

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - February 2017

### The Lambourn Valley Railway

At the Wargrave Local History Society's February meeting Graham Jones gave an interesting illustrated presentation, including rare film footage, on The Lambourn Valley Railway.

Graham began by recalling the "pre-Beeching" era that many of the audience would remember, when there were plenty of railways - a journey by steam train was "surely one of the most exhilarating things known to mankind". He had a particular soft spot for branch lines, where a little train would chug from a main line junction to a little rural community, or a small industrial one. By the time of a 1906 map of the railways of Britain, virtually every town or village of any size had a link to the rail system. This had been built in a space of about 70 years, and probably had a greater impact on the population than the coming of the internet.

Graham had started to investigate the history of the railway from Newbury to Lambourn when his son moved to a house on the alignment of the old track, although the latter has all now gone. Before the coming of the railway in the late 19th century, the Lambourn valley had hardly changed since Saxon times, Wheat grown on the downland, and sheep kept on the upper downs and cattle on the lower areas. The very pure water of the streams was ideal for growing watercress, and the river was teeming with trout. Lambourn at this time was rather like "Lark Rise to Candleford" - most people were born, married, had children and died in the same area, without travelling more than 15 miles or so. The combination of the repeal of the Corn Laws and the opening up of the American prairies, both in the mid-19th century, led to a dramatic drop in the local market price for arable produce. As with many other communities, the economy of the Lambourn Valley collapsed. Rearing more animals would not provide a good solution, as from Lambourn there was just a rough track to Newbury. That meant it took too long to take cattle or milk in churns for sale outside the valley- as it would be unsaleable by the time it reached the town.

The economic case for a railway was that people and goods could be moved down the valley in 45 minutes, instead of taking all day. In the other direction, coal could be brought up to Lambourn - the effect being that where it cost 10/- per ton before a rail link was provided, the price was just 1/- per ton afterwards. Horse racing had also been taking place since the mid-18th century on the downs at Lambourn, (pre-dating Newbury Racecourse) and a means to transport the horses would be an advantage - a local landowner, William the 2nd Earl of Craven, who lived at Ashdown House being particularly keen on horse racing.

The first scheme was begun in 1873, with a route from the centre of Newbury to run up the valley. There would be horse drawn carriages on the line of rails. A ceremonial 'first spike' was laid in Cheap Street by the Lord Mayor and the Countess of Craven. The engineer was a Mr E E Allen, and the line was gradually laid until just north of the present A4 bypass road to the north of the town centre - when work stopped due to bankruptcy - as far as is known, nothing remains of this early project.

The need for a railway to Lambourn still existed, and so in 1882 the Lambourn Valley Railway Company was formed. The Chairman was George Bramston Eyre, the other promoters being a Mr Money and a Mr Holmes, with a Mr Baldry as their engineer, who was asked to work out the costs of building the line. He estimated a total of £58,000 and on that basis the promoters sought an Act of Parliament in 1883, and raised £24,000 by selling shares in the venture. The next task was to engage a contractor to build it. In 1885 Furners and Baldwin agreed to do so for a price of £52,000 in cash and £30,000 in shares. Their first task, in 1886, was to make a detailed survey of the route. The first difficulty they found was the need to

need to cross the Kennet and Avon canal, the River Kennet and an area of soft ground – so the cost would rise to over £100,000. With this news, Baldry, the engineer left, and Furners and Baldwin relinquished the contract!

The promoters then signed up the firm of Billups from Cardiff, who undertook to build the line for just £18,000 in cash, taking the rest of their payment in the form of shares. They began in the middle of the route, and by 1890 had built 4½ miles – when they fell out with the railway company. The dispute was taken to court, the Lambourn Valley Railway Company winning the case, Billups being ordered to leave the site, and all the materials, as well as pay £1,000 court costs. So the railway company had to find yet another contractor.

There was a 6 year gap before this happened, in 1897, when a Yorkshire firm, Pearsons, took it on. The company chairman, local country squire G B Eyre, who lived at Welford Park, disappears at this time. He had been the main ‘driving force’ behind the project, and very active in the 1891 court case, and presumably without his leadership the project faltered. Maybe he had died whilst serving with the Royal Berkshire Regiment? In fact, his uncle had died, leaving him to inherit a large fortune and an estate in Essex, on condition that he changed his name from Eyre to Archer-Houblon. Sorting out his inheritance had taken his time and energy, and the Lambourn railway had to wait! Pearsons were experienced engineers, and managed to complete the line 3 weeks early, in 1898. They solved the problem of the marshy ground by constructing a bridge, with piles that went down 14 yards – but the rest of the line was built cheaply, with low station platforms, no telegraphic communication for signalling, etc. It passed the Board of Trade inspection, and a grand opening with an inaugural dinner was planned. There was just one minor problem left to resolve. The company had run out of money, and owned no freight wagons, no passenger carriages, and no locomotives!!

George Archer-Houblon then personally bought carriages and wagons for use on the line, each one carrying a plaque to say it was the ‘Property of George Archer-Houblon’. An old small engine was borrowed from the Great Western Railway, and on April 2nd 1898 the line finally opened. A couple of months later, the company took delivery of its own engine – named Ealhswith, it was unusual for the time in having protection for the driver and fireman.

The people of Lambourn could now reach Newbury in 45 minutes in relative comfort – a journey that had previously taken the best part of a day. The railway timetable showed connections much further away – including Southampton and London, and thence ‘the rest of the world’. By taking the first train of the day, passengers could reach London by 10.10am – ‘commuting’ was becoming possible.



In the first 4 years the railway ran about 39,000 'train miles', and made an operating surplus of £934 in 1903, but the company was seriously in debt, with interest charges on its loans far more than it was earning. In 1903, the GWR produced a 'rail motor' – a carriage with a self-contained steam engine. It was more comfortable to ride in and cheaper to run, so the company directors sold their carriages and engines, and hired 2 of these railmotors. All worked well – for several months – but then the railmotors were found to not have enough power to make their way up the incline of the Lambourn Valley. The hardness of the local water led to furring up of the engine boiler, and the Company simply did not have enough money to sort the problem out. The Company directors then met with the GWR, and the result was that the latter offered to buy the Lambourn Valley line. A shareholders meeting was held in May 1905, when they agreed to accept the offer of the GWR, and also unanimously accepted a resolution to thank the directors of the company – even though the shareholders had lost everything they had invested in the railway.

Under the Great Western, the line was modernised, with brick built stations and standard height platforms, and the line prospered in the 1920s and 30s, and they introduced a diesel railcar in the 1930s. The branch made plenty of money, with a good business from horse boxes – possibly carrying more horses than people. This helped to boost the economy of the valley, so the council reaped the benefit in more taxes. They invested this in the local infrastructure – building more roads, encouraging the use of lorries and buses, and so putting the branch line into decline.

In the 1950s, a quite different form of freight traffic was brought to the line. A connection was made to the branch at Welford to serve a US military base there. It was to be a major ammunition dump from 1955 – 1972, and the weapons were delivered by rail up the Lambourn Valley line. Road competition, however, led to the withdrawal of passenger services from the branch in 1960, the line from Welford to Lambourn being closed, with the freight trains to Welford Park lasting until 1972. Dismantling of the line that had taken so long to build took just a few months – although it has not disappeared without trace, as parts of the alignment now form the Lambourn Valley Way, a protected footpath.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, March 14th which is the Society's Annual General Meeting, when details of the programme for the coming year will be given, and then on Tuesday, April 11th George Rawlinson will recount some village memories from his time growing up in Wargrave. Our meetings take place in the Old Pavilion at the Recreation Ground in Wargrave, starting at 8pm. For more information about the Society, visit our website [www.wargravehistory.org.uk/](http://www.wargravehistory.org.uk/)