

# Private Owner Wagons of the Helston and District Gas Company

by

Robert A Smith

## 1 Introduction

On reading Stanley Jenkins' book entitled *The Helston Branch Railway*<sup>1</sup> I was intrigued by the references to the wagons of the Helston Gas Company and the diagram showing wagon number 10. I thought the Gas Company must have been a very large concern to own ten railway wagons.

As I was in the process of building a model railway based on the Helston Branch I decided to make some enquiries about these wagons in order to produce accurate models for my layout. Stanley Jenkins' book<sup>1</sup> includes photographs and drawings produced by Pat English who is an old friend of my father-in-law (L J Bullen). I therefore wrote to Pat English who was able to point me to the likely source of Stanley Jenkins' information: an article in the Model Railway News (MRN) for June 1970 by the late Peter Matthews<sup>2</sup>.

**HELSTON GAS COMPANY, HELSTON, CORNWALL**  
For Capt. O. T. McDonough Jnr., Staff, Comcrudeslan,  
Newport, U.S.A.

Private traders' mineral wagons from Cornwall were very rare, possibly because much of the coal used was imported to the various Cornish ports. Hence, details of this wagon will help to fill a gap for modellers interested in this part of the country. Four wagons only were in traffic service, and they were all built to conform to the R.C.H. (1923) specifications. They were built in 1926 by D. G. Hall & Co. Ltd. of Swansea, registered by the G.W.R. and had split type oil axleboxes, open type spoked wheels, and a brake lever and two brake shoes at one side of the chassis only. The wagons were numbered 10, 20, 30 and 40, and all carried the tare weight of 7-2-0.

Livery: body and all running gear was black, with plain white lettering.

### MAIN DIMENSIONS

Length over headstocks: 16 ft. 6 in.

Width over headstocks: 8 ft. 0 in.

Depth (floor level to top of wagon): 4 ft. 4½ in.

Wheelbase: 9 ft. 0 in.

Plank widths: each plank was 6\_ in. wide, apart from the two uppermost planks which were each 8\_ in. wide.

Readers wishing to model Helston Station should refer to the September, 1966, issue of *Model Railway News* for the article by P. English, who also verified the numbers of the wagons for me.

MRN article by the late Peter Matthews<sup>2</sup>

The MRN article<sup>2</sup> included a diagram identical to that in Stanley Jenkins' book<sup>1</sup>, and the text in the box on the left. There are some discrepancies between the text and the diagram, notably the tare weight which is clearly 9-2-0 on the diagram, and the brake arrangement where the diagram shows brake levers on both sides. Wagon No.50 also existed, according to the Minute Book of the Company, but it was not hired until a year after the first four wagons.

Pat English does not know where Peter Matthews obtained his information but he did receive a 'diagrammatic drawing of the wagon' from Peter Matthews before it was published in the MRN<sup>2</sup>. The origins of the MRN drawing (see Figure 1) are still unknown but the lettering is unconvincing and the Gas Company was the *Helston and District Gas Company* at the time the wagons were leased. Bernard Holland of the Historical Model Railway Society (HMRS) advised me that: "at the time this was published the MRN was re-drawing Matthews' sketches, as may be seen in other issues of the period, using totally unsuitable Letraset" and suggested that the Helston wagon did not lend itself

to Letraset and was lettered by hand. He also says that the characters are not at all like Peter Matthews' style. In the light of this information I am inclined to believe the tare weight in the text (7-2-0) rather than on the diagram.

**JUNE 1970**

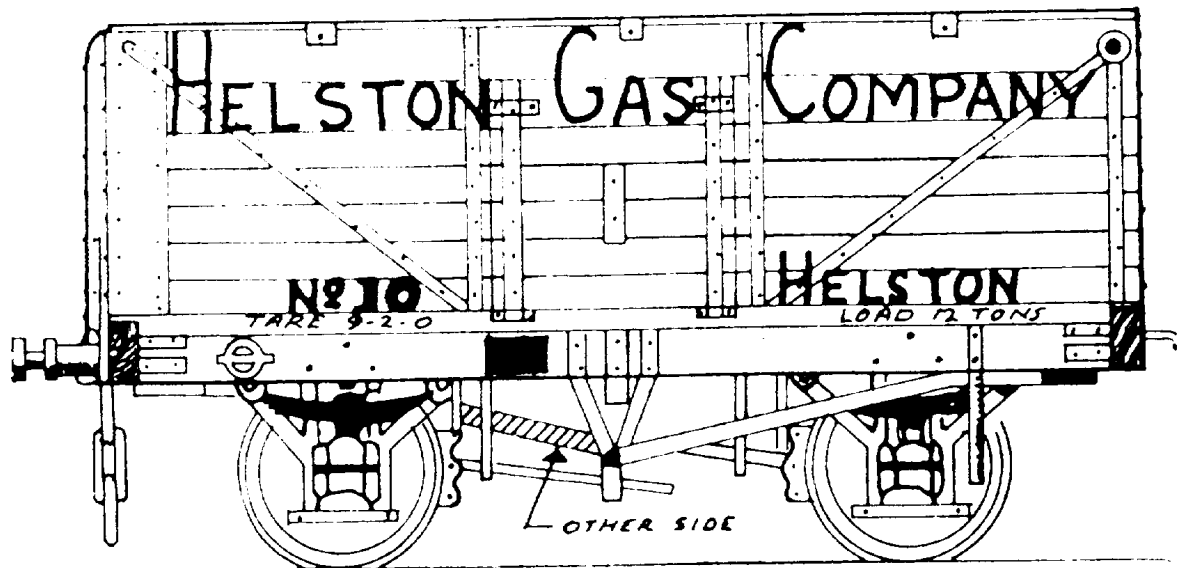


Figure 1. Diagram in Model Railway News article by Peter Matthews<sup>2</sup>.

Section 3 gives details from the Minute Book of the Helston and District Gas Company proving that the first four (and probably the fifth) wagons were hired from the Gloucester Railway Carriage and Wagon Company and were *not* built specifically for the Helston company by D G Hall & Co Ltd of Swansea, as suggested by the MRN article, because they were built 11 years before the Helston company leased them. It is possible that the Gloucester RC&W Co absorbed D G Hall & Co and proceeded to hire out their wagons. Alternatively, just the wagons themselves may have been purchased for hiring out. In any event, it is not impossible for the (apparently conflicting) reports both to be correct.

No further information about the appearance of the wagons has been found. The Gloucester Record Office holds the records of the Gloucester Railway Carriage and Wagon Company, from where the Helston wagons were hired. However, these do not contain details of hired wagons (possibly because they were handled by a subsidiary of the main company), only of those actually built and sold to customers. The Order Books, Registers of Drawings, Photograph Albums and Accounts Papers were searched in June 1994 but no reference to Helston or its Gas Company was found.

David Collings of Sithney, Helston, Cornwall can remember seeing a photograph of one of the wagons in a book. The wagon was behind a locomotive which was the main subject of the photograph and the caption explained that the wagon behind the locomotive belonged to the Helston Gas Company in Cornwall. So far this photograph has not been found again.

The following sections give the details gleaned from various sources about the Helston Gasworks and the reasons for hiring the wagons.

## 2 History of the Helston Gasworks

- 1820 Helston Gasworks built at the highest extremity of Town Green (see Figure 2).
- 1880 Reference in Helston Borough archives<sup>3</sup> - report of the Gas Committee. Assessment of cost of gas lighting in Bodmin, Launceston, Liskeard, Penryn and St Austell to help decide how much they should be paying the *Helston Gas Company* for gas lighting in the town. Recommends reduction in cost and some metered buildings.
- 1887 Reference<sup>3</sup> to *Helston Gas Company*.

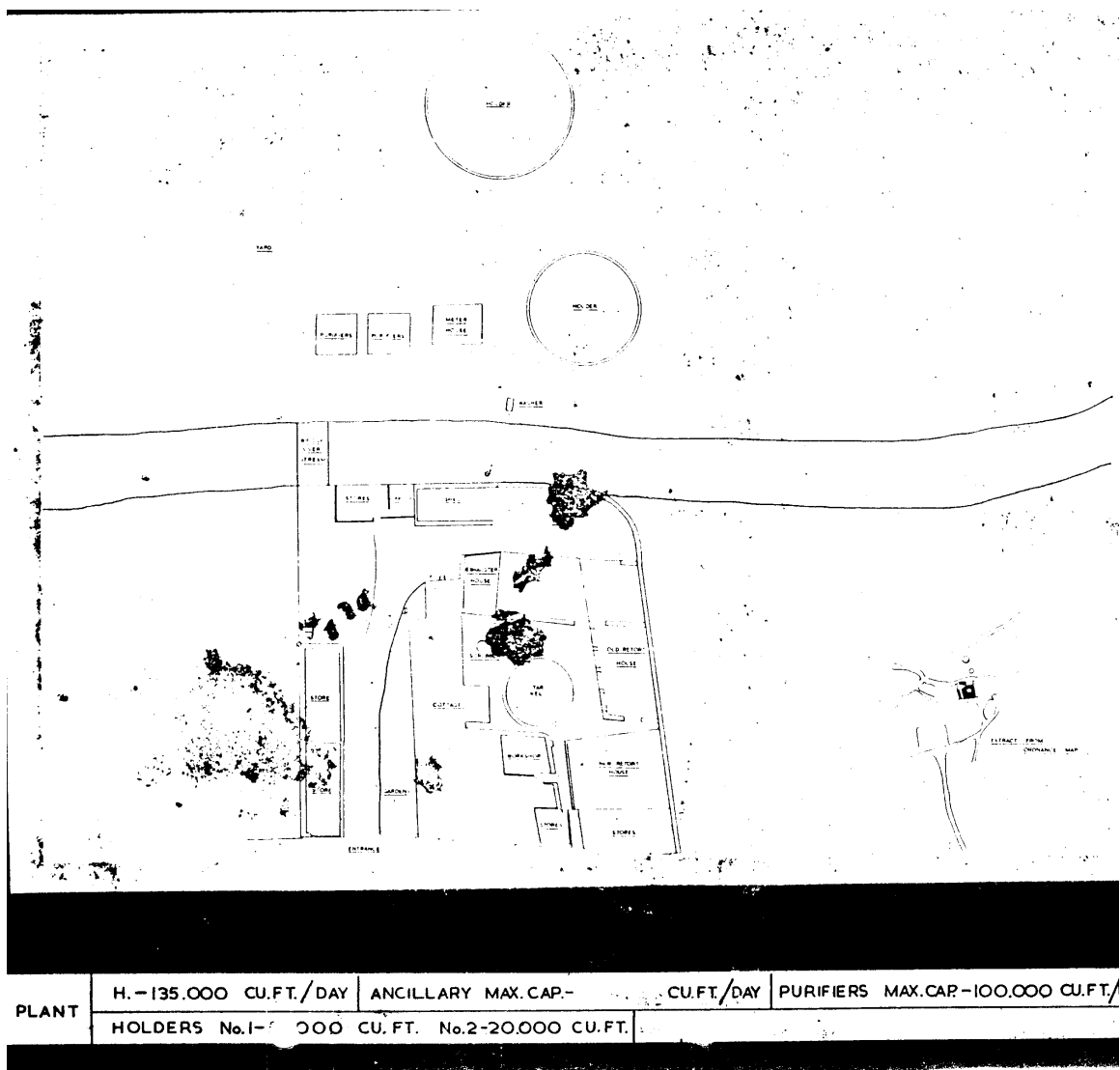


Figure 2. Plan of the Helston Gasworks soon after nationalisation.

----- Change of name from *Helston Gas Company* to *Helston Gas Light Company*

- 1890 The *Gas Light Company* referred to in the Borough archives<sup>3</sup>.
- 1899 Further reference<sup>4</sup>, this time to *Helston Gas Light Company*.

1924 Board of Trade empowers<sup>5</sup> *Helston Corporation Gas* to acquire *Helston Gas Light Company*. Authorises the Corporation to supply gas within 1¼ miles of the SW corner of the Guidhall and to acquire land shown on plans<sup>5</sup>.

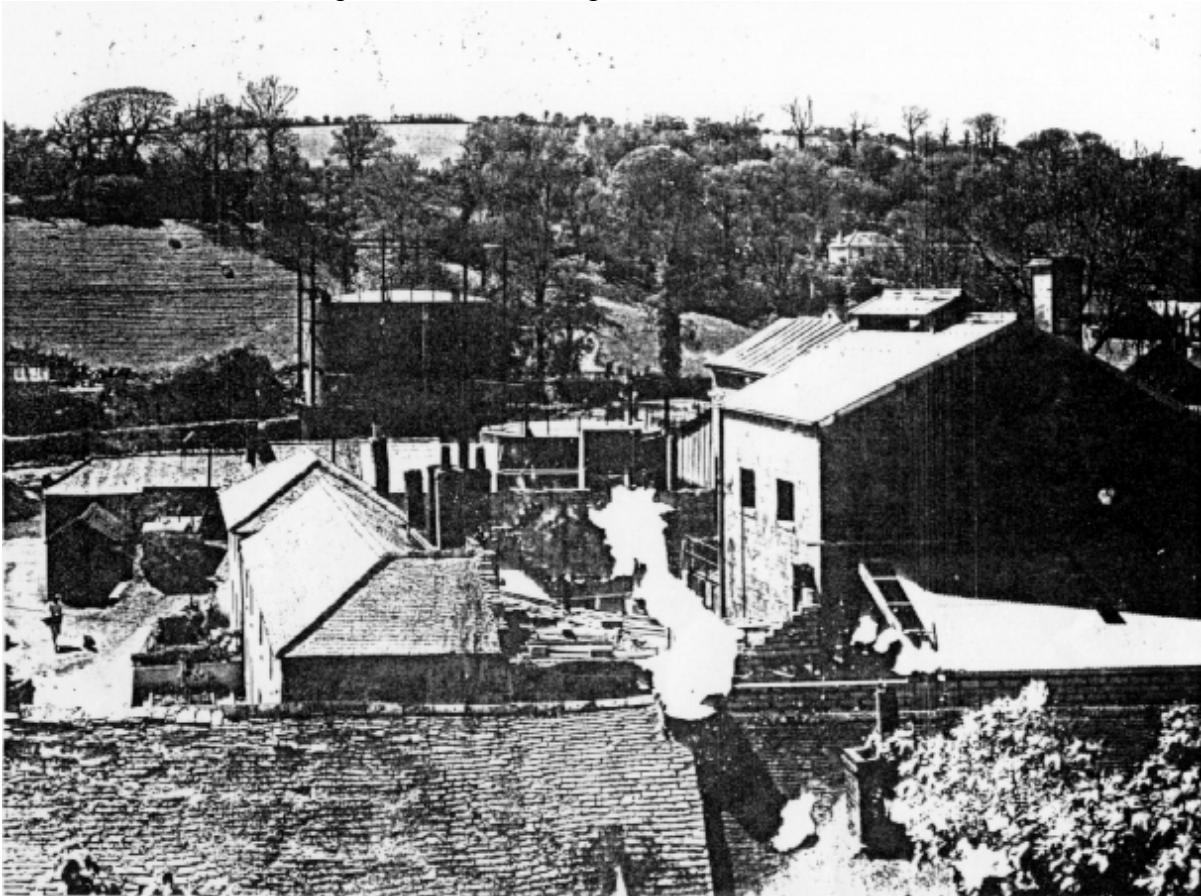


Figure 3. Helston gas works just after nationalisation.

----- **Change of ownership from *Helston Gas Light Company* to *Helston Corporation***

1926 Reference in the *Helston Corporation minutes*<sup>6</sup>. *Gas Department of the Borough* request a review of the cartage of coal to the Gasworks.

1928 *Helston Corporation Gas Department Committee*<sup>6</sup> asked for enquiries to be made into respective costs of coal by different routes. New gas holder erected.

1929 Offer<sup>6</sup> from Messrs Renwick Wilton & Co. to supply 800 or 1000 tons of coal at 1/- per ton more than last price. This was agreed to if a 3d reduction per ton could be obtained.

1934 *Helston and District Gas Company Ltd* registered to acquire the municipal enterprise.

1935 *Helston and District Gas Special Order*<sup>5</sup> for the transfer to *Helston and District Gas Company Ltd*. Land to be used for construction of Works or the manufacture or storage of Gas.....

----- **Change of ownership from *Helston Borough* to *Helston and District Gas Company***

1937 See the following extracts from the Minute Book.

### **3 Extracts from Minute Book of the Helston and District Gas Company**

*12 July 1937*

3. Arrangements made with the Gloucester Railway, Carriage and Wagon Co. Ltd. for the simple hire of four wagons for the coal traffic, numbers 10, 20, 30 and 40 at 5/6d per week each from July 9th 1937 for a period of three years was confirmed.
6. Owing to the increase in Freights from the Humber to Porthleven, also of an impending increase by the Contractor for hauling the coal from the Port to the Works, it was decided, after making careful comparisons of the costs to transfer the Coal traffic to the Great Western Railway who met us by allowing a special reduction of 1/6d. per ton on the new Coal Contract for the period ending June 30th 1938. This is at 33/3d per ton F.O.R. Helston Station, made up as follows:-

Coal 16/6d, Railway freight 18/3d less the 1/6d reduction, in the Company's Wagons.

These arrangements are hereby confirmed.

*6 December 1938*

5. The hiring of an additional Coal Wagon No. 50 at a rental of 6/3d per week for a period of three years ending 16th October 1941 was confirmed.

#### **4 The later years**

The only evidence of the existence of these wagons subsequent to their delivery is a reference<sup>8</sup> to the renumbering by British Railways of wagon No 30 to No 102374 in the week ending 4 March 1950. The reference was found in a hand-written book detailing work carried out by Stanton and Staveley Wagon Repair Works at Holwell Junction, Asfordby, Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire.

### **5 Conclusion**

After several years of searching for a photograph, requests for information in the Great Western Railway Journal, the Model Railway Journal and Modellers Backtrack, and letters to Kingfisher Railway Productions, Ian Allan Publishing and Haynes Publishing, no photograph has been found. Hence it was decided in October 1995 to go ahead with the production of transfers based on the Peter Matthews drawing published in the Model Railway News, on the basis that it is unlikely that anyone else will put more effort in than this. POWSides of Dunmow in Essex were commissioned to produce the transfers and they became commercially available in 7 mm and 4 mm scales in 1996. The transfers are to be sold with a synopsis of this article as a historical guide. 3 mm transfers were also commissioned from POWSides in the same year by Keith Gowen and these are identical to the larger-scale ones.

In fact, the transfers look much more convincing than the lettering on the original drawing. They are provided with numbers 10, 2, 3, and 4 to make 10, 20, 30 and 40 (No 50 may not have been to the same specification) and 7-2-0 or 9-2-0 tares can be chosen. The transfers fit the Slaters 1923 RCH 7-plank wagon with side and end doors.

## Acknowledgements

Robert Smith is very grateful to the following people who have helped in various ways during the research for this project: Dr H Nabb and Mr R B J Smith of the South Western Gas Historical Society, Mr Pat English of the Cornwall Railway Society, Mr C P Atkins of the National Railway Museum, Mr M K Matthews of the Helston Folk Museum, Mr H B Holland of the Historical Model Railway Society, Mr Keith Gowen from Huntingdon, Mr L J Bullen from Camborne and Mr David Collings from Helston.



Figure 4 First wagon, built to Coarse Scale 'O' Gauge standards by Robert Smith for L J Bullen.

## References

- 1 Jenkins, Stanley C, *'The Helston branch railway,'* Oakwood Press, 1992.
- 2 Matthews, Peter, *'Wagons of the private traders,'* Model Railway News, June 1970, pp 350/1.
- 3 Helston Borough archives, ref B/HELs 319 at the Cornwall Record Office.
- 4 Helston Borough archives, ref B/HELs 371 at the Cornwall Record Office.
- 5 Development plans, ref QS/PDG/5/1-5 at the Cornwall Record Office.
- 6 Helston Corporation minutes, ref B/HELs/ 18,19 at the Cornwall Record Office.
- 7 Minute Book of the Helston and District Gas Company Ltd, 1934 to 1949. South Western Gas Historical Society archive, Malage House, Bristol.
- 8 G R Griffin, "What Happened to the Private Owner Wagons?" Journal of The Historical Model Railway Society, Vol 16 No 11, pp 425-428, July 1999.