

Memories of the railway

The days of man are three score years and ten – but that was certainly not the vision that inspired the building of the “Western Extension of the Great Eastern Railway”, as it was termed, when it was opened in 1882, but 70 years was how long the passenger service lasted until its closure in September 1952.

Launched amidst much anticipation (with perhaps not a little trepidation) during the period 1876–79, grandly the project gathered sway from Aylsham to County School, as Cawston, Reepham and finally Foulsham stations arose and the railway tracks completed their easy communication in 1882.

All the actors on that stage have now taken their last call and it is no longer possible to converse with anyone who was involved with the building of the line. There are many and varied episodes connected to the building, some are complimentary and many are contradictory. The search for detail can be long, exciting – sometimes exasperating – but always interesting and at last a more or less coherent story can emerge. When the line closed it was still possible to contact people in the Reepham area who could remember the 1880s. While most could remember the line being built, very few worthwhile details could be gathered.

The patriotic urge to provide waste paper and reduce the danger of fire from aerial attack early in 1939 doubtless resulted in many old papers being given over for salvage.

One lost paper held an account of the dinner given at the King’s Arms, Reepham, to celebrate the opening of the line when the superintendent (Mr R W Kendall), under whom it was built, was chief guest.

The high fields bounding Stony Lane and the eastern boundary of the yard to the railway bridge are often a puzzle to people. The navvies who built the railway excavated the site of the Reepham Station yard, leaving the fields high up on either side. The soil that was removed went to build the embankments which lead to the bridges on the Cawston and Kerdiston roads.

One old inhabitant, Mr Matt Timbers, recalled the making of the yard, entailing the work of a pick and shovel brigade (“There were no excavators or bulldozers in those day, you know”), and the earth was run down the slope on a specially constructed light track to build the embankments approaching the bridge over the Kerdiston road.

Horse-drawn trucks were the motive power, and Mr Walter Wilkin drove the tip horse. Originally the road from Cabbage Court to Cawston New Road (now known as New Road) ran through Crown Meadow, but with the construction of the railway

bridge to the east of the station, it assumed its present curve over the bridge. Incidentally, this bridge is the highest spot in Reepham and served admirably as a lookout post for air raid wardens in the last war. The blaze at Lowestoft in its worst night could be discerned at this vantage point.

Victorian ideas as to the Sabbath – and they were not bad ones either – insisted that the sale of many properties through which the line ran was conditional upon there being no Sunday traffic over them and this reservation has been scrupulously observed.

The Midland and Great Northern Railway Company had for some time been considering a line which would give a more direct route to the Midlands, which covered much of the area taken in hand so energetically by the Great Eastern. Once the necessary sanction had been given the latter really got on with the task and the speed with which the work was done came as a great shock to those who favoured the nearer route to Norwich from Whitwell Station. Because of the close proximity of the two stations of rival companies the fare to Norwich was the same, notwithstanding that the mileage from Reepham was about double that from Whitwell. The Whitwell line had no Sunday service either.

The story of the sheds at Reepham used as blacksmiths' and iron-workers' shops, of the turntable in use because the government of those days forbade a train to run with the tender before the engine; the work of Mr H E Hawes, a survivor of those days when he was a carpenter employed in the interior construction of the station's dwellings at Cawston, Reepham and Foulsham and on the woodwork of the line – are not all these with many another written in the Book of Memory.

In the early 1880s a favourite Sunday walk of those days was to the station to see the weekly progress of the line – how many more sleepers had been laid; this walk was alternated with a visit to Booton Church to see how many more bricks had been laid by the Rev. Whitwell Elwin and his team.

The line from Reepham to County School was opened on the 1st of May 1882 and two months later the July issue of the Foulsham Parish Magazine proudly printed the first timetable of the East Norfolk Railway with its conglomeration of "Mixed", "Parliamentary" and "Market" trains. By this it took 43 minutes to travel from Aylsham to Foulsham, the editor for brevity omitting reference to Cawston and Reepham. The journey from London to Foulsham by the "Mixed" train occupied 5 hours 14 minutes while the "Parliamentary" one took 6 hours 29 minutes. Norwich to Foulsham by the same trains were a matter of 1 hour 24 minutes and 1 hour eleven minutes, respectively. There were, however, 11 trains daily from Norwich to Foulsham and 10 from Foulsham to Norwich. All these, of course, passed through Reepham, too.

In 1882 the fastest train of the day did the 17 mile journey from Foulsham to Norwich in 63 minutes. This seems to be the fastest time recorded for this trip in the 70-year history of the line.

The building of the line seemed to have been relatively accident free, or else no accidents were ever recorded, but two incidents were recorded. Firstly, the one outstanding incident before the line opened when a steam traction engine used by the contractors blew up near Foulsham while the users were desperately trying to replenish the boiler with water from a nearby stream.

Shortly after the line opened the only bad accident occurred when a man named Flatman left Cawston where he had been waiting longer than he thought reasonable so he started walking a short cut home along the railway line. It was late and dark and a train overtook him, cutting him to pieces. The gory evidence of the accident was only revealed when the train stopped at Reepham Station and search parties went out and soon found further evidence to substantiate the tragedy.

No story of the Reepham railway would be complete without some reference to its stationmasters, the first of whom was Mr Richard Sayer, a genial and much-beloved gentleman. It seems he was succeeded for a short while by Mr Frank Rice, who subsequently became stationmaster of Sheringham, to help in its development from a lobster fishing village to a popular North Norfolk watering-place.

Probably his successor was Mr Youngman, whose son Harry contributed much to the cultural life of Reepham through the Orchestral Society and Nigger Minstrel Troupe before the 1914–18 war, in which he was killed. Later holders of the office were Mr Wilson, Mr Moore and finally Mr S B Bass whose maternal grandfather was a Mr Hoggar who was the first stationmaster at Foulsham. Mr Bass came from a real railway family who accumulated 390 years of railway service between them. Eleven members of his family were stationmasters.

Was the coming of the railway to Reepham a blessing or not? Till the 1880s it certainly was a prosperous, self-contained unit, numbering many influential people among its inhabitants. Whitwell Hall, Hackford Hall, the Brewery House, The Ollands and the Moor House were all the homes of gentry and Reepham was then where magisterial business was transacted and where a well-attended busy market was held each week. The railway gave Reepham a direct communication with neighbouring villages and with towns like Dereham and Norwich, while London was now only five hours travelling time away. To the farm labourer of the time for whom a journey to Norwich was likely to be an annual event the prospect of leaving Reepham at breakfast and to be in the centre of London for lunch must have been difficult to comprehend, although it is unlikely that he would have been able to afford it let alone have the free time to go.

The novelty of a railway journey, though, undoubtedly brought a shrinkage of trade and it is more than possible that the railway started the dispersal from the countryside.

The railway came as an engineering marvel which provided unlimited travel to the people of this Victorian era. The service, however, did not change much during the next 70 years and in its latter days it had many faults of infrequent and slow service but the passenger train during its 70 years at Reepham did meet a very real need. Even with its faults there was considerable sadness expressed when its farewell finally became necessary.

Reepham is one of those few places that had the benefit of two railway lines, which ran independently for many years and which were unexpectedly linked in 1960: the line through Reepham Station, which closed to passengers in 1952, and the line through Whitwell, which saw its last passengers in February 1959. The railway lines were eventually taken up in the mid 1980s but in the intervening years the lines continued in use until the mid 1970s with regular trains hauling freight, the final goods train from Lenwade made its journey on 4th January 1982.

The reason for this continued use was the building of the Themelthorpe curve in 1960. This line starting from Whitwell Station and turning back almost on itself at Themelthorpe returning to Reepham Station makes a pleasant walk which traces the transport line which for 70 years was the backbone of most of the life and goods that came in and out of Reepham.

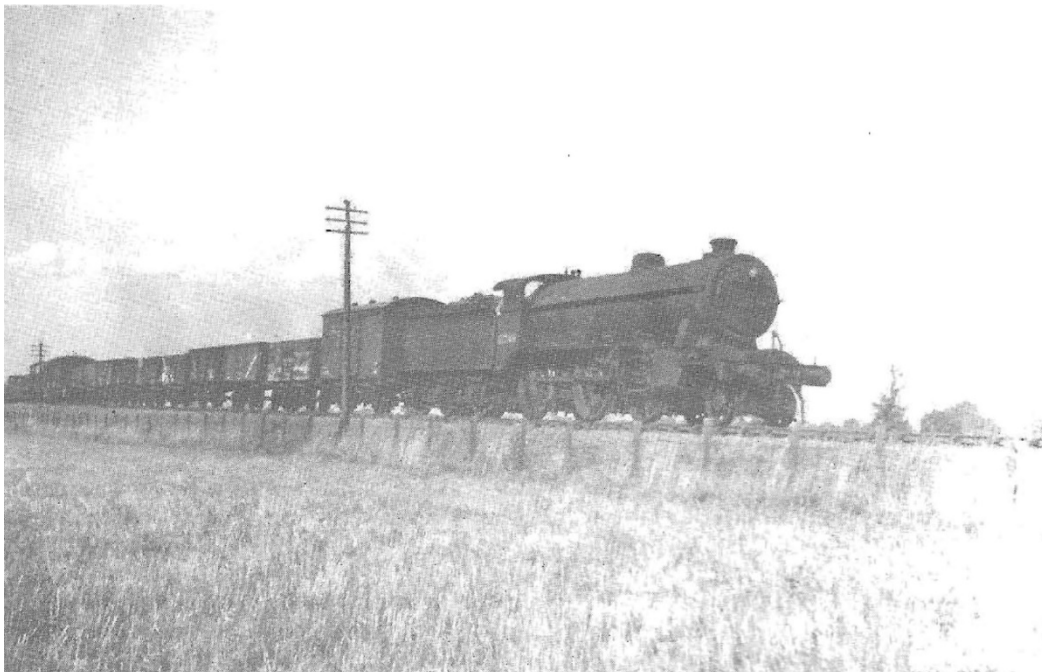
Prior to British Railways amalgamating the lines in 1948 the area was served by the Midland and Great Northern Joint Railway which journeyed into Norwich City Station (the area east of Heigham Street now developed as an industrial estate) and the Great Eastern Railway which journeyed into Norwich Thorpe Station. The two Norwich stations were only a mile apart yet there was no direct link and any freight that had to be moved from one station had to be sent northwards via North Walsham, Cromer and Melton Constable and thence back to Norwich.

For a distance of one mile direct the actual rail journey was immense, the route was affectionately known as "going-round-the-world". When the Themelthorpe curve was laid it halved the journey at a stroke

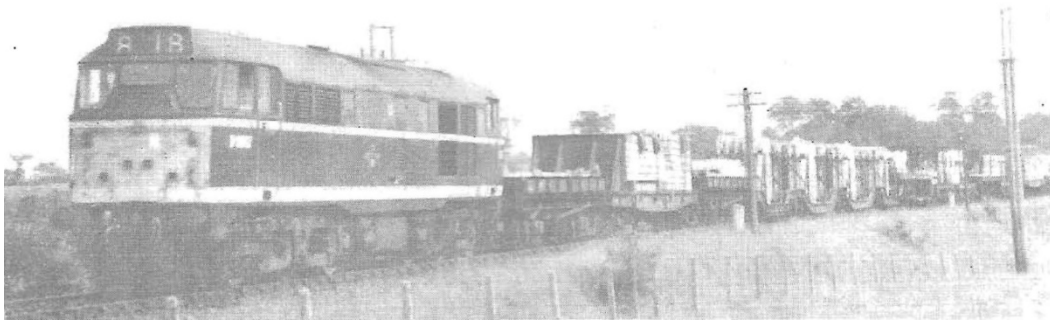
From an article published in the Reepham Society Magazine, 1991



E 4 No. 2793. The 2.10 pm from Dereham to Wroxham leaves Reepham Station in May 1950 – our local railway memories are encapsulated in pictures like this.



K 2 No. 61748 A Gresley K2 passes Themelthorpe, later the site of the British Railways curve, on 10th May 1949.



No. D 5537. Concrete beams on low loader wagons leaving Lenwade in August 1965 and about to make their journey around the Themelthorpe curve.

