

The Building of the Railway

Almost exactly 110 years ago—to be precise, on July 6, 1837—thousands of people from Berkhamsted, Tring, Hemel Hempstead and neighbouring villages swarmed along the dusty roads to Boxmoor. The first section of the London and Birmingham Railway was due to be opened, and excitement ran high when the first train came in sight. The quaint, tall-chimneyed engine wheezed to a halt, and a thousand spellbound boys thereupon decided to become engine drivers. Out of the rickety little coaches stepped the top-hatted directors and other high officials, indulging in hand-shakes all round but not entirely certain whether the cheers were for themselves or for the "Puffing Billy."

It was a proud day for all save the stage coach owners and diehards who still regarded the "iron horse" as a menace. But an early chapter had been written in the history of British railways—a chapter charged with human drama, sometimes tragic, often exciting, but finally triumphant. Costly mishaps and heartbreaking delays were not the only disappointments; the pioneers also had to struggle against prejudice and organised opposition from landowners and others who sent the costs sky-rocketing.

"Quacks and Lunatics"

Opposition was especially strong in Hertfordshire—resolutions condemning the project were passed at meetings held in Berkhamsted and Watford—and property owners were actually responsible for the route being changed.

With King's Cross as the terminus, the original plan was to take the line through Cassiobury Park and Grove Park—the Watford seats of Lord Essex and Lord Clarendon—and then along the valley from Hemel Hempstead to the Dagnall Gap, via Water End and Great Gaddesden. But this route was scarcely calculated to please their Lordships, neither did it please Lady Bridgewater, whose chief concern was the preservation of the family estate at Ashridge. With the support of landowners in all parts of Herts and Bucks, opponents skilfully handled the weapon

of propaganda, likening the promoters to quacks and lunatics and prophesying complete failure and disaster. The promoters found it hard to get a hearing, and every attempt to come to terms with the landowners was seemingly doomed to failure.

One of the most influential and embittered opponents was Sir Astley Cooper, the surgeon, who is remembered in a happier connection as founder of the West Herts Hospital. The line was planned to pass through his property at Hemel Hempstead, and Robert Stephenson, the famous engineer, himself tried to induce Sir Astley to change his mind. But the surgeon was adamant. "Sir," he boomed, "your scheme is preposterous in the extreme. It is of so extravagant a character as to be positively absurd. If this sort of thing be permitted to go on, you will in a very few years destroy the noblesse!"

Costly Diversions

Stephenson, incidentally, walked the whole distance between London and Birmingham over twenty times in locating the most serviceable routes. Even the harmless work of surveying was hampered by landowners, and one section could only be surveyed while the proprietor, a clergyman, was conducting a service!

Largely in deference to the landowners, the original route was altered. The terminus was changed from King's Cross to Euston, and at Watford the line was diverted to avoid the parks of Lords Essex and Clarendon, at the high cost of building a long tunnel. To the lasting benefit of Berkhamsted and Tring, the Ashridge estate was also avoided, making it necessary to construct a tunnel, deep cuttings and high embankments along the Bulbourne valley.

Even then opposition to the railway had by no means evaporated. The House of Commons eventually passed the Bill, but in the Lords it was thrown out on the motion of Earl Brownlow. It was not until 1833—three years after the original scheme was drawn up—that the Bill passed both Houses of Parliament, and only then was the oracle worked by offering landowners three times the amount of the original estimates. The total expenses of carrying the Bill through Parliament amounted to nearly £73,000.

In a short time 80 miles of the railway were under construction. Then it was

the turn of the poorer classes to bemoan the enterprise. Armies of navvies—"uncouth savages," they were often called—descended upon country towns and villages, completely upsetting the tenor of local life. The navvies' drinking bouts were notorious, and savage fights occurred frequently. In 1836 a "great riot" broke out in Berkhamsted among the navvies, and men were "knocked down, severely beaten and kicked unceremoniously." Yet some of the men were of a fine type, and it is an interesting fact that they introduced Wesleyanism to Berkhamsted. A number married local girls, and their descendants are still living in the district.

The Berkhamsted Embankment

During the building of the railway casualties were frequent—several men were killed by falls of chalk in Watford tunnel—and every mishap and delay acted as a spur to the Jeremiahs who constantly predicted disaster. Few of the contractors completed their sections of the line without assistance from the Company; eleven firms were ruined, and suicides were not unknown.

Locally the difficulties were enormous. Yet, with relatively primitive tools, the navvies threw up high embankments, burrowed under the chalk, and made that remarkable cutting beyond Tring Station.

The embankment near Berkhamsted station, though relatively short, proved a major undertaking. For six months pumps worked day and night draining the marshland between the Castle and the canal. Tens of thousands of bricks and flints were hurled into deep caverns to gain a firm foundation, and it is said that there are more bricks below ground level than in the superstructure.

"Harvey Coombe"

Most of the soil from cuttings was removed by wheelbarrow or horse-drawn sled until the arrival of the "Harvey Coombe," the first locomotive seen in the Berkhamsted district. Transported in sections by barge, it was assembled in a barn at Pix Farm, Bourne End, and the locomotive was then set to work hauling trucks filled with soil from Northchurch tunnel and Crooked Billet-lane cutting to the embankments under construction nearer Berkhamsted.

And so the work went on for three or four years. On the opening of the first section of the line, from London to Boxmoor, the success was immediate. In the first 28 days 39,855 passengers were conveyed—a number which, the directors reported, "exceeded all expectations." Daily receipts averaged £153.

Three months after the first section was opened, the line between Boxmoor and Tring was completed. On Monday, October 16, 1837, the first non-stop journey was made along the 32-mile section from London to Tring by the directors and a party of friends, who left Primrose Hill at 9 a.m., reaching Boxmoor 51 minutes later. "The train

here entered on the new line of rails," states an official report. "Immediately after leaving Boxmoor there is an embankment of very considerable length and height, at the conclusion of which there is a short cutting of a few feet in depth and a tunnel immediately following. The tunnel is only 300 yards in length, and the inconvenience which has been complained of in passing through those at the earlier part of the railway, in the want of light, therefore, was scarcely felt. An arrangement has also been made with a view to remedying this defect entirely, by the introduction of lamps into each carriage. The regulations, it is intended, shall extend to carriages both of the 1st and 2nd class, and the object is to be effected by placing oil lamps in apertures in the roof of each carriage."

Speed!

The report adds that Berkhamsted's first railway station (it stood near Castle-street bridge and was demolished twelve years ago) "was built in the Elizabethan style of architecture, which forms an agreeable relief to those at other stations, the whole of which are mere plain brick or stone erections. The train passed this station at 10 o'clock precisely, and concluded its journey down without any accident or mistake by arriving at Pendley at 11 past 10 o'clock, thus having performed the whole distance from Primrose Hill in an hour and 11 minutes."

Seventy-one minutes—many a modern train has been known to take longer! And to prove that no special burst of speed was made to impress the directors and their guests, here is one more quotation, this time from a publication dated 1844:

"Time-table for the 8½ p.m. down train from London to Tring, on and after April 12, 1844:—

Leave Euston 8.30
Arrive Tring 9.38."

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