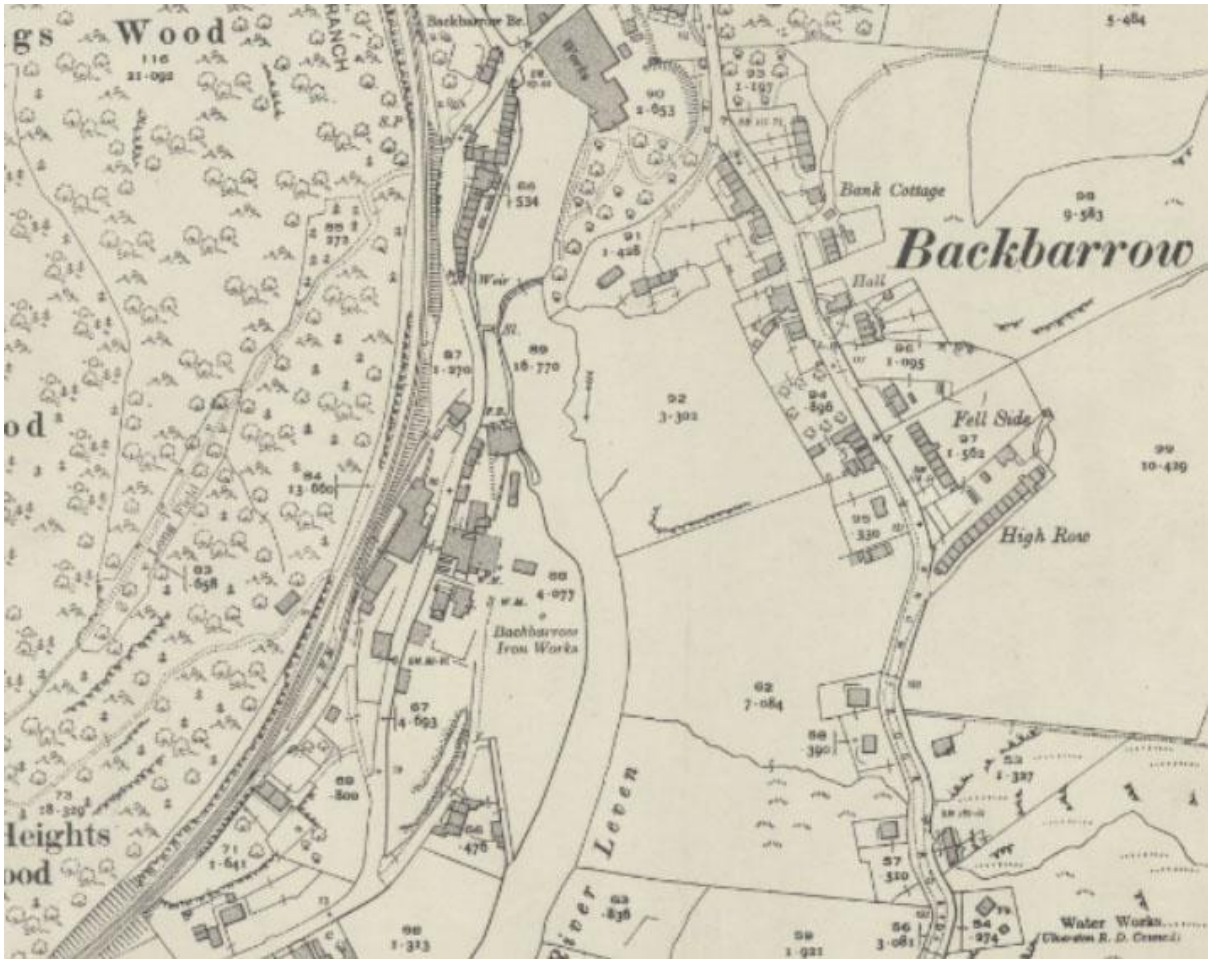
Backbarrow Ironworks – The Railway

The Lakeside Branch of the Furness Railway was opened in 1869, running from the main line near Ulverston to Lake Windermere. It closed to traffic in 1965, the year before closure of the ironworks itself.

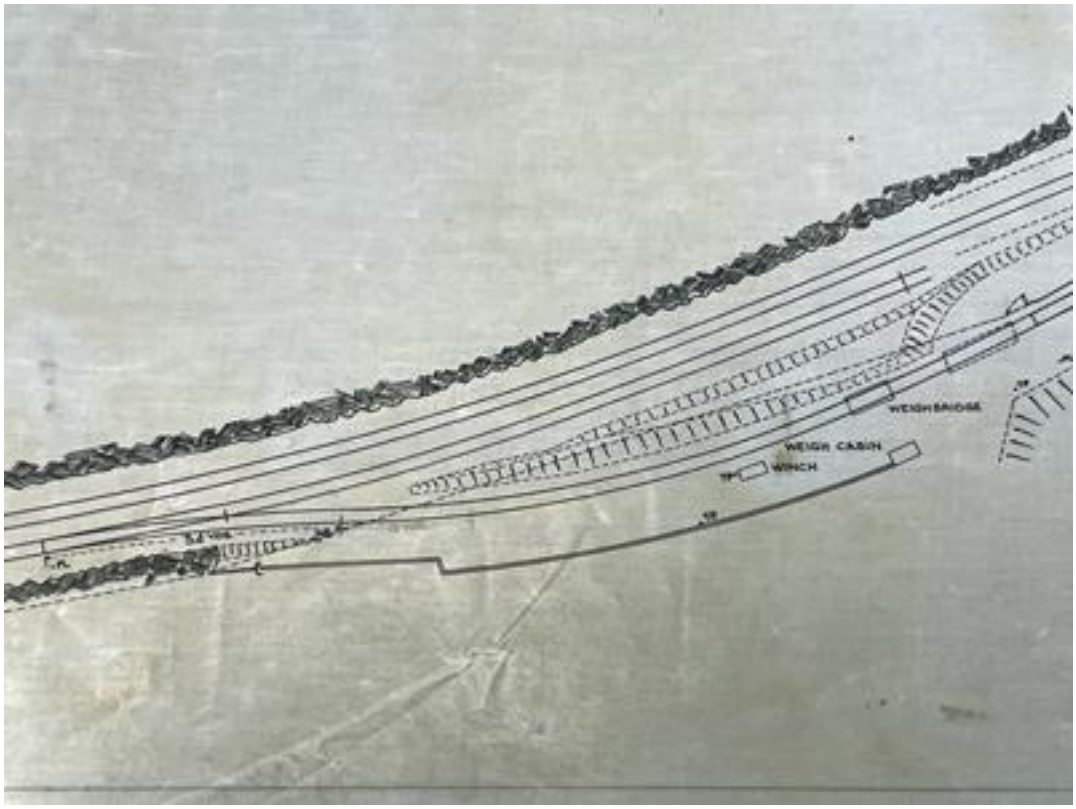
Although the line was built with the intention of capturing part of the growing tourist trade in the Lake District, it also served a number of industrial concerns along the way. Having a railway on the doorstep was a key factor in the survival and growth of the ironworks – bringing in raw materials such as coke, limestone and iron ore, and delivering to customers pig iron and other products.

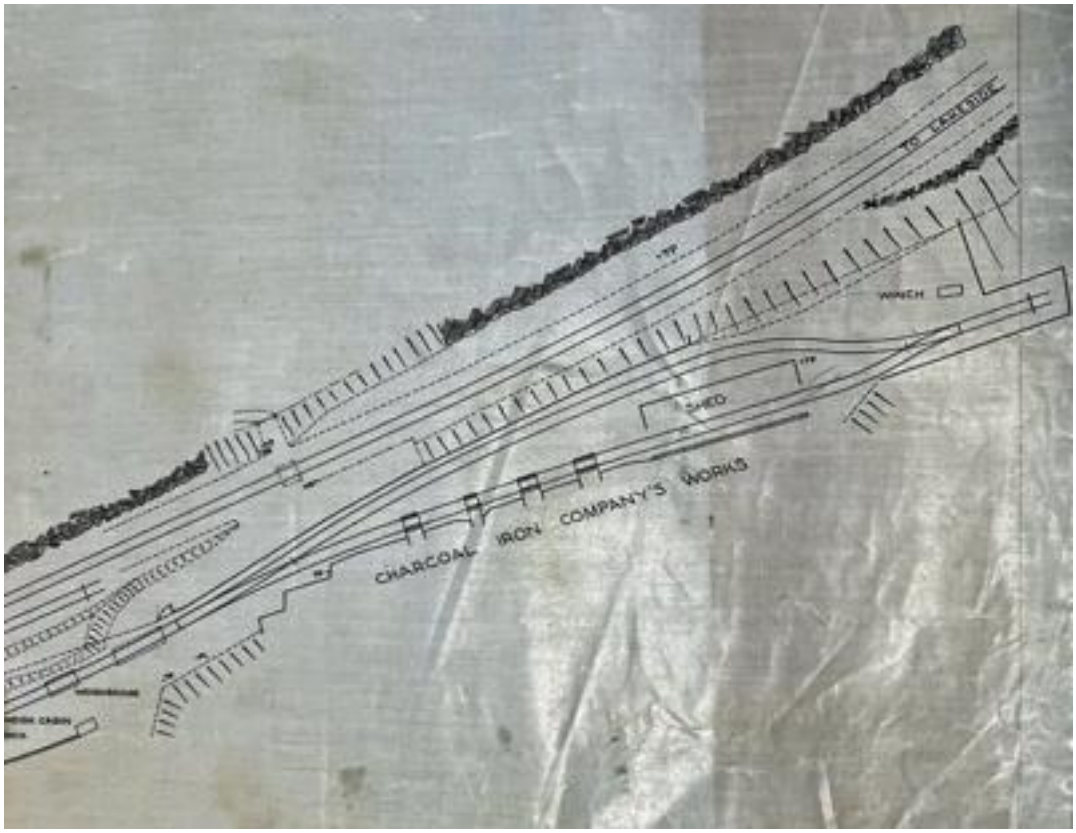
Maps and Plans



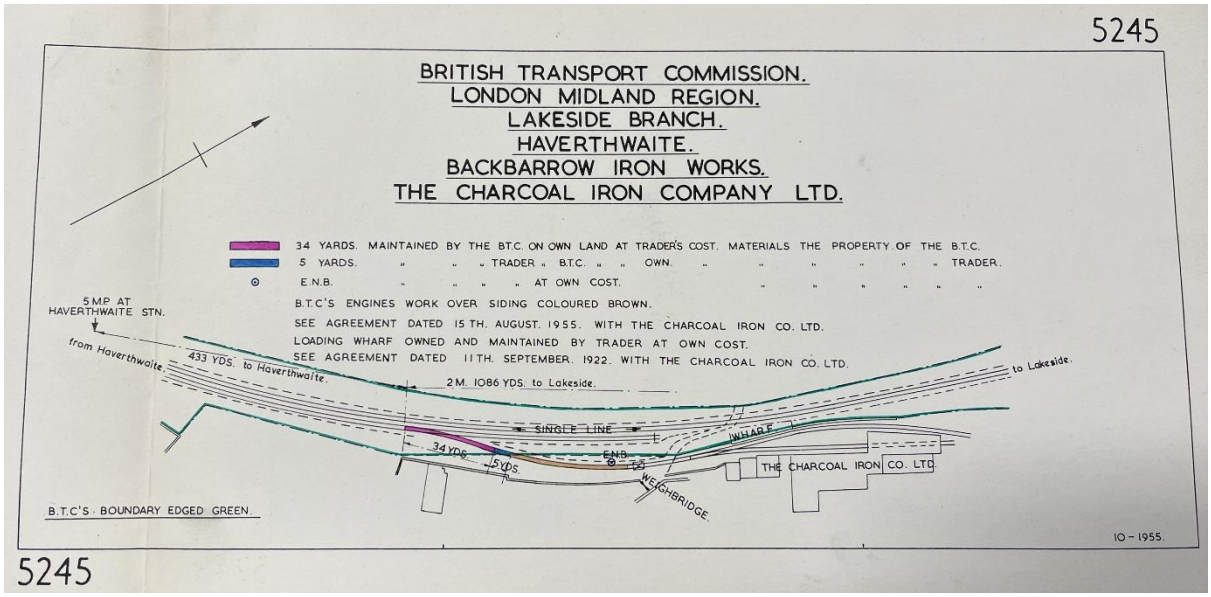
The map above from 1938 (OS 25”) shows the single-track line running at the base of the fell above the ironworks. A long siding runs alongside back to Haverthwaite station and goods yard, and a line runs off that towards the storehouses.

The railway plan reproduced in two parts below (BTBR/BUNDLE/2/1, 1936-62) gives more detail, in particular the weighbridge and cabin before the right-of-way across the line, the two winches – one near the weighbridge, the other at the north end of the site, and the four marked open chutes under the track.





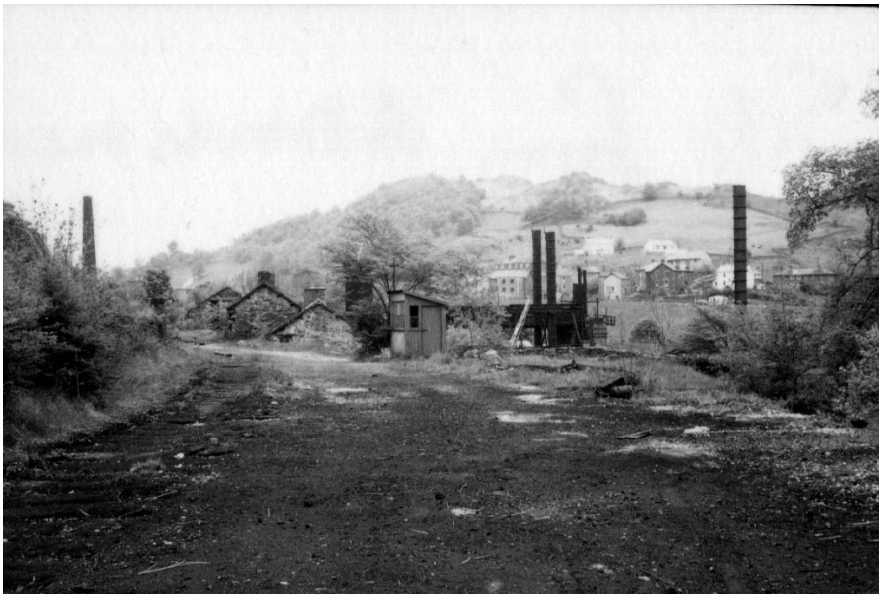
This is repeated in the 1955 BTC plan below (BDX/51/12/1/5245), but this shows more clearly the right-of-way across the siding (which was used to reach the 'wharf' next to the track), and the covered section (marked as 'shed' on the other plan. This BTC plan also gives some useful information about who had responsibility for what over the tracks.



Photos

We have a few photos that help to clarify what is shown on the maps and plans. In each case the notes refer to the image below.

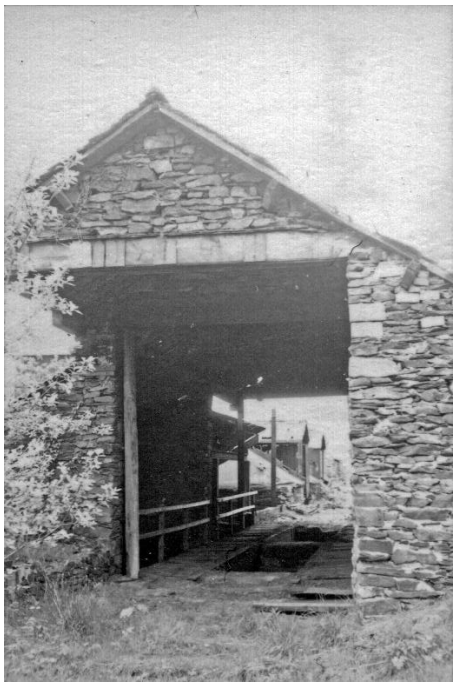
CIHS Owen 10, 1960s. Taken from the south (Haverthwaite) end of the sidings after the track was lifted. It shows (in the centre of the photo) the cabin for the weighbridge standing next to the right-of-way across the tracks, with the works office and storehouses beyond.



CRA POW040, 1955. Taken from over the right-of-way. It shows the loading wharf next to the siding (with wagon) on the left, and the line running next to the storehouses on the right.

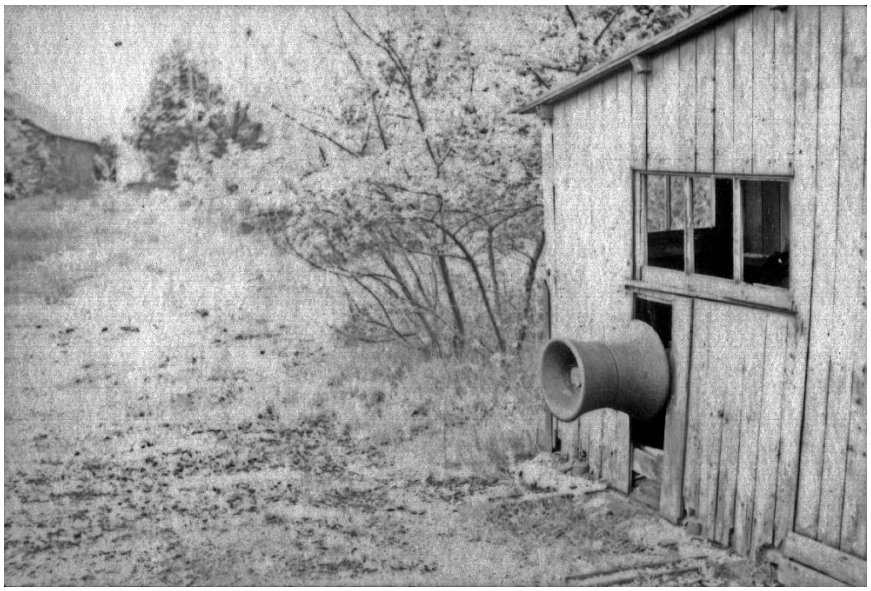
Peter Holmes img067. Taken from further along the lifted tracks. It shows the line passing over the chute into one of the storehouses (to the right), before entering the covered area for unloading iron ore.

CIHS Owen 17A. Taken from the far side of the covered ‘shed’, looking back towards the other storehouses. It shows the pit into which the iron ore was unloaded.



CRA POW041 1955. Taken from near the north (Backbarrow) end of the site, looking back towards the ‘shed’. The short line on the left could be the catchpoint for runaway wagons.

CIHS Owen 18A. Taken from the north end of the site, with the 'shed' in the distance. It shows the cabin with the electrically driven winch.



Workings

The evidence for this section comes from the documents and photos described above, from an interview with an ex-employee, and from discussions with railway enthusiasts.

Wagons were pushed by a loco onto the ironworks siding, and parked there with their hand brakes locked in position. The maximum number of wagons delivered at any one time would depend on the weight of their contents, but was restricted by the length of the entry/exit siding. A runaway crash occurred in 1932 when the loco was unable to push ten wagons (with two empties behind) up the incline from the station to the ironworks, so that would appear to be the limit.

From the entry/exit siding to the storehouses the line ran down an incline. The 'topmen' would release the handbrake on a wagon and with the help of gravity make a controlled descent until it reached the unloading position for whichever storehouse the load was destined for.

Once above the loading point the doors underneath the wagon would be released to allow its contents to fall into the storehouse. In the coke store at least long metal sheets were used to distribute the coke over the existing heap.

Empties would then be allowed to roll to the end of the storehouses before being pulled up to the end of the track by the winch, and from there onto the 'back line'. Pigs (of iron) and any other products from the works would be tipped into the wagons from the wharf near the end of the 'back line', having been driven up by lorry from the stackyard by the furnace.

What is not clear is how the outgoing wagons were moved from the 'back line' to the entry/exit siding. The most obvious way would be for the loco to run along the line across the right-of-way and pick them up. However, the BTC plan gives the impression that their locos were not allowed to travel further along the line than the weighbridge before the right-of-way. If that was the case then the wagons may have been winched from the 'back line' to the entry/exit siding before being picked up by the loco.

Our research into the railway and other aspects of the ironworks is on-going. Please get in touch if you can add to our knowledge of this fascinating place.

Roger Baker
Backbarrow Ironworks Heritage Trust
March 2025

Sources of information

National Library of Scotland (OS maps online)
Cumbria Archive Service (Barrow)
Cumbria Industrial History Society photo collection (John Owen)
Cumbrian Railway Association photo collection
Interview with Bill Walker (ex employee)
Peter Holmes, Alan Postlethwaite (Advice, information and photos)
Cumbrian Railways (Marsh & Garbutt)

Afterwords

July 2025. Since this article was written, a couple of us went to look at the area where the wagons were parked, before the current building work made this too difficult. In our opinion a) the area would not have been large enough to accommodate 10 wagons, and b) the slope from there down to the storehouses would not have been enough to allow wagons to be manhandled into position. All of which contradicts what is said in the article.

September 2025. We have noticed that one of the photos in our collection dated November 1966 shows the north end of the sidings, complete with track and buffers, and the winch cabin complete with winch and electricity supply. A rare find. Here is the detail from the photo…

April 2026. (Comment by PH re our July 2025 note). It may be true enough that there isn't room for ten wagons. However, I think it's a mistake to suggest that the gradient isn't suitable for gravity operation, down the slope from the top siding to the unloading points. I don't think it takes much to get a wagon, particularly a loaded one, to start moving on a gradient. In railway terms, that gradient down to the works is fairly steep, about 1 in 30 possibly? I can picture the wagons being left at the top of the slope.by the locomotive, brakes on, and then being 'walked' down on the handbrake one at a time.