

THE RAILWAY COMES TO EYNSHAM

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by Eynsham Primary School Research Group

In 1859 there was a railway (which had been there for quite a while) which ran from Oxford to Worcester and then to Wolverhampton. It was a single line.

In that same year some businessmen, mainly from Witney, came together to form a committee with the aim of having a branch railway built from Yarnton Junction through Eynsham to Witney. The Committee was headed by Charles Early (head of the famous blanket company in Witney) and included Walter Strickland of Cokethorpe Park, an important farmer, Henry Akers of Bampton (farmer), Malachi Bartlett of Witney (builder), William Payne of Witney (carrier) and from Eynsham, Joseph Druce, who with his father and brother Samuel were important farmers and landowners in Eynsham.

This group wanted only the best and they chose Sir Charles Fox as their Engineer. He had been a partner in the house of Fox, Henderson & Co, contractors for the erection of the Great Exhibition of 1851, and he had been knighted for his services in that capacity. He surveyed their planned route. In the spring of 1859 a Bill was presented in Parliament asking for permission to build the Yarnton Junction to Witney line. Despite a good deal of opposition from the larger railway companies, like the Great Western, the Bill passed through Parliament quite quickly and received the Royal Assent in August 1859.

Capital for the project was raised by the sale of £10 shares. The company needed to buy a good deal of land which, as can be seen from the Book of Reference accompanying the Parliamentary Plan, included in Eynsham Parish some 10 arable fields, 23 grass fields, an ozier bed, a gravel pit and part of the Botley and Newland Turnpike road and the Toll House. The chief sellers of land in Eynsham, besides the Druce family, were the Duke of Marlborough and the Revd. Robert Burr Bourne of Donhead St. Andrew in Wiltshire. He had bought up a lot of land in and around Eynsham during the twenty years or so before the railway was built. For three parcels of land, measuring approximately 6 acres, 3 roods, 2 perches, he was paid £879 2s 6d. However, an Indenture dated 26th July 1875 shows that he had still not received the money owed to him since 1860!

On Saturday May 19th 1860, just under a year after the Act had been passed, this notice appeared in Jackson's Oxford Journal:-

'WITNEY RAILWAY

It is with much pleasure that we are able to inform you that arrangements have been made for the commencement of the Railway. Invitations have been issued to meet at the Swan Inn, Ensham, this day (Saturday), and the ceremony of turning the first sod will be performed by Walter Strickland, Esq., of Cokethorpe Park. A procession will be formed at the Swan Inn and it will then go to the spot selected for operations.'
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Charles Douglas Fox, son of Sir Charles, was appointed as the resident engineer and the report of the celebrations for the opening of the railway in 1861 in Jackson's Oxford Journal says that he had personally supervised the work "from commencement to completion". The railway took twenty months to build but there were some complaints about the delay in opening. The Act of Parliament states "The Capital of the Company shall be Fifty thousand Pounds in Five thousand Shares of ten Pounds each". The cost of the building was reported as having been £40,000 and the contractor, Mr Joseph Pickering of West Bromwich and London, was praised for his work. Unfortunately, during the carrying out of the work, Mr Pickering ran into debt. Four writs served against him in 1861 show a

total of £1,509 (rounded up to the nearest pound), and the speech given by Sir Charles Fox at the opening celebrations and some correspondence dated 1861 suggest that he was in difficulties.

According to the newspaper account of the opening celebrations, Sir Charles "...scarcely hoped that the contractor, Mr Pickering would have been present on that occasion, for circumstances had occurred, as they were aware, which rendered it unlikely that he would be there; but still he felt that he should not be doing his duty if he did not state that he had done his work extremely well ... Mr Pickering had, never manifested any inclination to shirk his work". It has not been possible to establish exactly of what "they were aware" but certainly the writs, as well as very politely worded letters of demand for payment of out-of-date bills, indicate severe problems. The following letter, which seems to express a great deal of worry, would not have looked out of place at the beginning of a Sherlock Holmes story! It also underlines the importance of precisely timed rail travel.

75 Old Broad Street, London E.C.
Oct. 15th 1861.

My Dear Pickering,

At my earnest request Ikin has consented to go down tomorrow. May could not and unless someone did I was all up.

You must meet Ikin at Oxford before Sir Charles [Fox] comes and inform Ikin on all points. He must be ready to meet all parties at [2] o'clock p.m. and therefore there is no moment to be lost. He will quit London by the Six o'clock train and will go to the Angel but he will come to Graces Hotel to you and stay with you until [Fox] arrives who will probably quit London by the 9.35 train.

Do attend to this as your [safety] depends on it. We shall not quit London until ½past six p.m.

Believe me

Yours faithfully,
John Garney.

Jos. Pickering, Esq.

We have not established the identity of Ikin or John Garney, but they may have been members of the Board of Joseph Pickering's firm.

The correspondence available shows that materials were gathered from all parts of the country but some was purchased locally, particularly timber. W. Day of Eynsham supplied fencing, gates etc. and someone called Scan[...] also supplied timber. (It was impossible to be sure of this name because the papers are very badly damaged.)

The building of the line depended very much on the use of horses as well as men, as the following list shows:

October 11th 1861 "... the list of Men and Horses employed on Witney Railway.

3 Carpenters in the Yard getting Fence Ready for Station
1 Carpenter and 2 labourers fixing ditto
1 Blacksmith 1 Striker
8 Carpenters putting up Stations & 3 labourers
1 Man putting on slates and 1 boy
1 man Watch[...] Stations
3 pair of Sawyers

Sutton and 8 men putting in points and crossings
Sherwood and 10 men making Road at Witney Station Yard,
2 Horses and 1 Driver taking materials to Sutton and the Carpenters 4 Horses and 1 driver taking
Engine Shed from Junction to Witney 2 men fixing Scaffolding for to put up Engine Shed
1 man Rep[...] Horse Reaper Cutting chaff"

[again a damaged document]

The main celebrations for the opening of the Railway in November 1861 took place in Witney. At 11.00 a.m. on 14th November the first train went from Witney to Oxford, being driven by Mr C. Douglas Fox. There were 14 carriages which were mainly full. The weather was bad. The return trip left Oxford at 1.00 p.m. The train stopped at South Leigh and Eynsham "at which a large number of working classes were assembled and on the arrival of the train gave vent to hearty cheers". As shareholders the Druce family were well represented at "the elegant dejeuner" held in St. Mary's School Room, Witney, and also in Witney an ox was roasted; and at Eynsham "the navvies and workmen employed on the line were entertained with a substantial dinner".

The operators of the railway claimed that there was difficulty in drawing up the first timetables which were to be arranged for "the convenience of the public", but these duly appeared in Jackson's Oxford Journal on Saturday November 23rd 1861.

From Eynsham to Oxford 8.30 a.m. 11.15 a.m. 5.05 p.m. 7.50 p.m.

From Oxford to Eynsham 9.18 a.m. 12.08 p.m. 5.57 p.m. 8.48 p.m.

and the prices of tickets for passengers were:

Eynsham to Oxford - 1st class 1/8d, 2nd Class 1/2d, 3rd Class 10d.

Eynsham to Witney - 1st Class 1/- , 2nd Class 9d, 3rd Class 6d.

These fares made travel much cheaper, for we discovered that in 1867 a cab fare from Oxford Station to Eynsham, a distance of 6 miles, cost six shillings (6/-).

The authorised fares for freight and cattle, based on so-much a mile, had been set out in the Act of Parliament. These took into account the use of Company carriages and Company engines. So that we found:-

"Toll for Animals Class 7. For every Ox, Cow, Bull or Neat cattle, Twopence a Mile; and if conveyed in any Carriage belonging to the Company an additional One Penny a Mile."

We wondered how the animals could be transported without the use of a carriage and an engine!

From the Log Book of the Infant's School, which was opened in 1890, we have found some indications of how important the railway became to those travelling to and from Eynsham.

1894. Feb. 5th I missed the train at Oxford this morning & so could not be at Eynsham to take school until the afternoon.

Apr.20th I left school at 3.00 p.m. today in order to catch the 3.30 p.m. train to Cheltenham.

1895. Mar. 8th Attendance poor, Norah away ill. Left school early this afternoon to leave Eynsham by the 3.30 train.

1898. Apr. 7th School assembled this afternoon at one, registers were marked immediately and school closed at 3.15 so teachers (who were going on Easter holidays) could catch the 3.19 train.

The railway also entered into the school curriculum. Subjects for lessons included 'The Station Master' (1902), 'The Railway Station' (1904), and 'The Railway' (the latter under the heading of Social Economy); and on Sept. 30th 1898 the Head Mistress recorded

.."Children played trains today as it was too wet to go out."

Eynsham had not only a railway, but also a 'Railway Inn', and we wondered if this was built at the same time as the railway or if it was an old inn renamed. The external appearance of the building we see today (on the corner of Station Road and Acre End Street, opposite 'The Swan') led us to believe that it had probably been built or altered around the middle or end of the 19th century. Research among the archives revealed two documents which shed some light on the problem. By his will of 19th August 1869, James Gibbons, described as Grocer, farmer and brewer, left "... to my daughter Ann Ruth Gibbons ... my house and premises known as the Railway Inn at Eynsham with the two cottages adjoining them", and a later schedule, which redistributes his property after the death of one of his sons, states that Ann Ruth Gibbons shall have "the messuage or tenement hereditaments and premises situate and being in Eynsham aforesaid in a certain street there called Fire Lane - All which said premises were formerly known as the 'Britannia Inn' and are now known as the 'Railway Inn'".

No 'Britannia Inn' (other than at Barnard Gate) appears in Kelly's Oxfordshire Directory of 1848 or in Slater's Oxfordshire Directory of 1850, but Billing's Directory of 1854 records that the 'Britannia Inn' in Acre End St. was kept by one John Harwood, described as 'Beer retailer & baker'. No other reference to 'Fire Lane' could be found. Prior to the coming of the railway, Station Road seems to have been called New Bridge Road (see Chambers, E.K. Eynsham under the Monks. Oxfordshire Record Society, Vol.18, 1936), but we wondered if it could have been called 'Fire Lane' for a short time after the so-called "Calamitous Fire" reported in Jackson's Oxford Journal of Saturday October 7th 1854. This broke out on the Duke's Farm but spread rapidly and burned for the best part of two days causing a lot of damage and involving property in Swan Lane. We can, at the moment, only speculate.

In this, our first project, we have confined ourselves mainly to the Victorian era of the railway, in line with our school studies, but we may have opportunities to take our study further in the future.

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