

Chapter 23

The Railways Through the Parishes

Part I: The London & Birmingham Railway

The first known reference to a railway in the Peterborough area was in 1825, when the poet John Clare encountered surveyors in woods at Helpston. They were preparing for a speculative London and Manchester railroad. Clare viewed them with disapproval and suspicion.

Plans for a Branch to Peterborough

On 17th September 1838, the London & Birmingham Railway Company opened its 112-mile main line, linking the country's two largest cities. It was engineered by George Stephenson's son, Robert. The journey took 5½ hours, at a stately average of 20mph – still twice the speed of a competing stagecoach. The final cost of the line was £5.5m, as against an estimate of £2.5m. Magnificent achievement as the L&BR was, it did not really benefit Northampton, since the line passed five miles to the West of the town. The first positive steps to put Northampton and the Nene valley in touch with the new mode of travel were taken in Autumn 1842, after local influential people approached the L&BR Board with plans for a branch railway from Blisworth to Peterborough. Traffic on the L&BR was healthy. On 16th January 1843, a meeting of shareholders was called at the Euston Hotel. They were told that the company had now done its own research and was able to recommend a line to Peterborough.

There was some opposition from landed interests along the Nene valley. On 26th January 1843 at the White Hart Inn, Thrapston a meeting, chaired by Earl Fitzwilliam, expressed implacable opposition to the whole scheme on six main counts, from increased flooding to the danger of 26 road crossings, rather than bridges. The local papers carried many



Fig 23b. Castor: Signal Box and Booking Office.



Fig 23a. Castor: Station Master's House.

articles for and against the railway. The L&BR Board was equal to such opposition and answered the key objections. Arguments went on for about six months. The third and final reading of the Bill was on 26th June, after which it returned to the Commons for approval of some amendments. Finally, on 4th July 1843, Royal assent to the Bill was granted; an Act of Parliament had been created; construction could now proceed. A victory dinner took place on 27th July at the Angel Hotel, Northampton.

About this time an anonymous poem was written, entitled 'The wonderful effects of the

Peterborough and Northampton railway, or the pleasure of travelling by hot water'. Here are eight of its twelve verses:

*“Now of all the great wonders that ever was known, And some wonderful things have occur'd in this town,
This great Peterborough railway will beat them all hollow, And whoever first thought of it was a wonderful fellow.
Oh! No my good friends when this railroad is finished, All coachmen and cattle will for ever be banished,
You will ride up to London in three hours and a quarter, With nothing to drive you but a kettle of hot water.
You can breakfast in Peterborough on tea, toast and butter, And need not put yourselves into a splutter,
You can travel to London and dine there at noon, And take tea in Peterborough the same afternoon.
What a beautiful sight it is for to see, A long string of carriages on the railway,
All loaded with passengers inside and out, And moved by what comes from a tea kettle spout.
What chance for the Cockneys who are fond of fish, They will have them of all kinds alive on the dish,
Fen geese and fat turkeys and all such cheer, There be more go in one day than now goes in a year.
And as to Innkeepers and Ostlers and all such riffraff, This railway will disperse them before it like chaff,
They must all list for soldiers or take on for marines, And curse the inventers of railroads and steam.
All great coach proprietors that have roll'd in their wealth, Are to ride upon donkeys for the good of their health,
And to keep up their spirits are to strike up a theme, Of the blessings of railroads and the virtues of steam.
So these are a few of the strange alterations, That this great Peterborough railroad will make in the nation,
But if the shareholders be not careful and mind what they are after, They may all get blown up by this boiler of hot water.*

The Work Begins on the Peterborough Branch

Work began almost immediately. The L&BR appointed their Chief Engineer, Robert Stephenson, to take overall responsibility for the Peterborough branch. The 47-mile line was divided for contract purposes into three sections, the first two from Blisworth (junction with the main London & Birmingham line) to Oundle, being given to John Stephenson of Derby, son of an eminent Scottish engineer, and the third section from Oundle to Peterborough, to Mr



Fig 23c. Castor Station: Looking West 1930.



Fig 23d. Castor Station: Looking East.

Brogden of Manchester. Works on the line were generally light and easily tackled, a major part of the construction effort being occupied with sixteen bridges. The only larger undertaking was building the 616 yard ($\frac{1}{3}$ mile) Wansford Tunnel. Work on it began at the end of January 1844, the contractor being Mr Jones of Sheffield, but before work on the bore could start 136,000 cubic yards of earth had to be moved from the approaches. Three shafts were sunk on the line of the tunnel. A number of men working 20 ft down one of the shafts were nearly buried alive by a fall of earth. In March 1844 three local surgeons were retained at £70 pa to help those hurt.

In general, with so little heavy work, progress was rapid; by January 1844 large quantities of rails, chairs and fishplates were being delivered to Wisbech by ship. Over the next few months more than a hundred vessels carried such cargo to Wisbech,

where it was transferred to Nene river boats. The rails, bull-head type, were of wrought or malleable iron, in 15ft lengths; probably they all came from South Wales. Chairs were of cast iron. The wooden sleepers probably came from the Baltic. The L&BR main line originally had rails laid on stone blocks from the Pennines, but they had proved to be unsatisfactory, moving under heavy traffic. No doubt Robert Stephenson made them available to the Peterborough branch contractors; these blocks can still be seen in many of the bridges and each end of Wansford tunnel; some of these heavy stones reveal the cut out shapes and bolt holes for the rail chairs.

From the outset, the line was equipped with the new Electric Telegraph, only invented by Charles Wheatstone about 1840. The L&BR's Peterborough branch was one of the world's first railways to have this from its start. People were surprised to find, for instance, that time differed several minutes between Northampton and Peterborough. It was not until 1852 that railways in Britain agreed a standard time.

The Peterborough branch was built wide enough for a double track. However on opening it was all single track, except from Blisworth to Northampton and a passing loop at Thrapston. About a year later, with traffic increasing, the whole route was doubled. Also in 1846 the L&BR became part of the new LNWR, London & North Western Railway. LNWR was the largest UK railway company in Victorian times, with its main workshops at Crewe.

The final cost of the 47.4 mile line from Blisworth to Peterborough was £429,409; this was appreciably less than the original estimate of £500,000. Wansford tunnel was completed at the end of April 1845. Crowds flocked to see the 'stupendous work', together with what was said to be the tooth of a mastodon, and the bones of elephants, dug up near Sutton and Castor. Other archaeological finds occurred during construction of the Castor - Stibbington section; a small Roman statue (now at Woburn) was found at Wansford station; William Artis, Earl Fitzwilliam's agent and a keen archaeologist, was involved in finds where the railway crosses Ermine Street (just East of the site of Castor station).

In the field of railway construction, Navy stories are legion. *'When the LNWR was being made about 45 years ago...the navvies and plate-layers used to choose their champions and fight on Sutton Heath for £10 a side on Sunday'*, reported Rev W Hopkinson in 1901. Most navvies were tough, very hard working, independent men, to whom we owe much. Railway steam shovels were not used in Britain on any scale until the 1890s, when the Great Central built its main line to London. Peterborough's seven rail routes were all hand made. Here is a downside tale. The writer of a letter to the Stamford Mercury in March 1845 described a visit he had recently made to the railway works at Wansford, and added the comment: *'The navvies and others, as they gradually withdrew from the works, leave bills unpaid in all the villages where they could obtain credit from trades-people or those who let lodgings; the losses sustained are in many cases very severe. And not only does the district suffer in a pecuniary view from the visit of these freebooters, but the fellows have taken many women from the neighbourhood, and in some instances the wives of decent men and the mothers of families, who have been induced to rob their husbands and abscond'*. Some of the navvies were good family men, who brought up their children as well as they could under their nomadic conditions, and saw that education was received where possible. Our parish registers contain records of the railway navvies and their families

The First Train into Peterborough

Peterborough's first railway opened for passengers on Monday 2 June 1845; it was a fine summer's day. From early in the morning, stage-coaches poured into Peterborough, bringing travellers and sightseers. It was estimated that the city's normal population of 7,000 had swollen to 10-12,000 by midday. The first train had left at 7am, with its six coaches full. The second left at 10.30am. At Thrapston this crossed with the first "Down" train from London, also crammed with people. At Wansford, 200 more people were waiting to board for the last leg into Peterborough, and many had to resort to riding on the carriage roofs! The train puffed its way into Peterborough (East) station, where it was greeted by a brass band and bell ringing.

Once the new railway had settled down, carrying cattle became a major proportion of the goods traffic revenue. A second substantial source of freight revenue by the mid 19th century came from the development of Northamptonshire's iron-industry. From the 1880s Peterborough's brick industry, aided by the Fletton loop line, created Westbound traffic. Coal, general merchandise, timber, agricultural produce and requirements were also regular goods.

As the 19th century progressed, the original L&BR/LNWR Peterborough branch from Blisworth became complicated by new routes and connections. In 1867 the Great Northern Railway's link line from Wansford to Stamford & Essendine opened (LNER after 1923). In 1879 an LNWR link from Seaton to Yarwell Junction opened, giving trains between Birmingham and Harwich an improved route - the Rugby line. Peterborough's Fletton loop line of 1883 enabled the GNR's Peterborough - Leicester service via Seaton. By the 1880s traffic on the Wansford - Peterborough section had at least doubled. The LNWR built their Woodston locomotive depot in 1885.

The Grouping into the Big Four

In 1923, after the World War One experience of close co-operation, Britain's railways were grouped; over a 100 companies were merged into a 'Big Four'. The once mighty LNWR became part of the London Midland & Scottish Railway, the LMS, which now owned and operated the Nene Valley line. In the 1920s, road transport really began to compete with the railways. The lightly loaded Peterborough – Leicester GNR service ceased in 1916 and was never re-instated. In 1929 passenger trains ceased on the Stamford – Wansford service; the line was taken up some two years later. Part of the LMS fight-back against the inroads of cheap and door-to-door road traffic was faster trains, but it was difficult to speed up cross-country routes like the Nene line. During World War Two, trains ran throughout the 24 hours; the build up to D-Day in 1944 was probably the peak.

Castor Station

Castor station opened in August 1853. At the height of its use some five trains in each direction stopped at Castor daily. In the 1887 timetable two additional trains stopped, if signalled! A single siding was added in 1897, off the line to Peterborough (in railway parlance the 'Down' line; in coaching days, travelling from London was in the 'Down' direction). I recall as a youngster in the 1940s that practically every day wagons of coal and farm products were



Fig 23e. Castor: Walter Taylor, Stationmaster 1957.

unloaded and loaded at Castor. One day, during World War Two, I remember the excitement when a wagon with flames coming from an over-heated axle-box was hurriedly put into the Castor sidings, where no doubt a fire bucket of water was applied. In those days, some older wagons still had grease box lubrication, a system going back to the first railways. The station boasted a chocolate machine, and there were rudimentary toilets. Opposite the small station building was the Stationmaster's house. 'Up' line trains were little more than an arm's length from the dwelling. On the evening of 3rd January 1945 a German V1 'doodlebug' bomb exploded just West of Castor station, in a clump of trees close to the tracks; fortunately there was neither loss of life nor serious damage. Castor station closed to passengers on 1st July 1957 and to goods on 28th December 1964. Over the years Castor's station masters included Thomas Wright (1870s), John Green (1880s and in 1891), John Alfred Barnett (1890s), Lionel Green and Frank Abbot (1900s), Fredric Cowell (1910s) Albert Edward Brooms (1920s), in 1954 Mr Hankin was succeeded by Albert Spicer, who was also station master at Wansford. In the 1950s, Castor's main customer was J W Taylor who took several coal wagons a week; freight also included grain,



Fig 23f. Castor: Goods Siding 1950s.

seed potatoes and sugar beet. In 1854 the 5¼ miles to Peterborough took 12 minutes and cost 5d (1st), 4d (2nd), and 2d (3rd 'parliamentary'). In the 1950s it took nine minutes.

The Northampton – Peterborough passenger service ceased on 2nd May 1964. Likewise, the Rugby –

Peterborough line ceased on 6th June 1966. For a few years after, passenger trains ran for Oundle public school each term. On the Rugby line, past Yarwell Junction, mineral trains served the Nassington iron ore quarries until the early 1970's. From 1845 until the 1960s, steam power prevailed; only in the twilight years were diesel trains used. Dr Richard Beeching deemed the Nene Railway uneconomic. The Birmingham to Harwich Continental night mail train ran until the 1966 closure. An irony of the Nene rail closure is that, in the 1960s, plans existed to expand Northampton, Peterborough and Wellingborough. Barbara Castle, Minister of Transport, said at the time that steps would be taken to preserve the route for future transport needs, but this never happened. In other parts of Europe, modernisation and electrification of such inter-urban routes was taking place. Sadly, here, it was not long before chickens roosted in Wansford signal-box. Soon all that remained of Castor station was its rusting wagon loading gauge.

The Nene Valley Railway

Peterborough Development Corporation (PDC), a government body, functioned from 1968 – 1988 to expand Peterborough by attracting people from London's boroughs; the New Town needed recreational provision. This was the setting for the rebirth of the Peterborough end of the Nene Railway. There were two other players: Dr Beeching had provided a fine length of abandoned rail route through the centre of the planned Nene Park; and the Rev. Richard Paten, local vicar and chartered engineer, in 1968, bought for civic display a former British Rail restorable steam locomotive. It was around this engine that a band of volunteers formed and put forward the NVR idea. Nine years on, in 1977, a leisure tourist train service from Wansford to a new station at Orton Mere began. It was operated by NVR, a charity company, under the Light Railway Act of 1896. PDC provided the capital, NVR the operating people. NVR acquired a Swedish engine built to the larger European Berne loading gauge. In consultation with HM Railway Inspectorate, certain modifications to the railway were undertaken.



Fig 23g. Castor: Loading Gauge 1986.

Within a few years a considerable collection of engines and carriages from across Europe came to the NVR. The combination of foreign trains, easy access from London, ready hotels, the river and Wansford tunnel have established NVR as a good location for the film industry. James Bond's Octopussy has been the greatest commercial success to date. In 1971 the late Rev Awdry OBE named a little blue engine 'Thomas' in Peterborough's sugar factory; the only 'Thomas' he ever named. Now it attracts visitors from across the world. Peterborough's independent Railworld, an exhibition centre and museum, began as an NVR working party in 1981. NVR's Santa Trains are amongst the best in Britain. Currently, Peterborough Cathedral and NVR both attract about 60,000 visitors per year. The late 20th century rail renaissance has many faces, including the enrichment of Britain by its heritage lines, not least the Nene Valley Railway.

Richard Paten

Born in 1932, the privileged son of a local business family that moved to Castor in 1937. After Marlborough School, National Service and a commission, he read Engineering at Cambridge, worked in Africa and in 1961 became a Chartered Engineer. Following ordination by the Church of England he did eight years parish work and 23 years as a chaplain for community and race relations. He is an originator and founder chairman of the Nene Valley Railway, Peterborough Interfaiths Council and Railworld. He is president of the Peterborough Civic Society. He married in 1975, was divorced in 2001, but is blessed with three children and one grandson.



Fig 23 h. Wansford Station: the Sutton train in the island platform c1900.

Part II: The Stamford & Essendine Railway

Sutton and Upton were served by the Stamford and Sibson branch of the Stamford and Essendine Railway, promoted by the Marquis of Exeter. It was to join the LNWR at Wansford, and so give access to Northampton. The 8¼ mile line was opened on the 8th August 1867, and the following day's Stamford and Rutland Mercury gave an account of the line and 'a magnificent dinner at the George Hotel given by Mr Jackson the contractor, who liberally invited about 100 persons to the entertainment' and noted there are 'two intermediate stations for passengers, goods and coal, one at Wansford Road and the other at Barnack. At both places full arrangements are made for receiving and carrying the traffic of the district.'



Fig 23i. Wansford Road Station c1930

Wansford Road Station (Fig 23i) is of course in the parish of Sutton, and the station was sited on the turnpike already served by carriers' carts and roughly equidistant from the three villages of Wansford, Sutton and Upton. The line opened late because the Railway Inspector was unhappy with the junction with LNWR. The

junction was a source of friction years later when the S & E railway closed it and built a temporary terminus called 'Sibson' but actually in Sutton. S & E Railway claimed the LNWR was charging too large a rent for the traffic carried. Passengers had to alight and make their way across the fields and onto a bridge over the river (Fig 23j) to Wansford Station. This arrangement lasted from 1870 to 1877 before the junction was reconnected. This bridge had been erected by Sutton's Lord of the Manor for him to be driven by horse and trap from the Grange to the station. The present footpath No 2 dates from this time and gave him and villagers access to the station.

There were extensive cattle pens at Wansford Road Station, and sheep would be driven through the sheep wash before being loaded onto the train for Stamford market. Whilst there was no station in Sutton village, unofficial stops were made. Newspapers were dropped daily at the house by the level crossing occupied by a railway man. His wife would

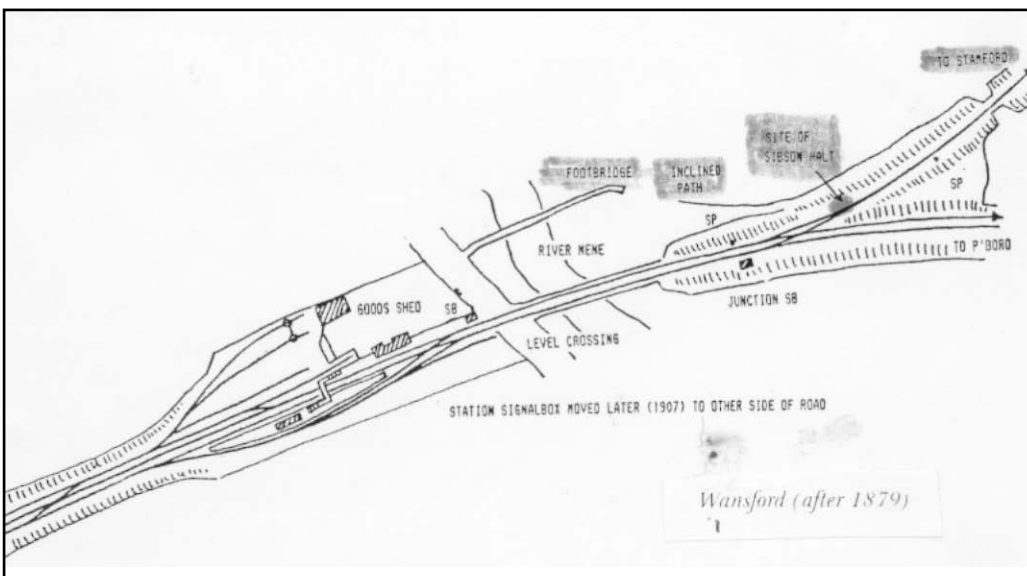


Fig 23j. Sibson halt Plan

deliver them round the village. Also a small girl from Stamford would visit her aunt every Saturday, being dropped off at the level crossing by the 10.44am and collected later by the 4.35pm train. Arthur Mason recalls timing himself on the way to school by the 8.25am train. If he saw it he knew he wouldn't be late for school! He also remembers a Wansford butcher of ample proportions who used to go to Stamford every Monday morning and being assisted aboard through the narrow

carriage doors by the station staff. Laurence Tebbut, the former librarian at Stamford lived at Upton Manor Farm as a boy. He told me he used to be driven in a pony and trap to Wansford Road every morning to catch the 8.55am to attend Stamford School, returning in the evening by the 3.20pm or 5.45pm from Stamford and again being met by pony and trap.

The line was never a viable proposition and animal traffic to Stamford market always seemed to have exceeded passenger traffic. Indeed, whilst the line closed to passenger traffic in 1929 it remained open for goods traffic for a further two years. The station is now a private dwelling. (See also Figs 13p to 13r)

Keith Garrett

Acknowledgements

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Fig 23k. 'End of the Line.' Wansford Road Station c 1945. Margaret White on the platform.



Milton Ferry Bridge, Lodge and gates beside the old A47 in the 1950s, before part of the Lodge was rebuilt up on the hill to make way for the by-pass.



The Ferry House on the morning of the fire 1 Jan 2003.