neyland had opened, Brunel submitted his annual report to the SWR directors updating them on progress. He wrote:

'the designing and constructing the Terminus of the Railway upon the shore of the Haven, at a point where no trade of any sort exists, although there is every prospect of a very large trade being created, must, however, necessarily be progressive, and must mainly consist of expedients contrived from time to time to meet each experiment or trial as it is made, or keep pace with each requirement as it may grow. Such has been our commencement at Milford Haven [Neyland] and such must, for some time to come, be the character of our proceeding.'⁴⁰

This report aims to justify issues that had occurred with developments so far and explain to the directors that the experimental nature of the port and terminus at the location they had chosen meant that things might not always run smoothly, and they would have to adapt to each new situation as and when it arose, and find a solution as best and quickly as they could. As his engineer's report a year later reiterates:

'at the Neyland Station [...] alterations and improvements, and the general arrangement of the stations at this place, must be considered experimental, and of a provisional character, as it is impossible to foresee the precise nature of the arrangements required for trade'.⁴¹

40 Isambard K. Brunel, Engineers Report (1856) *South Wales Railway Accounts and Reports*, National Archives Reference RAIL 1110/431.

41 Isambard K. Brunel, Engineers Report (1857) *South Wales Railway Accounts and Reports*, National Archives Reference RAIL 1110/431.

Brunel had great aspirations for his experimental South Wales terminus, and his grand plans would have created something very different from what was eventually finished. He had hoped to run a second railway line down the east side of the pill, separating goods and passenger traffic, as well as dam the pill and build a floating pier.⁴² However his plans were not to be fulfilled as his further proposals were rejected by Parliament in 1855, a year before the building of the first line was complete. A newspaper article in the *Monmouthshire Merlin* reporting on the court proceedings surrounding the issue is portrayed as an eye witness account, written 'expressly for the Merlin' by a correspondent at the court house in London. It is therefore a useful and reliable source of information regarding the reasons that the bill was rejected. The article goes into detail about several clauses of the South Wales Railway Consolidation Bill, part of which was the proposal from Brunel that a short railway line be 'thrown across the pill' in order to separate goods and passenger traffic, plus the works to the waterway for the convenience of large steamer ships. Land owners Lord Milford and Mr Bowen strongly objected to the bill, with Lord Milford stating that he would not have agreed to the earlier 1852 bill had any mention of 'damage to the pill' or an east side line been proposed.⁴³ Mr Bowen objected on the grounds that his land, including a working mill, would be destroyed by a dam, and his tenanted land would no longer be desirable as it would not be connected to the sea. Brunel appeared as a witness, stating that he had proposed taking the land as part of the 1852 act, however he could not remember why it had not happened.⁴⁴ Had the land been acquired as part of the earlier Act it would have probably solved his issues with the proposed east side line, however it wouldn't have solved the issue of damming the pill, as it was the Admiralty at Pembroke Dock that sank those plans for good.

42 Richard Parker, *The Railways of Pembrokeshire*, (Southampton 2008) p. 13.

43 Anon, 'South Wales Railway Consolidation Bill', *Monmouthshire Merlin* (30 March 1855), p. 3. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3396308/3396310> (Accessed 12 May 2019).

44 Anon, 'South Wales Railway Consolidation Bill', *Monmouthshire Merlin*, p. 2.

Reported in *The Pembrokeshire and Herald General Advisor* in April 1855, an Admiralty report regarding the proposals at Neyland is discussed, with the Admiralty claiming that impounding water at Neyland would cause huge issues for large vessels turning at the Royal dockyard at Pembroke Dock, by depriving the 'harbour of the scour of 1,200,000 cubic yards of water at every tide'.⁴⁵ The report goes even further, by stating that perhaps another of the suitable sites on the Haven might have been better suited to the location of such a port and not interfere with the workings of the dockyard. These suggestions were Pennar Creek (near Pembroke Dock), Milford Haven or Angle. This was perhaps an attempt at changing the minds of the SWR directors by thwarting plans at Neyland in the hope to redirect the railway to Pembroke Dock, however the line to Neyland was almost complete by this time and Brunel and the SWR had no choice but to make do with only modest developments on the west side of the pill.⁴⁶ Before the railway line had even opened in 1856 the SWR chairman CRM Talbot had admitted that the 'vision of greatness' he had anticipated for Neyland had faded away.⁴⁷

45 Anon, 'South Wales Railway', *The Pembrokeshire and Herald General Advisor* (6 April 1855), p. 4. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3054405/3054409/33/Neyland> (Accessed 12 May 2019).

46 Parker, *The Railways of Pembrokeshire*, p. 13.

47 Jones, *Brunel in South Wales Volume III*, P. 86.

Chapter Three

“Neyland [...] a temporary hiccup in the chain of events that would inevitably lead to Milford developing into a major commercial port”⁴⁸

This was, according to McKay, the opinion of Colonel Greville when the decision was made to build the terminus at Neyland, and it is arguably not far from the truth. After the opening of the railway in 1856 Neyland suffered some difficult times in its early years as a fledging commercial port and terminus. Sadly Brunel died in 1859 at the age of only 53, just three years after the railway opened, and he did not witness the fifty years of prosperity in the town he had created, or, mercifully, its decline. Despite the setbacks of his unrealised plans it was still the intention of Brunel and the SWR to attract international shipping to the port and they put huge efforts into advertising. In 1859 an arrangement was made by the Anglo-Luso-Brazilian Steam Navigation Company to use Neyland as its port of call in Britain. This was seen as a crucial requirement in justifying the chosen location of the terminus, as the SWR annual report in 1859 testifies to. The report states that:

'the establishment of these vessels at Milford Haven is regarded by the directors as of utmost importance to the interests of the South Wales Railway Company, and they are of the opinion that the end to be attained, is

⁴⁸ McKay, *A Vision of Greatness*, p. 93.

such as fully to justify the proposed arrangements'.⁴⁹

Unfortunately this exciting development was short-lived, and after just a year the company decided to transfer its trade to the more established port of Liverpool. Determined not to be beaten, the SWR decided to concentrate on the already expanding Irish Packet trade, which had begun just months after the railway terminus opened, and in 1863 proposed a dock improvements scheme to make Neyland a viable coaling port alongside other South Wales ports.⁵⁰

The proposals for this scheme were remarkably similar to the original plans of Brunel's that had been rejected in 1853 due to the Admiralty's non-compliance. The similarity is perhaps unsurprising, as the engineer responsible was Brunel's former assistant R.P. Breton. He proposed to have the railway connecting to both sides of the Pill and the enclosure of the waterway, just as previously proposed by Brunel. However what is surprising is that the Admiralty 'must have had a change of mind about interference to their shipping as they gave the go ahead to the scheme.'⁵¹

During the same period Milford Haven was battling against the developments at Neyland to bring their own town to the fore. Having lost the SWR railway terminus and with no signs of the Manchester and Milford Haven railway materialising, Greville had taken matters into his own hands and proposed a four mile stretch of railway from Milford Haven to connect to the SWR at Johnston, in which he was the main investor. Having been authorised by an Act of Parliament in 1856, it took until 1863 to open the line.⁵² With the town's isolation issues taken care of with the railway, Greville turned his attention to the docks, with a proposed scheme much like the one at Neyland, to enclose part of Hubberston Pill, which had already been given authorisation by an Act of Parliament

49 Anon, South Wales Railway Company Annual Report, clause 11, (1859) *South Wales Railway Accounts and Reports*, National Archives Reference RAIL 1110/431.

50 Davies, *End of the Line*, p. 30-31.

51 Davies, *End of the Line*, p. 31.

52 McKay, *A Vision of Greatness*, p. 92.

in 1860. With both ports in direct competition for funding to complete their projects it was clear only one could succeed. Newspaper articles from the period depict a ferocious battle between supporters, with letters to the editor declaring support for one scheme or another, and replies defending their chosen port of preference. In a letter published in *The Pembrokeshire and Herald General Advisor* in March 1864,⁵³ a Milford Haven Docks supporter defends against claims made by a Neyland Docks supporter in an earlier issue.⁵⁴ Writing under the pseudonym of Asiatic, the author picks fault with every argument put forward by the Neyland supporter, including boldly stating that choosing Neyland as the location of the terminus was 'among poor Brunel's many mistakes'.⁵⁵

However arguably the most persuasive and significant piece of evidence that led to Milford Haven's eventual success in the further developments of its port and the abandonment of plans at Neyland was an essay written in 1867 by John Fowler Coke, a stipendiary magistrate for Swansea.⁵⁶ The essay aims to promote the advantages of the port of Milford Haven as a commercial port of national importance and to promote its superior qualities over the port of Liverpool. Although the author claims he is free from bias and has no connection to the Haven or its railways,⁵⁷ it must be considered that it does not provide a balanced view, as it is concerned only with the advantages of Milford Haven and does not address any disadvantages. Nevertheless this essay has the added authority of having won the prize for the best essay at the National Eisteddfod of Wales in 1867 and therefore shows that the opinion of the essay must have been relevant at the time.⁵⁸

53 Asiatic, 'Milford VS Neyland' in *The Pembrokeshire and Herald General Advisor*, 25th March 1864, p. 3. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3055491/3055494/23/milford%20vs%20neyland> (Accessed 15 May 2019).

54 George T. Braine, 'New Milford Docks' in *The Pembrokeshire and Herald General Advisor*, 11th March 1864, p. 3. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3055481/3055484/24/milford%20vs%20neyland> (Accessed 15th May 2019).

55 Asiatic, *Milford VS Neyland*, p.3.

56 Anon, 'Death of Mr John Coke Fowler, Swansea' in *The Western Mail*, (18th December 1899), p. 7.

57 John Coke Fowler, *An Essay on the Advantages of Milford Haven as a Commercial Port of National Importance*, (Carmathen, 1868) p. 40.

58 Fowler, *An Essay on the Advantages of Milford Haven*, p. I.

The essay goes into great detail regarding the suitability of the port due to its deep water and sheltered position, repeating what has been written previously. However with the town now boasting its own railway line, the author can justify earlier failed attempts at developing the port facilities, stating it had been too early for success, but the arrival of the railway has changed that.⁵⁹ Fowler argues that the Americans believe that 'trade, population and civilisation will follow trains',⁶⁰ and uses testimonies from American Captains to endorse his case. Similarly to essays discussed earlier, the author claims that the position of Milford Haven means that it is a safer and more sheltered port, reducing shipwreck incidents and loss of life. He goes further, stating that merchants have 'all their eggs in one basket' using Liverpool as the sole western port, and ought to 'put some of their eggs in another basket in which they cannot be so easily broken'.⁶¹

Unsurprisingly, off the back of this prize-winning publication the building of the Docks 'began on a wave of high hopes'⁶² for the area and the project, however it still took many years to complete and the Docks didn't open until 1888. When they did eventually open the transatlantic trade was brief, but Milford Haven became synonymous with fish, and became one of the biggest fishing ports in Britain.⁶³

As Milford Haven prospered, Neyland struggled and by the 1870s the cramped and inadequate terminus was under considerable strain with a booming Irish trade. Alterations and expansion were limited due to the lack of space available, because of the restrictions of the west side developments. In 1898 proposals were made again to improve the port facilities and bring in new packet steamers, however these improvements were never implemented as by this time the GWR, having amalgamated with the SWR in 1863, was successfully negotiating to purchase the recently

59 Fowler, *An Essay on the Advantages of Milford Haven*, p. 11.

60 Fowler, *An Essay on the Advantages of Milford Haven*, p. 13.

61 Fowler, *An Essay on the Advantages of Milford Haven*, p. 45.

62 McKay, *A Vision of Greatness*, p. 125.

63 Parker, *The Railways of Pembrokeshire*, p. 119.

completed North Pembrokeshire and Fishguard Railway. This led to a massive blow for Neyland, when in 1906 the decision was made to move the Irish Packet service from Neyland to the new terminus at Fishguard.⁶⁴ Fifty years after Brunel had proposed Fishguard as the Pembrokeshire terminus to the SWR his vision came to fruition.

In a bid to survive alongside its 'near neighbour and to a great extent competitor on the coast, Milford Haven'⁶⁵ a consortium of landowners and businessmen in Neyland set about establishing an industry to replace the Irish Packet trade. They established a fishing trade, the Neyland Steam Trawler Company, as well as a fish market, which began operation in 1908.⁶⁶ Milford Haven relished the competition, using it as a convenient reason to convince shareholders to fund improvements in their own facilities, which invariably paid off, as after only six years of trading the industry at Neyland failed. The trawlers were transferred to Milford Haven in 1914 and the fish market closed.⁶⁷ It was arguably inevitable that the railway terminus would not survive. In November 1963 British Rail issued a letter announcing that from December 2nd 1963 the goods facility at Neyland would be withdrawn 'in favour of Johnston and Milford Haven'.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Davies, *End of the Line*, p. 91.

⁶⁵ Richard Parker, *Neyland, A Great Western Outpost* (Bishops Waltham, 2002) p. 11.

⁶⁶ Davis, *End of the Line*, p. 94.

⁶⁷ Davis, *End of the Line*, p. 98.

⁶⁸ Parker, *Neyland, A Great Western Outpost*, p. 131.

Conclusion

“The commercial world thought him extravagant, and although he was so, great things are not done by those who sit down and count the cost of every thought and act”⁶⁹

These were the words of Daniel Gooch, fellow engineer and friend to Brunel, written in his diary after hearing of Brunel's death. Brunel could have chosen to build the SWR terminus at the arguably more suitable location of Milford Haven, as discussed in chapter one, or even Pembroke Dock, and either option would likely have been successful, based on the fact that both of these towns still have viable rail links today. However, Brunel strived for greater things. The reasons that made Milford Haven arguably the more suitable choice - existing trade and industry and an existing port and town - were exactly the reasons that he chose not to utilise the location. He saw vast untapped potential on the shores of the Westfield Pill at Neyland, and had visions of railway lines running along both sides of large enclosed docks, as discussed in chapter two. His pioneering and experimental mind pushed him to attempt to turn the 'apparently impossible into reality'.⁷⁰ The 'vision of greatness' anticipated by CRM Talbot might well have been realised had the Admiralty not opposed Brunel's plans, dooming his decision to disappointment.

The 'superior qualities' of Milford Haven could scarcely have been overlooked by Brunel, as has been suggested by Jones, referred to in the introduction of this essay. Much has been written to

⁶⁹ Ellis, *Isambard Kingdom Brunel*, p. 32.

⁷⁰ Ellis, *Isambard Kingdom Brunel*, p. 27.

publicise the attributes of Milford Haven, as has been discussed throughout this essay, and eventually, although perhaps not as quickly or on such a grand scale as had been anticipated by many, the port has become the 'major commercial port' anticipated by Greville, becoming an important oil port in the 1960s.⁷¹ Milford Haven was already a town with aspirations before the arrival of railways, and Brunel's decision to build at Neyland, creating a new town and competitive neighbour for Milford Haven, caused the two locations to battle against each other until one came out on top. As argued in chapter three, Milford Haven is the only one of the two towns examined that has survived with its primary function as a port still intact. As interesting as it may be to speculate on what might have become of Neyland if Brunel had been able to proceed with his grand designs, locals to the town have a proud railway heritage to remember, and Neyland will always be Brunel's original Great Western outpost.

In answering the question of why Brunel chose Neyland as the location for the SWR railway terminus and port this essay has filled a gap in the historiography, and in examining the competitive development between these two towns has added to the under-developed area of research regarding urban-rural development in West Wales.

Word Count 5955

⁷¹ McKay, *A Vision of Greatness*, p. 330.

Appendix

Timeline of Key Events

- 1802 New town of Milford Haven establishes Naval Dockyard
- 1814 Naval Dockyard transferred to Pembroke Dock
- 1836 Irish Packet Service transferred from Milford Haven to Pembroke Dock
- 1844 SWR formed with Brunel as Chief Engineer
- 1846 Fishguard selected for Pembrokeshire Terminus
- 1848 All railway plans west of Swansea cancelled by SWR
- 1851 Milford Haven Waterway Terminus proposed
- 1852 Act of Parliament to build Terminus and Port at Neyland
- 1856 Neyland Port and Station opens
Act of Parliament to build railway line connecting Milford Haven to Johnston
- 1860 Act of Parliament passed for Docks at Milford Haven
- 1863 Milford Haven Station opens
Proposals for new Docks at Neyland (plans collapse in 1864)
- 1888 Docks open at Milford Haven
- 1906 Irish Packet Service transferred from Neyland to Fishguard
- 1907 Fish market, trawler company and ice factory established at Neyland
- 1914 Trawlers transferred from Neyland to Milford Haven, fish market and ice factory closed
- 1963 Railway at Neyland closed

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