

In this report I shall use the name "vicinal railway," as in Belgium, in preference to "light railway." Though the vicinal railway is generally a light railway as we understand it, the name does not imply light construction, but that the line is of local rather than national importance. Its standard of construction must in each case be suitable for the work it has to perform.

The vicinal lines are generally of 1-metre gauge, but not entirely so. There are 163 lines of 1-metre gauge, totalling 4,200·22 kilometres; thirteen lines of 3 ft. 6 in. gauge, totalling 506·30 kilometres; three lines of 4 ft. 8½ in. gauge, totalling 38·11 kilometres. Comparison with past records shows that while the lines of 1-metre gauge are being continually extended and new ones started, no new lines on the other gauges have been made during the past five years, if not longer. Even if the State lines are taken into consideration it will be found that the expansion of the metre gauge in the past four years has been nearly six times as great as that of all the other gauges.

Of the 157 lines open for traffic, twenty are worked entirely by electricity, and ten by the lately developed system of petrol and electricity (used by some of the London omnibuses, and now being tried on the London tram-cars), making altogether 380 kilometres on which electric traction is in force. On the balance steam is the motive power. Although the original Act and regulations seem to have anticipated horse traction, this is now entirely superseded by the more rapid methods mentioned.

As an indication of the progress now going on, the society is occupied with the study of new lines which may be classed as follows:—

	Kilometres.
(1.) Twenty-four lines for which a concession has been requested	343·20
(2.) Forty-nine lines of which the consideration has been definitely decided on, together with the State's promise to provide part of the capital	838·10
(3.) Seven lines under consideration, but concerning which the State has yet to signify concurrence	75·40
(4.) Thirty-six lines of which the consideration is not definitely decided upon, and of which the preliminary reports have been or are being furnished to enable the State to pronounce whether it will assist	410·60
Total	1,667·30 (1,030 miles.)

Thus we have—

	Kilometres.
(A.) In operation	4,037·87
(B.) Under construction	342·34
(C.) To be constructed immediately	474·42
(D.) Concessions applied for	343·20
(E.) Under survey, or otherwise being examined	1,324·10
(F.) Otherwise	60·40

Total lines which will probably be completed within a few years ... 6,472·33
(4,000 miles.)

As an indication that the control of the State over the inauguration of fresh lines or extensions of existing ones is not a dead-letter, we find that permission has been refused for thirty-three lines of an aggregate length of 432 km. The reasons for the refusal are either strategic, or from the opinion being held that the chances of ultimate financial success are too slender.

The organization in connection with vicinal railways is somewhat peculiar, and in order that it may be better comprehended it must be understood that the capital is provided by three, or possibly four, parties—viz., the State, the provinces, the communes, and possibly private individuals—in various proportions, but on the average as follows: State, 43·7 per cent.; provinces, 27·9 per cent.; communes, 27·1 per cent.; individuals, 1·3 per cent.

The following is the method followed in connection with a new line: The local population, having become convinced of the desirability of a line from A to B, approach the local communes and urge them to support the line. The Communal Councils consider the matter, and if favourable write to the National Society, who, after submitting the matter to the Government to ascertain that the Army authorities raise no objection, reply stating that if the communes will lodge £—, being the estimated cost of a preliminary investigation, the matter will be looked into. The communes then vote the necessary money; or some person, such as a large manufacturer deeply concerned, may find it. Then the society sends into the district to be served, its officers, commercial and engineering. The communes and interested parties bring before these officers all the information they have at their disposal with regard to the capabilities of the district to support a line, the population likely to use it, and how it may best be located to avoid conflicting interests and cheapen cost of land-acquisition and other things. On the information obtained by its officers the society formulates a preliminary report (see sample report at end). This is forwarded, with the proposed tariff, to the State Department dealing with these matters (the Ministry of Railways, Posts and Telegraphs), and it is considered by the Government, who approach the question from, firstly, the point of view of its effect on the strategical position in case of war; and, secondly, the effect it will have on the business of the State railways or other vicinal railways with which it might be in competition, or which it might benefit; and, thirdly, the prospects it has of being a paying concern now or in the immediate future; and,