

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - September 2001

### The Railway Comes to Maidenhead

*The Railway Comes to Maidenhead* was Luke Over's topic at the Wargrave Local History Society meeting in September.

Luke began by explaining that the railway came about as the merchants and traders of Bristol were looking for a quicker way than the barges then in use to transport their goods to London. From meetings held in 1835, they eventually decided to build a railway - to be called the Great Western Railway - and appointed Isambard Kingdom Brunel as their engineer. Work started in 1837, and Brunel appointed Daniel Gooch - a 21 year old engineering genius, who designed the first engines for the GWR, such as North Star, Venus and Fire Fly. Gooch later became chairman of the GWR, lived locally at Clewer and is buried in the churchyard there.

The line itself was built without modern mechanical aids, of course, so all the embankments and cuttings were dug by navvies using handtools and wheelbarrows. One of the shareholders, George Henry Gibbs, would walk the line at times, to ensure his money was not being wasted.

The first stage of the railway opened from Paddington to a temporary terminus at Maidenhead Riverside, near the Bath Road at Taplow, as the bridge over the Thames was not complete. Many of the engines were delivered from Newcastle to Maidenhead via the Thames and then taken to Taplow. The terminus was built of wood, with platforms up on the embankment and offices down near the road, and access also possible from the road bridge. The first train ran on 31st May 1838, the journey taking 49 minutes. Public services started on 11th June that year, with 8 trains each way daily.

Meanwhile, work continued to build the bridge over the Thames at Maidenhead - which remains the widest brick arch in the world. Brunel's critics said it would fall down when the timber supports were removed, but in the event the timber structure was blown down by the wind and the bridge stood standing - as it still does. Once the bridge was finished, the line was opened to Twyford (on July 1st 1839). This was the terminus until the problems of Sonning cutting had been overcome - not helped when the workmen went on strike for more money. Eventually the railway reached Bristol, essentially complete by 1845.

In 1854 the Wycombe Railway built a line from High Wycombe to Maidenhead, with Maidenhead Boyne Hill Station on Castle Hill - rather more convenient for the town.

The coming of the railway to Maidenhead caused many problems. It had been served by up to 90 coaches a day, and these paid bridge tolls to the town, so the revenue was lost. There were many stables, coaching inns, blacksmiths and so on who derived their livelihood from coaching, and even the highwaymen were unable to make a living. However entrepreneurs from London came to the area, to set up businesses, and build large villas on the edge of the town, and they built the

Victorian churches and schools - Maidenhead became prosperous again. The area also became popular for people to travel out from London to enjoy the Thames 'and more' - many Mr & Mrs Smith's staying at Maidenhead hotels . The Guards Club was also set up there, and many of the guards housed their mistresses on the opposite bank in 'Gaiety Row'.

The present station was built, by local contractor William Woodbridge, in 1871. Originally it was called Maidenhead Junction, and in due course replaced both Boyne Hill and Riverside stations. Then in the 1890s the lines were converted from Brunel's broad gauge to the standard gauge, and a total of 4 sets of tracks laid on this stretch of line.

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