Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - April 2022

The Arrival of the Railways in Reading - Richard Marks

Wargrave Local History Society began its new programme year with an illustrated presentation by Richard Marks on the *Arrival of the Railways in Reading* – drawing on the research for his PhD.
The first line built to serve the town was the Great Western. Construction had begun from both the Bristol and Paddington ends, reaching Twyford from London in 1839, and Reading in 1840. The next was the Reading, Guildford and Reigate Railway, which (unusually) actually served all the towns in its name! The line opened in 1847 and was actually operated by the much larger South Eastern Railway, rather than directly by its promotors. Next to serve the town was the Staines, Wokingham and Woking Railway, which was operated by the London and South Western Railway, using the tracks of the Reigate line from Wokingham to reach Reading. In due course, these both became part of the Southern Railway in 1924. The next major change was in 1948, when the Southern and the Great Western, together with the LMS and LNER, were combined to form the nationalised British Railways, but in 1996 the railways were privatised again, with Thames Trains, First Great Western and South Western Trains serving the Reading area. It is hoped that the new Crossrail line will fully open in 2022, providing other travel opportunities, although it has been severely delayed, apparently due to different signalling systems needed in the underground and open-air sections.

The commonly held view is that when the navvies built the early railways there was a lot of destruction of property, and slum clearance, putting canals out of business, (although the Great Western made use of them during construction) and that when the railways opened, there was economic growth, leading to population expansion etc. Whilst true in some areas, such as London or Manchester, Richard said it was not true everywhere, and depended on which industries were affected. Most previous studies of the impact of the railways on the area they served have concentrated on six city areas – Birmingham, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and of course London.

In London such clearances were probably true. Charles Dickens. appears very anti-railway in Dombey and Son – but his opinion was probably influenced by having been involved in a railway accident at Staplehurst shortly before the book was written. In more modern times, Dan Snow in his television series Locomotion said that the railways caused massive destruction, ploughing through the countryside. Sometimes this was the case - the approach to Waterloo, for example, was built on viaducts through a densely populated area, and there was a lot of slum clearance to create the London and Birmingham railway. In Birmingham, the council provided the site for New Street station, as it contained many “less salubrious” properties, such as gambling dens and houses of ill repute. However, at Northampton the Norman castle was destroyed to enable the railway to be built – a station now occupying the site. The railways, however, did not evict people – they just bought the properties. The landlords often then moved the occupiers into other property they owned – leading to even more over-crowding. But go where they wished. The original plan for the railway from Staines towards Windsor was for it to continue to Clewer, taking away a corner of Windsor Castle. Queen Victoria was not amused – and the line terminated alongside the river.

In rural areas, such as East Anglia or Berkshire, it was rather different, and Richard drew a comparison between two locations – Bath and Reading. Both are on rivers, also on the Kennet and Avon canal and on the Bath Road, and involved in the manufacture of woollen cloth – most ships at Trafalgar had sails with fabric made at Reading. The geography of Bath, however, meant that the railway route had to follow the

theriver. Richard explained that construction of railways required an Act of Parliament. To obtain that, people were invited to subscribe to the company (they would only be asked to actually pay when funds were needed), and an engineer – in the case of the Great Western, Isambard Kingdom Brunel. A route would then be surveyed, and every property to be built on was detailed in a book of reference as to who owned it, who leased it, what business was undertaken there, etc and all annotated on a map. If the railway did not already possess it, the owner did not have to accept their offer. Arbitration would be binding on the parties, with a valuation by a land surveyor, who was often a local friend of the landowner. Compensation might also be needed if the railway would separate two parts of the owner's land, and bridges or other suitable crossings made at the railway's expense. A lot of landowners were able to take advantage of this, and made a lot of money as a result. In the centre of Bath, the 500 or so properties listed included canal basin warehouses close to the station site, which could be replaced nearby, and overall 679 people had to move. By comparison, in Reading only 97 properties were demolished, and 47 people displaced. Most of the buildings were cowsheds Unlike in some city locations, the railway made a gesture to the farmers concerned, and build them new cowsheds – the GWR would be wanting them to be a source of traffic in the future. The different situation arose because the railway took an alignment that was as easy as possible for the engines of the day – relatively flat and straight. A result of that was that stations were not always close to the towns they served – Wallingford Road was 4 miles from the town in its name, and Bodmin Road was even further from the Cornish town. In the case of Reading, the station was to the north of the then town centre. Brunel's first station was designed to have the platforms for both directions of travel on the town side. This meant that trains to or from London had to cross each other's path – when the number of trains increased this was impractical, so the station was rebuilt.

There were no catering facilities, or toilets, on early trains, so there were many refreshment facilities around the station, and the railway built the Great Western Hotel (now Malmaison) opposite the station. A small local biscuit maker – Huntley and Palmer – saw the potential in supplying passengers with their produce, realising that if they liked them, they would ask their local grocer to stock them. As a result, Huntley and Palmer grew to become a major Reading business. The firm cannily also tried to play off the 3 railway companies serving the town against each other, to get the best carriage rates. For other industries, however, the railways did not bring prosperity to Reading. National papers and magazines could make people aware of the latest fashions, for example, so whereas the town had supported 13 dressmakers before the railways arrived, afterwards there were none. There had been 8 footwear factories, but when the GWR built a line north from Oxford, giving access to Northamptonshire, the economies of scale of the industry there meant the Reading factories could not compete- the railway was a complete disaster for them (but good for Northants). Many other towns and their industries were affected in a similar way.

Wargrave station in the 1960s, shortly before it was changed to a single track

Richard concluded by looking at the railway to Wargrave. The branch had opened inn 1857, but Wargrave had to wait until 1900 for a station – the GWR expecting villagers to walk to Twyford for a train. Originally with 2 platforms, a footbridge, a goods shed etc, the line was singled in 1961, and the original station building demolished in 1988. Unlike many other places, Wargrave did not grow as a result of the provision of a station – but the railway did invest in the branch, with through trains to London, and 14 trains per day each way (just 6 on Sundays, as none ran during the time of morning church services). It was also where the GWR trialled its pioneering automatic train control system – the forerunner of today's fail-safe signalling systems.