

BERKHAMSTED LINKS WITH CHESHAM

By "BEORCHAM"

Recently a reader wrote that he was particularly interested in the articles in this series on the coaching days, the cutting of the canal, and the building of the London and Birmingham Railway. "But," he added, "nothing has been said about the railway *after* it was built. I would very much like to read a description of the original railway station near Castle Street bridge, and I would also be interested to know whether it is correct that a branch line from Berkhamsted to Chesham was planned during the 'railway mania' years."

Not one branch line, sir, but two! Our district seems to be a graveyard of ambitious but ill-advised railway projects. They would almost certainly have become "white elephants."

But first there is a request for a description of the old railway station. Unfortunately, authentic details are scanty, for the station has been closed for about 75 years. It is just possible that a few old inhabitants recall the tiny booking office and the narrow stairs to the two platforms. They may even remember the top-hatted station master ringing a handbell to announce the approach of the trains.

Small the station may have been, but it was ample for the modest needs of Berkhamsted's 3,000 inhabitants in 1837. It was then considered one of the most attractive stations on the line. The directors, on their trial trip to Tring, were so impressed by the lay-out and appearance of the building that they gave "hearty approval of the Elizabethan style of architecture." One might as well commend a "Tudor" garage!

Before King's Road was made

The enthusiastic directors were not to know of the undignified uses to which the building was put when it was closed as a station about the year 1870. For some years it was used as a brush-works, and the tiny goods station on the Castle side of the bridge became a wood-turner's shop. Later, the red-bricked façade was bequeathed to hoarding contractors, and twelve years ago the dilapidated building was completely demolished.

The "new" station, erected some 200 yards north-west of the old when the number of tracks was increased from two to four, was unusually large for a town of Berkhamsted's size. But there were good reasons for building on a lavish scale. Not only did Earl Brownlow demand his own private entrance, but the station was required to serve both Chesham and Berkhamsted. Our Buckinghamshire neighbours had no railway station of their own until the 1880s, and all of their letters, parcels and heavy goods, including coal, were sent via Berkhamsted station.

Wagonettes, forerunners of the bus service, made the journey several times daily to meet important trains, but either from choice or necessity most people covered the five miles on foot. There was regular business for owners of wagons and vans, and goodness knows how many horses were prema-

turely aged in hauling heavy loads up the steep slopes of Chesham Road, the Hockeridges, and Nashleigh Hill. Chain horses were kept to assist the regular teams up the cruel gradient of Chesham Road, for King's Road, then called Cox's Lane, was only a rough, narrow track.

An interesting point is that when the "new" station was built and Lower King's Road was made to provide a second link with the High Street, the people of Chesham contributed generously to the cost of the road.

A busy and profitable transport business between Berkhamsted and Chesham collapsed when the Great Central Railway opened a branch line from Chalfont Road to Chesham. More than one hint was thrown out that this branch should be continued to Berkhamsted, but the directors wisely concluded that the heavy cost of making a series of tunnels or deep cuttings would be unwarranted.

No Trams to Chesham!

Another scheme, promoted by the Chesham, Boxmoor and Hemel Hempstead Steam Tramway Company in 1887, all but succeeded. This company actually received Government sanction to construct a light railway to link the three towns. The Berkhamsted branch would have run from the station via King's Road and High Street to Bourne End, and the Hemel Hempstead branch from Marlowes to Bourne End, the rails being laid along existing highways. From Bourne End the track would have continued to Chesham along the gently rising valley of the Bourne Gutter via Bottom Farm and Harriotts End.

This scheme was thought highly progressive at the time, and there was much support for it at meetings held at Berkhamsted, Chesham and Hemel Hempstead. The fear was expressed, however, that the locomotives would frighten horses on the roads, and the County Council had the last word by objecting that the roads were too narrow.

Finally, it is interesting to recall a famous dispute which prevented the Heath Park Halt line from being linked with Boxmoor station, despite the fact that a cutting was made for this purpose. In 1863 the Hemel Hempstead Railway Company was formed to build a line from Boxmoor station through Hemel Hempstead to the Hertford, Luton and Dunstable Railway, near Harpenden. Later, when the Midland Railway Company extended their line from Bedford to London, the local company decided to link their new line with the Midland Railway instead of the Hertford line. The Midland Company, however, was for many years in bitter rivalry with the L.N.W.R., and objected that the London traffic of the Hemel Hempstead branch line would be diverted to the rival company's shorter route to London if the branch were extended beyond Heath Park to Boxmoor. Thus no railway track was ever laid along the cutting, which, grass grown and derelict, can still be seen beside the main line.