

## History of the Uva Railway from Peradeniya to Badulla

### The highest broad gauge line

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#### Abstract

The scope of this study includes a presentation of the development of the construction of the Uva railway from Peradeniya to Badulla during the period from 1872 to 1924. The construction of the Uva railway of 111 miles took nearly 52 years witnessing the reigns of three British monarchs and the involvement of ten British governors from Sir William Gregory (1872-1877) to Sir William H. Manning (1918-1925). If the Colombo-Kandy railway has had the honour of introducing the first railway line in Sri Lanka, it was the Uva line which has the honour of registering the broad gauge line 5'6" to ever reach the altitude of 6226 feet at the summit of Pattipola. The railway line from Colombo to Badulla is about 150 miles in length. In terms of engineering marvel and scenery, this line especially the Uva railway from Peradeniya via Idalgashinna, Haputale, Diyatalawa, Bandarawela, Demodara and Hali-Ela to Badulla is considered to be one of the finest train journeys in the world. In England, during the 19th century, railway lines were constructed and operated by private enterprise. The complete absence of any state participation in this sphere was not only an indication of the ability and willingness of private capital to engage in economic activities of such magnitude, but was also a reflection of the prevailing economic concept of laissez-faire. In contrast, the role of the colonial governments in countries was different, in that railways fell within the category of public works and hence constituted a legitimate sphere of government activity. In actual fact, there was no deliberation on this point. It was always assumed that the state should be the main vehicle in colonies of railway expansion or take a large part in the decision for railway construction. To the colonial government in Sri Lanka, the construction of railways in the colony was a necessary requisite for the advancement of production, trade and commerce of the island. Any discussion of policy should therefore be based on analysing the degree of government support given to any particular line. Regarding the Uva railway, it is evident that the profitability of it was the main factor in determining its construction. The extensive surveys and the estimates carried out suggest that the colonial government as cautious in undertaking this railway line especially up to Haputale. There is no doubt whatsoever that the railways were initiated and rapidly expanded due to the continuous clamour by the planters. The policy of the Governor Arthur Havelock (1890-1896) regarding the rail extension to Nanu-oya and Uva was to give consideration to such railway projects only as can be shown to offer a fair degree of certainty of profit sufficient to cover all the charges incidental to the construction and to undertake such projects in the order of their relative importance in respect of the interest which they will serve. Hence it is clear that at no time the colonial government was willing to promote planting interests only without due regard to the effect on the general economy and revenue of the island. This does not however mean that the planting community were not the main beneficiaries of the Uva Railway. Since it was the planting industry which provided the bulk of the government revenue, it is natural that the railways should be stated to serve the planting regions. What is contested here is the thesis that the colonial government championed the planting interests with no regard to consequences on the traditional sectors of the economy.

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