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RIDING ON THE 'HARVEY COMBE'

## Berkhamsted's First Locomotive

Recently, a reader brought along an old print which, but for his timely intervention, would have been thrown away. It is a lithograph by J. C. Bourne of the London and Birmingham Railway at Berkhamsted, dated June 10, 1837.

No, this is not the familiar scene of the original railway station at Berkhamsted, with a few passengers standing perilously near a close relative of "Puffing Billy". The much rarer print in my possession shows the Sunnyside cutting a few months before the line was officially opened.

A tall-chimneyed locomotive is drawing a train of small trucks along one of the two original tracks, and ahead we see Gravel Path bridge, nearing completion but still surrounded by scaffolding. To the left, farm buildings occupy what is now the west end of George Street and Ellesmere Road. In the distance, St. Peter's Church is seen above the trees.

### A FAMOUS LOCOMOTIVE

The little train is obviously taking chalk and soil from Northchurch tunnel or Billet Lane cutting to build up embankments east of Berkhamsted. The locomotive is the 'Harvey Combe', which, readers of earlier articles in this series may remember, was transported in sections by canal boat to Bourne End, assembled at Pix Farm, and then used to supplement the work of man and horse on the construction of the railway.

Mr. L. T. C. Rolt has some interesting things to say about this locomotive in his excellent book entitled "George and Robert Stephenson," published a few months ago by Longmans (30s.). The 'Harvey Combe,' built by Robert Stephenson & Company, was the first locomotive ordered by the London and Birmingham Railway to assist in construction work, and it "represented the highest development of the six-wheeled 'Patentee' type." It was fitted with a form of gab valve-gear using four eccentrics, and Mr. Rolt goes on to say that the perfection of the famous "Stephenson Link" valve-motion, which is still in use on many locomotives at the present time, was evolved by the Stephenson Company as "an inspired simplification of the complex gab valve-gear introduced on the 'Harvey Combe' of 1835."

The driver of the 'Harvey Combe,'

Mr. Rolt adds, was Henry, son of Robert Weatherburn, who was one of George Stephenson's workmates when the famous railway pioneer became a civil engineer on his own account. It is useful to know the name of the man who gave Berkhamstedians their first taste of railway travel. Henry Weatherburn permitted people to ride on the tender from the starting point near Billet Lane bridge to the "tip" where the soil was deposited, receiving—as Henry Nash records—tips of another kind to augment his salary. Afterwards, he was an engineman on the old South Eastern Railway.

### WHERE THE WORK BEGAN

It would be interesting to know why the Berkhamsted section was favoured with the London and Birmingham Railway Company's very first steam locomotive. In 1835, when the 'Harvey Combe' was delivered, work was in progress all along the 112½ miles route, a start at Berkhamsted having been made in 1834.

Locally, work began near Castle Street canal bridge, where the original station was built. A temporary bridge was thrown over the road to Whitehill, and soil from the Sunnyside cutting was used (with tons of bricks and stones) to build the embankment which faces the Moor. In early stages all the soil was transported in wheelbarrows and carts, but as soon as sufficient land was levelled, rails were laid down and then extended for the 'Harvey Combe' to make progressively longer journeys.

### THE FIRST SIDINGS

It may not be widely known that the original sidings were between Whitehill and Gravel Path bridges. I had an opportunity of exploring the site a few days ago. Although the rails and sleepers were removed some eighty years ago, the large goods shed and adjoining office are still standing. A track ran right through the shed, which, when the new sidings and goods shed were built, was used by the Railway Company for stabling horses employed on the local delivery service. Today the shed in Station Road is leased to a firm of public works contractors.

The sidings, incidentally, extended to within a few yards of Gravel Path bridge, where the cutting may still be seen. On the west side of the former goods shed, the loading ramp is intact, suitably curved at a point opposite an abandoned turntable.

### TOM MEEK'S BRIDGE

While touring the former sidings, I was interested to hear a veteran railwayman refer to Whitehill bridge as "Tom Meek's Bridge." He and his colleagues always use this name, and I propose to follow suit in future. Tom Meek was one of the town's last wood-turners, specialising in the manufacture of pump buckets and suckers—popular utensils before the days of piped water. He plied his trade in Cox's Lane (King's Road); then, on becoming licensee of the "Crystal Palace", he transferred the turnery to the disused station building on the Castle side of the bridge, only a few yards from his public-house.

On the Castle side one may still see signs of the subway which gave access to the platforms of the old station. The stairs and corridor, I understand, were never completely filled in. Some future archaeologists may break through the bricked-up entrance to the subway and find a fourth-class railway ticket or a handbill advertising excursion fares to the Great Exhibition of 1851.

### NARROW PLATFORMS

Note the granite sleepers (dating from the earliest days of the railway) which strengthen the embankment near the former subway.

A copy of an undated plan in my

possession is interesting in that it shows three main lines. Originally there were two, the present "fast" lines. Later, a third and then a fourth track were added.

According to the plan, a platform for the fast down line extended from Whitehill (Tom Meek's) bridge to a point opposite Mill Street. Part of this platform was on top of the front station buildings. Between the fast up line and the third line was a longer platform which continued over and beyond the bridge. Obviously this was a very narrow platform, and anyone familiar with the site will realise how difficult it would have been to provide a fourth line and an extra platform. Both embankment and bridge would have required considerable widening.

It may have been this construction problem, as much as the growing needs of the town, which caused the London and North Western Railway Company to build a new station a furlong or so west of the old one.

### ENGINE INN

The plan, incidentally, gives the "Railway Tavern" the name "Engine Inn." Additions in red ink, obviously made many years after the original plan was drawn, indicate a new road for what we now call Station Road. Lower King's Road, too, is shown as a red-inked addition, with this interesting footnote: "Licence granted to the Berkhamstead Vestry to erect gates and form entrance to Station Yard at point A; see Agreement 23 Jan. 1885, acknowledgment 1s. per ann."

Although dozens of early photographs of local scenes have been pre-

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served, our pictorial records of the old railway station appear to be limited to two drawings of early Victorian days, long before local photographers were active.

As the station was in daily use until the 1870s, and the building facing the canal was not completely demolished until 1932, it seems strange that we should lack photographs. Someone, somewhere, may be able to fill this gap in our records of bygone Berkhamsted.

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