

Old Hobday

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The image shows a musical score for the song 'Old Hobday'. It consists of three staves of music in a treble clef, with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The first staff has a chord progression of E, B, E, B, E, B, E, B. The lyrics under the first staff are: 'Now build - ing a rail - way is dif - fi - cult work, you need will - ing men who hard la - bour won't shirk. A -'. The second staff starts with a measure rest marked '5' and has a chord progression of A, E, E, B, E, B, C#m, B. The lyrics under the second staff are: 'mongst Eng - lish wor - kers Old Hob - day was famed, as he ne'er took his boots off, or'. The third staff starts with a measure rest marked '8' and has a chord progression of A, B, E, A, C#m, A, E, B, E. The lyrics under the third staff are: 'so it was claimed. Old Hob - day, Old Hob - day, the mean - est of men.'

Now building a railway is difficult work.
You need willing men who hard labour won't shirk.
Amongst English workers Old Hobday was famed,
As he ne'er took his boots off, or so it was claimed.

Ch: Old Hobday, Old Hobday, the meanest of men.

The line south of Penrith was in English hands,
While the Irish were northwards camped near marshlands.
But a skirmish took place when some workers fell out,
And the Irishmen promised the English to rout.

With pick-shafts and hedge-stakes, they marched into town
To batter the English where'er they be found,
But their way it was barred by a brave magistrate
Who promised their grievance to investigate.

Old Hobday was angry at the Irishmen's cheek
And rallied supporters, their vengeance to wreak.
They knew of a house on the edge of the town
Where a few Irish hawkers could always be found.

The tinkers were roused and dragged into the street
Where the cowardly English used fists and used feet.
It's a miracle no-one was killed on that day
As such was the violence of Hobday's affray.

The navvies soon heard of the vicious attack
And once more set off - a most dangerous pack.
The town was besieged with the atmosphere tense,
While the priest Mr Haydock tried to make them see sense.

Old Hobday was questioned and thrown into jail.
His plea of 'Not guilty' did not him avail.
From the Irish in court, there were tears, shouts and cheers,
As he was sent to Australia to serve fifteen years.

Old Hobday was a real person, and the events described in the song took place in the Penrith area in February 1846 during the construction of what is now known as the West Coast Main Line.

Navvies, i.e. navigators, (many of them Irish) built canals across the British Isles, and 'happily' turned their hands to railway construction when it became the preferred mode of transport. It is hard nowadays to imagine the conditions in which they worked, but it is easy to understand why they were 'trigger happy', and looking for opportunities to escape the sheer drudgery of their work.

The end of the line? Below is a picture from New Zealand which aptly demonstrates the difficulties faced by railway workers, not least because of the terrain, the primitive tools they used and the paucity of machinery at their disposal. It was a case of dynamite first, then picks, shovels and wheelbarrows. One thing that still puzzles, is what they did in wet weather (apart from continuing to work, of course). Water-proof clothing hadn't been invented, and, although they mainly wore woollen trousers and jackets, once wet they must have taken ages to dry out.

