

If there are ghosts, they should be here on the old M&GN

The railway lines around Reepham were built well after the railway mania which swept through early mid Victorian England. Their working life was from the late 1880s until the passenger closures in the 1950s although goods traffic carried on for a few more years. Today the line remains and has found a new life in offering a route to walkers and horse riders, its past use remains in the empty cuttings and archless bridges all built by hand more than 100 years ago.

The line was built by navvies who used tipping trolleys and hand tools as they dug, blasted and drank their way through the Norfolk countryside, many of them lived too far away to return home at night, so they slept in barns or among stacked up sleepers covered with tarpaulins. Many of the workmen employed on the line were ex-farm labourers from the surrounding areas who were attracted by the 50% increase over the normal wage which navvying offered and during the summer months particularly, the possibility of overtime gave them the chance to earn even more.

The gangs were made up of colourful characters such as Sam Shirt who apparently was not impeded in the quality of his work by having only one arm; Lumpy Ling, Spitting Joe the Diddekoi and Loo Dye, the latter of whom was famous or notorious, for his breakneck style of engine driving. The men often had to get or make their own meals. They cut wood for fires and would cook their food in communal coppers, which often included anything they could get by poaching. But mostly they would exist on the staple diet of bread and cheese and vegetables often taken from the local farmers' fields. These vegetables were cooked in the coppers along with the famous Norfolk dumplings made from bread dough. Water for the coppers often had to be carried long distances and to ensure that none of it was wasted any left over after the vegetables and dumplings had been cooked in it was used for making tea.

The gangs dug cuttings and used the soil to construct the embankments and they built culverts, bridges, level crossings and stations with most of the materials being sent by rail from Melton Constable as the line moved relentlessly on towards Norwich. On some occasions it was necessary to use locally made bricks from sand and clay dug from nearby pits and then fired in local brick kilns.

After the line was built, life for those in the permanent employment of the company was geared to the arrival and departure of the trains. For a short while this part of the working day was one of hurried business and in between it could be confined boredom, particularly during the wet and colder weather, but languid enjoyment during the spring and summer months. This intermittent workstyle affected all the station staff but particularly the signalmen and the crossing keepers. Many a

signalman has wandered off to fish in nearby pits or streams whilst waiting for the next train.

At the turn of the century railway regulations stated that gate-houses, such as the one at Themelthorpe, could only be occupied by married couples, and the husband had to be a railway employee. This meant that during the day (when most of the trains passed through) the operation of the gates was left to the wife. With the house so close to the line when the trains went past, they would shake the doors and window panes and rattle the pictures on the walls and move the ornaments on the mantelshelf.

Level crossings were a prominent feature of the M&GN. They usually had a small crossing-keeper's cottage, perhaps built of concrete blocks made at the Melton works, alongside. Originally it was intended to build a cottage at all but the smallest crossings, provide it with a plot of land, and then offer it rent free with a modest wage to anyone who would undertake to handle the gates as required. The wages offered varied according to the traffic and in a very minor lane just after the last war it would be a couple of pounds a week and this sort of sinecure job was much sought after.

When Reepham Station was built the navvies were fortunate in that the site was used as a main base by the contractors and a bakery was completed and available to make bread and dough for the workers who made their way back to Reepham each night.

The line is now overgrown and has become a wilderness for wildlife such as seen in very few other places today. It offers a rural enchantment in its slumbering beauty and you can feel a wistfulness and nostalgia for a railway that has now gone forever.

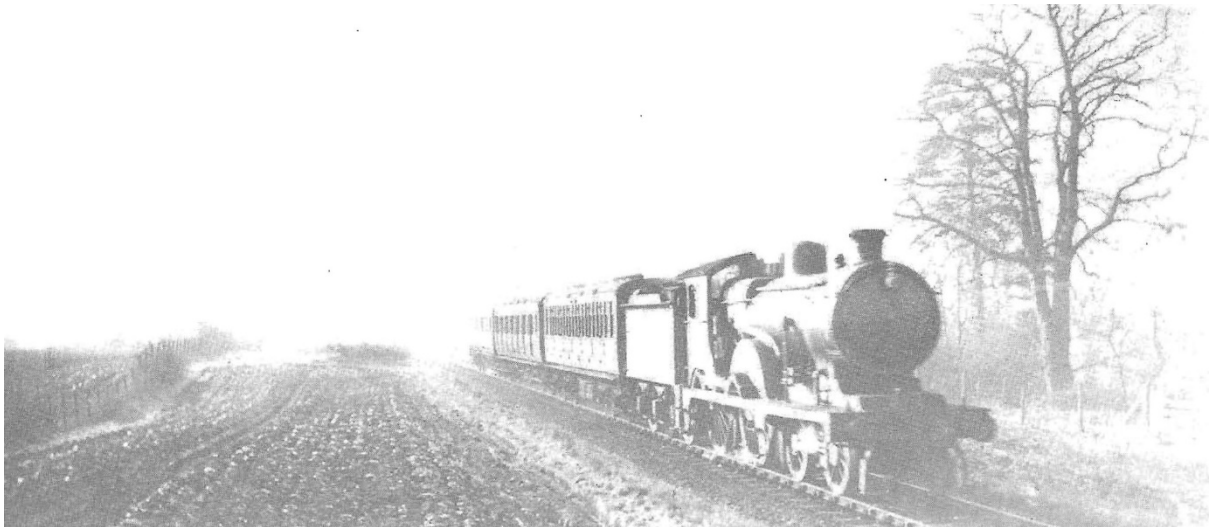
Under the bridges you can still see the blackened remains of old train smoke high above on the brickwork. The cuttings are steeply pitched and up to 18ft high. In the summer, many areas are ablaze with hawthorn and particularly the dog rose. Later in the year they are heavy with hips and haws – a berry-red harvest of crimson and scarlet.

When the railway was in use the sides of the line were kept free of undergrowth and were used for hay. This was scythed and the tonnage was sent to London where it was used by the horses of the Great Eastern Railway. This scything of the high grass was a practice which also helped to prevent fire along the banks from the sparks of passing engines. The policy of keeping the undergrowth down meant that windborne sparks sometimes did not stop until they had landed in and subsequently set alight to nearby cornfields.

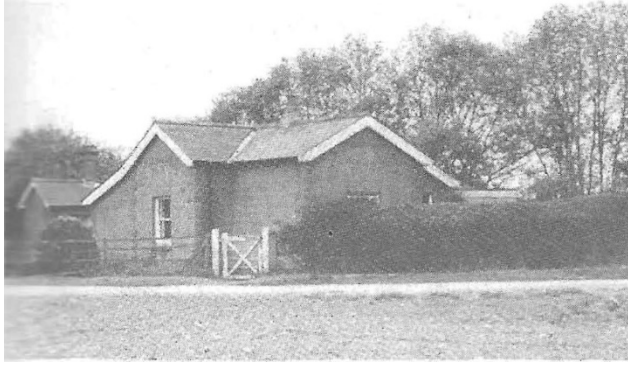
Along the walk if you look carefully you can find the few remaining examples of the railway and its staff; the odd sleeper covered in undergrowth which will in time rot away; the few rails which were never taken away when the line was ripped up and which will no doubt permanently remain, offering a metal gravestone honouring the life of the railway; whilst their surface bears no inscription they will remain for many years, their very presence speaking volumes of the seventy years that the line formed the backbone of the industrial and social life of this area.

The line will now become a reserve for nature and a place of peace and solitude for the walker but it will also become a time capsule of ghosts and memories: before the last war there were a number of passenger trains every day travelling along the two lines either side of Reepham. They were slow but punctual and many a farm worker would stop and check their pocket watches or would time the routine of their day with the sound of the whistles or the sight of the trains. In this hurried age we can now only look back and consider these thoughts with nostalgia but wouldn't we like to travel back in time and ride on these trains again... if only we could!

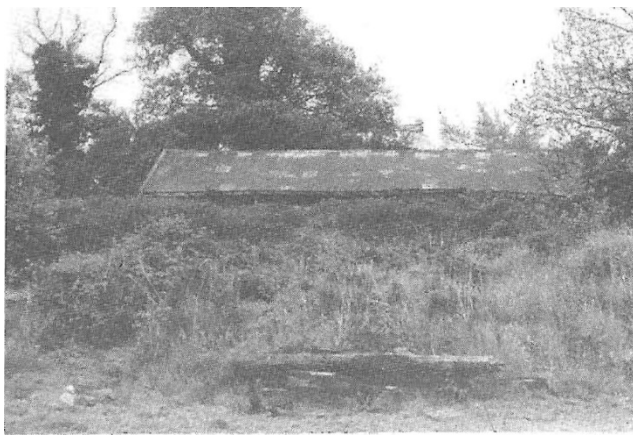
From an article published in the Reepham Society Magazine, 1991.



D 15 No. 62528. The winter sun in February 1949 brightens the 10.31 am to Norwich City as it approaches Whitwell Station.



The M&GN crossing keeper's cottage at Themelthorpe.



"The Last Sleepers" on the old track bed at Reepham Station.