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NEW LIGHT ON A FANTASTIC SCHEME

The Northchurch Tramway

Some ten years ago I devoted an article in the *Parochial Review* to the Chesham, Boxmoor and Hemel Hempstead Steam Tramway Company which was formed in 1887. It was the promoters' intention to lay rails along existing roads from Marlowes to Bourne End, and then along the Bourne Gutter valley to Chesham.

Of course, nothing came of this proposal, and I would not have dealt with the subject in a Berkhamsted publication but for the fact that a branch line from our town to Bourne End was also contemplated.

But that was only half of the story. I have just discovered that trams were proposed for Northchurch, too! And, just to show that the "railway mania" of early Victorian times was followed by a "tramway mania" in the 'eighties, yet another steam tramway—from Tring Station to Aylesbury—was proposed.

WHITE ELEPHANTS

Fortunately, these white elephants were still-born. If the promoters had succeeded, we may be sure that their trams would have been scrapped long ago, as was the case with the double-decker steam monstrosities which formerly snorted along the road from Wolverton to Stony Stratford.

To set the scene for our story, we must go back to the time when Berkhamsted station was also used by Chesham residents, who had to wait for a station of their own until Britain's last trunk railway was built. To the chagrin of our Buckinghamshire neighbours, the London and North Western Railway Company did not build a branch line from Berkhamsted to Chesham. Instead, the Company maintained a busy road service between the two towns, and the cost of transporting goods alone (in wagons drawn by four horses) was estimated at £10,000 a year.

LANDOWNER'S OBJECTION

Additional information now available shows that Berkhamsted did not wish to lose this traffic. To quote the *Berkhamsted Times* for November 18, 1887: "The sudden announcement on Saturday of a steam tramway between Chesham and Hemel Hempstead, via Bourne End, leaving out Berkhamsted, caused considerable attention, and on Monday, about noon, the following bill was

issued: 'Notice.—Steam tramway.—A public meeting of special importance will be held at the Town Hall this evening (Monday) to meet and consult with the engineer of the Company...'

The meeting was well attended, and the tramway engineer, Mr. S. Sellon, made it clear that the route originally favoured was from Berkhamsted to Chesham. But there was the difficulty of getting up King's Road (then very narrow) and going through a portion of the recreation ground (Butts Meadow), and before adopting his plan he had to see some of the principal landowners. Mr. Dorrien-Smith's agent said the project would destroy a pet scheme they had in view for building, and Mr. Sellon admitted that if he had to meet with opposition from Mr. Dorrien-Smith "he might well whistle for the success of the tramway."

PENNY A MILE

Mr. Sellon, the report continued, therefore determined on the Boxmoor scheme, and Hemel Hempstead had received him with open hands. He had offered several plums, such as widening approaches, before throwing out the Berkhamsted and Chesham scheme.

As a final sop to Berkhamsted, Mr. Sellon said he would do all he could for a scheme which would link Berkhamsted with the Chesham and Hemel Hempstead tramway at Bourne End. The steam trams would travel at eight miles an hour on roads and twenty-five miles an hour across fields. The fare would be a penny a mile.

POLICE STATION JUNCTION!

After a good deal of friendly discussion, Mr. R. R. Norris proposed "That it is the opinion of this meeting that a line of tramway connecting Berkhamsted with the proposed line from Hemel Hempstead to Chesham will be of advantage to the town, and ought to be supported." Mr. Alfred Pocock, seconding, said Mr. Dorrien-Smith might regret not having a tramway nearer his property some day. Mr. J. G. Knowles and Mr. John Ashby then said they wished Northchurch to share the expected benefits, and with this addition the motion was carried unanimously.

The tramway promoters were quick workers. Four days after the meeting at

the Town Hall, the local papers carried a column-length preliminary notice headed "Northchurch and Berkhamsted Tramways" for a Provisional Order under the Tramways Act of 1870. Here is a summary:

Tramway No. 1.—Commencing in High Street, Northchurch, opposite New Road, passing through Gossoms End and terminating opposite the Police Station, Berkhamsted. Single line throughout, save for a short double line at the Northchurch terminus.

Tramway No. 2.—From Berkhamsted station passenger entrance (with a branch under the bridge to the goods yards), along Lower King's Road to the Police Station.

Tramway No. 3.—From the Police Station along the main road to join the Chesham—Hemel Hempstead tramway at Bourne End; single line, doubled for trams to pass outside the Town Hall, Berkhamsted Hall (demolished: between Swing Gate Lane and Bank Mill), and the "25 miles to London" post.

The gauge was to be 3-ft. 6-in., and the promoters sought permission to use animal, steam or other mechanical or motive power.

ANOTHER DIFFICULTY

That was the position on November 18, 1887. A week later the local papers contained a letter from Mr. Sellon stating that the promoting company, after preparing and issuing plans and advertisements at considerable cost for the Northchurch and Berkhamsted Tramways, found that the resolution passed at the Town Hall meeting was not sufficiently representative of the

feeling of the town. There was a further difficulty, and the company therefore had no option but to withdraw their application to the Board of Trade.

The campaign for tramways continued unabated at Chesham and Hemel Hempstead. Our Buckinghamshire neighbours were most enthusiastic, and one man wanted the line extended from Chesham to High Wycombe. At Hemel Hempstead one of the few opponents was Sir A. P. Paston-Cooper, who was reminded that it was his uncle who "was just as much opposed to the London and North Western Railway fifty years ago, and so it had to be two miles away from the town." (This, with other objections caused the diversion of the railway from the Gade to the Bulbourne valley, to the lasting benefit of Berkhamsted).

THE SCHEME ABANDONED

Berkhamsted and Northchurch people were still interested in a local tramway, however, and the subject was discussed at length at a meeting of the Northchurch Vestry. Objections were raised to the smoke and noise of the engines, and to the danger of laying rails along narrow roads "which could hardly accommodate a timber-carriage and a trap."

In the end the "Noes" had it, and the only tramway scheme that was ever likely to mature—from Chesham to Hemel Hempstead—was abandoned when the authorities ruled that the roads were too narrow. And so we have no pictures of Old Berkhamsted showing steam trams shunting outside the Police Station or panting along the Bourne Gutter valley past Bottom Farm. I

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cannot help feeling that we have missed something!

Incidentally, when Chesham was belatedly favoured with a railway station, a proposal that the branch line from Chalfont Road should be continued to Berkhamsted received some support. As no action was taken, British Railways have been spared the agony of closing yet another uneconomic branch line. Or would it have been uneconomic, with an intermediate station which might have turned Ashley Green into a bustling town?

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