130th Anniversary of a Great Local Event

From Coaching Days to Railway Age

BY

'BEORCHAM'

ONE AUTUMN MORNING 130 years ago—to be precise, on Monday, 16th October 1837—stage coaches made their customary calls for fresh teams of horses from the stables of the Kings Arms and the Red Lion. It was 'business as usual' for the innkeepers, ostlers, coach proprietors and drivers, though some of them were apprehensive about certain happenings that day at the far end of Castle Street. The activity in the High Street, however, was so normal and familiar that only schoolboys stopped to watch the coaches as they clattered off to Tring, Aylesbury, Banbury, Buckingham, Leamington, and, of course, London.

It was for a London coach that a certain young man waited outside the Red Lion (where the Midland Bank now stands) at 9.30 a.m., a time when hundreds of townspeople were hurrying down Castle Street. The coach from Aylesbury arrived in good time and departed with as much speed as the driver could coax from his horses on the next stage of the journey to London. The coach lived up to its name 'The Dispatch'.

CHALK EMBANKMENT

Sitting beside the driver, the young man soon wished that he had paid an extra shilling or two for an inside seat. He turned up the collar of his greatcoat as the coach clattered past the '26 miles to London' post near the corner of Three Close Lane. At Bank Mill he shivered at the thought that it would be 11 o'clock before the coach stopped at Watford. There would then be a ride of more than two hours to London.

As the coach bumped along the rough turnpike road, the passenger enjoyed views over the hedge that were denied to wealthier folk inside the coach. He smiled when the coachman spat and cursed at an unsightly embankment of white chalk and brown earth, too new to be covered with grass, running parallel with the road. As the coach approached a wonderful new bridge at Boxmoor, a tall-funnelled locomotive came into view, drawing a string of six carriages of a design which had obviously been inspired by stage coaches. The engine snorted, and so did the coachman. 'It's against Nature,' he growled. It was also against his own livelihood. For on that Monday morning the Railway Age reached Berkhamsted, and the Coaching Days were numbered. October 16, 1837, was the day when the town's modern development began.

While our young friend was being jolted along the road from Boxmoor to Two Waters, Berkhamstedians saw and cheered our first passenger train. It entered the new station at 10 o'clock; ten minutes later it reached Tring and could go no farther. Rails were still being laid along the great cutting beyond Tring station.

Many of the people who flocked to Berkhamsted station had already sampled rail travel, for three months earlier the line was opened from London to Boxmoor. Short rides had also been enjoyed on the footplate and tender of the 'Harvey Combe', an early locomotive which was transported in sections by canal barge to Bourne End and reassembled in a barn at Pix Farm. Hauling truckloads of soil from cuttings to embankments, it was driven by Henry Weatherburn, son of one of George Stephenson's early workmates.

Berkhamstedians were no less happy to welcome the first trains than they were to see the departure of the railway builders. Upwards of 700 were employed in this district at one period. They worked on the line and fought in the streets. Public houses were crowded, and the rolling railway drunkard could slake his thirst at seven licensed houses in Castle Street alone. Women were afraid to go out unescorted, gang warfare broke out, and a 'great riot' in 1836 involved Irish navvies who were 'knocked down, severely beaten and kicked unceremoniously.'

MANY CASUALTIES

Nevertheless, there were good men as well as brawlers—Methodism was introduced to the town by railway workers—and only a very fit, hard-working body of men could have shifted so many thousands of tons of earth. The making of Northchurch tunnel was a highly skilled and dangerous job. We know from the parish registers that seven men at Berkhamsted and six at Northchurch were killed while working on the line.

Locally, work began near Castle Street canal bridge, where the first station was built, with sidings alongside what is now Station Road. A temporary bridge was thrown over the road to Whitehill, and soil from the Sunnyside cutting was used, with many tons of bricks and stones, to reinforce the Castle outer earthworks and form the embankment opposite the Moor. All the soil was transported by wheelbarrow or cart until sufficient land was levelled for rails to be laid. The 'Harvey Combe' was then able to make progressively longer journeys.

DIRECTORS' TRIAL RUN

Then came the great day when the directors of the London and Birmingham Railway and a party of friends made an 'experimental' trip in six carriages to Tring, leaving London at 8.59 a.m. and reaching Boxmoor at 9.51 a.m. To quote a contemporary report, '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.

'In Berkhampstead 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 continued its journey 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

It is difficult to know why Berkhamsted was especially favoured; the station must have been very attractive, to judge from one of J. C. Buckler's drawings. It was closed when the present station was built in the 1870s, but part of the old building was used for some years by Tom Meek, a wood-turner. Later, the 'Elizabethan' frontage was hidden behind hoardings, and the last remnants of the old station were removed in 1934. On the Castle side of the bridge we may still see signs of the subway which gave access to the platforms of the old station, and I understand that the stairs and corridor were never completely filled in.

From the nearby sidings, rails and sleepers were removed some eighty years ago, but the old goods shed and adjoining office are still standing, and the loading ramp is intact, suitably curved at a point opposite a long-abandoned turntable.

OXFAM and FAMILY PLANNING

OXFAM are often asked about the family planning projects they support, and in a recently issued pamphlet quote from a speech made by Bernard Llewellyn, formerly their Field Director in Asia, at an Oxfam conference.

'Birth-control—even ignoring the opposition it always provokes—takes time to act; while the countries where it is most needed, such as India, are ill-equipped to take action on the scale required. All Oxfam can do is to select areas and groups of people ready to take positive action, and offer the appropriate help.

RIVER BED

'One of the first places we did this was along the bed of the Han River on the edge of Seoul. This is the place to which the homeless and the hopeless without work tend to drift from all over South Korea. For many this is the end of the road. On the shingle of the river bed in the dry season they build their shacks of wood and tin and canvas; they send their children to grub in the rubbish tips for food.

'On the floors of the shacks, with little bedding and no clean water, women give birth to children they don't want, and don't know how to prevent. Their request to us, relayed through Korean case-workers, was for help to prevent these unwanted births at a time when their other children were having to go without food.

SHACKS

'We gave this aid through a Korean agency which was being helped by a dedicated young American doctor who spent more time in the shacks of the Han River than in his own home. I remember Dr. Boelens telling me one day of his visit to a slum home where a child lay dying in a corner. After examining the sick child he said it should be in hospital and offered to take it. The mother refused to have the child moved unless he undertook to look after it and feed it if it should survive.

'We didn't change the face of Korea by the help we gave to the Han River women. But we did take some of the pressure off where it had been heaviest. Which is what Oxfam exists to do.'