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LOCAL COMMUNICATIONS—5

By 'BEORCHAM'

The Railway Pioneers

On a July day 119 years ago, hundreds of Berkhamsted people streamed along the dusty road to Boxmoor to witness the official opening of the first section of the London and Birmingham Railway. Three months later, on 16th October, 1837, the line was opened as far as Tring, and Berkhamsted became one of the first small country towns of England—indeed, of the whole wide world—to have a main line railway station.

The age of fast, comfortable travel had arrived, and the London and Birmingham Railway was acclaimed as the greatest public work ever executed. One writer suggested that only the Great Wall of China and the Pyramids had involved a greater labour force.

EARLY RIVALRY

Long before the opening of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway in 1825, lines from Manchester to Birmingham and from Birmingham to London were projected. Surveys were made as early as 1825, and by 1830 two lines from London to the North were proposed: one via Oxford and Banbury, the other via Coventry. Rival companies were formed, but on September 11, 1830, they had the good sense to unite. George Stephenson was consulted, and he and his son Robert were appointed engineers to the London and Birmingham Railway Company.

The Oxford route was soon abandoned, and it was then the task of the engineers to choose the best route via Coventry. If a certain Mr. Giles had had his way, the London terminus would have been at Islington, and the line would have crossed Hertfordshire from Barnet, via South Mimms and Leverstock Green, to Hemel Hempstead. Mr. Creed examined another route, from near the West India Docks to

Hertford, Baldock, Bedford, and Northampton.

PROTEST MEETINGS

Eventually, the Stephenson's favoured a railway from near Hyde Park, running almost parallel with the Edgware road to Watford, Hemel Hempstead, and Ivinghoe. This would have by-passed Berkhamsted and taken the line through Piccotts End, Water End, Great Gaddesden, and Dagnall.

Many were the landowners who objected to a railway crossing their estates. Opposition was especially strong in Hertfordshire, and a resolution condemning the project was passed at a meeting held at the King's Arms Hotel, Berkhamsted. A similar protest meeting was held at Watford, where Lords Essex and Clarendon were determined to keep iron horses off their Cassiobury and Grove Park estates.

Among the choleric old gentlemen who likened the railway pioneers to quacks and lunatics was Sir Astley Cooper, the surgeon, who is remembered in a happier connection as founder of the West Herts Hospital.

"POSITIVELY ABSURD"

The line was planned to run through his Gadebridge estate at Hemel Hempstead, and Robert Stephenson spent an unrewarding hour trying to overcome Sir Astley's bitter opposition. 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. It is this sort of thing be permitted to you, you will in a very few years destroy the noblesse!"

Giving details to his colleagues of this unsuccessful mission, Stephenson commented bitingly that Sir Astley, defender of the aristocracy, had been knighted for cutting a wen out of the King's neck.

Robert Stephenson walked the whole distance between London and Birmingham over twenty times to locate the best routes. Even the harmless work of surveying was hampered by landowners. On one occasion the surveyors snatched a few vital minutes by telling an irate farmer that his horse had bolted; by the time the farmer had discovered that the information was false, the surveyors had completed their work and taken to their heels.

DURING THE SERMON

Then there was a clergyman who was so violently opposed to the railway that the surveyors drew up an elaborate plan of campaign. In the greatest secrecy they met in a remote part of the parish until it was known that the clergyman had started his sermon. Then, with great speed, they surveyed the estate and departed before the church service was over.

But we must not judge too harshly the landed gentry who, by opposing the building of the railway on the Gade-

bridge and Ashridge estates, discouraged the Gade Valley route. But for this change Berkhamsted would have waited many years for a railway station, probably on a branch line which would have run from Aylesbury to Two Waters.

RIISING COSTS

It was a member of the famous Ashridge family—Lord Brownlow—who, in the House of Lords on June 22, 1832, said: "The case for the promoting of the [London and Birmingham Railway] Bill having been concluded, it does not appear to the committee that they have made out such a case as would warrant the forcing of the proposed railway through the land and property of so great a proportion of dissentient landowners and proprietors."

Delays and frustration at Westminster continued for eleven more months. Then, on May 6, 1833, the London and Birmingham Railway Act received the Royal assent, the total expenses of carrying the Bill through Parliament having cost the Company £72,868.

This was a heavy blow, but worse financial worries were to follow. Not only were costs rising, but claims for compensation from landowners made nonsense of the original estimates.

LOCAL SECTIONS

The 112 miles route from London to Birmingham was divided into about thirty sections, the work to be undertaken by various firms of contractors. Few contractors were able to complete their sections without assistance from the Company, and six sections had to be taken over completely by the Company. Eleven firms were ruined, and suicides were not unknown.

The firm of W. and L. Cubitt was responsible for the Euston, King's Langley, Berkhamsted and Aldbury sections. Here are some details:

Section	Miles	Contract Price	Revised Price
Euston ..	1	75,860	91,528
Kings Langley ..	2½	28,900	57,386
Berkhamsted ..	4½	54,660	65,002
Aldbury ..	2½	15,694	25,134

The Aldbury section was one of the cheapest, per mile, in the whole length of the line, due to the fairly level country and the modest need for bridges.

TRING CUTTING

Three miles of the Tring section, however, proved very expensive; the contract price was £104,496, and the revised price £144,657. Here the firm of Townshend made an immense cutting through the great chalk ridge; for two and a half miles the average depth is 40-ft., and over 1,500,000 cubic feet of earth had to be removed by means of "horse runs." The method was to lay planks at steep angles, attach ropes to barrows filled with earth, and use horses to pull both barrows and men to the top of the embankment. Frightful accidents occurred when the ropes broke or when the horses became restive.

(To be continued).

EMERGENCY MEDICINE

Local Arrangements

Arrangements for the emergency supply of medicine now operating in Berkhamsted is as follows:—

CHEMISTS' ROTA

The week-day evening (6-7 p.m.) and Sunday morning (11.30 a.m.—12.30 p.m.) service rota adopted by Berkhamsted chemists for the dispensing of medical prescriptions, is as follows for the current month:—

July 1—7: Taylors.
July 8—14: Boots.
July 15—21: Figg.
July 22—28: Dickman.
July 29—August 4: Taylors.

LIBRARY OPENING TIMES

The Berkhamsted Branch of the County Library is open in Prince Edward Street on the following days and times:—

Mon., Tues., Thur., & Fri.—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.;
2 p.m. to 5 p.m.; 5.30 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.
Wednesday—CLOSED ALL DAY.
Saturday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2.30 p.m. to 5 p.m.

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