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Building the Railway

It was a great day for "Cubitt's men"—employees of Messrs. W. and L. Cubitt, builders of the local section of the London and Birmingham Railway—when, in 1834, they marched down Castle Street to receive their spades and wheelbarrows. Orders were given by the foreman, and work was started within a stone's throw of the canal bridge.

It was known that the job would take at least three years, and three years was a long time to wait for celebrations. So, after a short spell of work, the men were given unlimited beer. The rest of the day, to quote Henry Nash, was "given up to the worship of Bacchus."

HECTIC TIMES

That was the start of three hectic years for Berkhamsted. Not since the Civil War had there been so many men in the town. Irish labourers, Cockney navvies, Midland bricklayers, Northern miners, poured into Berkhamsted, and almost every cottage became a lodging-house. At one time upwards of 700 men and boys were employed on the railway in this district alone, and the publicans, in particular, enjoyed the fruits of full employment.

Much of the labour force, of course, was drawn from the town and neighbouring villages. Of the scores and scores of "outsiders," many married local girls, and their descendants are still living in Berkhamsted. One well-known local family is descended from a Leicestershire miner who came to the district to take part in the building of Northchurch tunnel.

What a mixed set of fellows were the railway builders! They worked on the line and fought in the streets. Public-houses were crowded from dawn until after midnight. The rolling railway drunkard could slake his thirst at seven public-houses in Castle Street alone

before sampling the delights of dog-fighting in the High Street. Women were sometimes afraid to go out unescorted, and their escorts often wished they had stayed at home.

Gang warfare broke out, and in a "great riot" of 1836, Irish navvies were "knocked down, severely beaten and kicked unceremoniously." All this, and much more, in a little town which had regarded the arrival of the mail coach as the most exciting event of the day.

GROWING PAINS

We cannot conceive the low type of morality that characterised these men, says Henry Nash. But there were rough diamonds, too, and some were noted for "their superior intelligence, their sobriety, and their religious principles." Indeed, railway foremen were responsible for introducing Wesleyanism to Berkhamsted.

Work on the local section of the railway could not have started at a more troublesome spot. The outer defences of the Castle, set in ancient marshland, seemed as unconquerable as they were in medieval times. A temporary bridge was thrown over the road to Whitehill, and earth from the Sunnyside cutting was taken by cart and wheelbarrow to form a foundation for the embankment facing the Moor.

Days and weeks passed without a firm foundation being secured. Then powerful pumps were kept going day and night to drain deep caverns into which thousands upon thousands of bricks and stones were hurled. Success came belatedly, after more bricks had been hidden below ground than in the superstructure.

"HARVEY COOMBE"

Eastward and westward, cuttings and embankments were made, and as soon as sufficient ground was levelled to lay down temporary rails, the first locomotive ever seen in the district was brought into use.

Who, I wonder, was Harvey Coombe? His name was given to Berkhamsted's first locomotive, which was transported in sections by canal barge to Bourne End and assembled in a barn at Pix Farm before a crowd of unbelievers. But the fitter knew his job; the "Harvey Coombe" was soon on the right lines, chugging along with a long train of wagons to bring soil from Billet-lane cutting to the long Boxmoor embankment. A ride on the tender was a privilege for which one paid dearly; gratuities put the driver and stoker in the higher income group.

TUNNEL DISASTER

Inevitably, there were accidents. One man was crushed by a fall of earth, and the funeral, attended by four hundred navvies wearing clean white slops, created "a very novel and impressive spectacle." A worse disaster occurred during the building of Watford

tunnel, when gravel broke through the chalk and killed ten men.

Many were the set-backs, but the estimated time for building the railway was not greatly exceeded. In July, 1837, the London—Boxmoor section was opened, and by August 18 the directors reported that the number of passengers had "exceeded all expectations." During the first 28 days 39,855 passengers were conveyed, and daily receipts averaged £153—not, it would seem, a very rich immediate reward.

THE FIRST TRIP

On Monday, October 16, 1837, the line was opened as far as Tring. Here is an account of the first journey:

"The directors and a party of friends made an experimental trip in six carriages, and the fineness of the day contributed to the pleasure of the journey. The engine having been attached to the train, the carriages proceeded on their journey, and they completed the distance to Harrow by 25 minutes after 9 and to the station at Boxmoor at 9 minutes before 10 o'clock.

"The train here entered on the new line of rails. Immediately after leaving Boxmoor station 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.

"In Berkhamstead a new station has been 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 10 past 10 o'clock, thus having completed the whole distance from Primrose Hill in an hour and 11 minutes."

THE OLD STATION

The "Elizabethan" railway station at Berkhamsted stood beside Whitehill bridge. For some years after it was closed (the present station was opened in the 1870s) part of the building was used as a workshop. Later, the frontage was hidden behind hoardings, and the last remnants of the old station were removed in 1934. In that year at least one resident could recall leaving Berkhamsted from the old station in the morning and arriving at the new station in the evening.

(To be continued).

A later article will deal with the first motor cars in the district, and early horse- and motor-bus services. Old residents' recollections will be gratefully received by 'Beorcham.'

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 29—August 4; Taylors.
August 5—11; Boots.
August 12—18; Figg.
August 19—25; Dickman.
August 26—Sept. 1; 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., Thurs., & 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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