

The Last Passenger Train

The branch railway line between Wroxham and County School (North Elmham) was open to passenger traffic for the last time on Saturday 13th September 1952, after that date the line remained open for freight trains until it finally closed on the 31st October 1967. The closure of the line to passenger traffic was an economy measure by British Railways.

On the night of 13th September the last passenger train steamed westwards from Wroxham to County School and various ceremonies had been arranged at intermediate stations along the route to mark the ending of a service which had been in existence for over 70 years and which had served so well the rural communities of this area of Norfolk.

The following detail is taken from the newspaper report of the time and it portrays the affection and regret expressed by the local people at the closure of this much loved railway line.

“Among the many hundreds of people who gathered at the stations to watch the train arrive and then depart into the night, there were several who regarded the occasion with lightness of heart. But there were many more who looked upon the passing of the service – which had been a great boon not only to them, but also their parents, their grandparents and, in some cases, their great-grandparents – with real and sincere regret.

“In big and little groups all along the platforms people could be heard recalling that the line had been kept open in far more difficult times than the present and pointing out that for many residents in the area the action of British Railways would cause real hardship and inconvenience.

“One man, for instance, declared that if he decides to use the bus service that will operate in place of the railway service, he will be forced to hang about for 80 minutes after leaving off work before he can begin his homeward journey every night. Further along people were speaking of mothers with young children living in the villages who used the train to visit the shopping centres along the line. With the train, they said, these women could take their toddlers and their prams or push-chairs in comfort; now that they would have to travel by bus, they would be obliged to carry their children in their arms all the way and all the time.

“At Aylsham (North) Station, the black and white crepe paper round and between the pillars supporting the roof of the main platform probably reflected the views of most of the 300 or so citizens who gathered there, and Chopin’s Funeral March, played over public address equipment as the train steamed in from Buxton, seemed

to harmonise with the general feelings. The ‘bang-bang-bang’ of exploding detonators as the train drew to a standstill appeared to strike an incongruous note.

“It must be assumed that when Mr J B Postle, president of the Chamber of Commerce, handed the driver and firemen cigars and bottles of beer, complete with clean tumblers, he was not trying to be light-hearted, but anxious to offer the men tokens of appreciation of their services on the branch line, for, with the help of an assistant, Mr C Skoyles, who, like Mr Postle, wore a top hat and a dark overcoat, he also clambered up a ladder to the top of the engine and hung a large wreath of dahlias, held by a wire round the funnel, over the front of it.

“Attached to the wreath was a card bearing the words ‘To the memory of another limb of private enterprise which was amputated during the scourge of nationalisation – 1881–1952’.

“Then Mr Postle and others having jumped on board to take part in the ceremony at Reepham Station, the train moved slowly off, exploding more detonators as it did so. As the red lamp at the rear of the last carriage faded into darkness, the big crowd slowly melted away. The public address equipment came to life again with a modern dance tune in a brave attempt to cheer the gloom, but the emptiness of the waiting rooms had a more telling effect. Then the doors were closed and locked and the porter wondered – would he never see the platform filled with people again?

“Four of Cawston’s oldest inhabitants, whose total ages were 344 years, had been taken by cars to Wroxham so they might travel back to Cawston on the last up train.

“On arrival at Cawston they were presented with their rail tickets as souvenirs of the ride by the station master, Mr J Burgess. They were taken by car to the King’s Head Inn where light refreshments were served.

“At 9 pm, when the last down train reached Cawston, about 100 villagers and friends were collected on the platform to say, ‘hail and farewell’.

“Detonators normally used as fog signals were placed on the track and as the train drew into the station, their flashes and explosions added to the tenseness of the scene.

“A wreath was hung on the engine and ‘Auld Lang Syne’ was sung by those present, then for the last time the train left the station and a large Union Jack at half-mast waved it on its way.

“The train steamed on its way covering the short journey to Reepham.

“As soon as the ‘Pink Uns’ had been collected the trek of pedestrians to Reepham Station started and the platform was thronging with spectators a good 20 minutes before the scheduled time of arrival of the last train into the station, whilst the

station yard assumed the activity and proportions of a car park. Never before have there been so many motor cars assembled there. An event, which during the previous week had been dubbed 'a lot of squit', gradually gathered interest and in its final denouement was clearly proved to have captured the public imagination.

"Yet there was never evidence of any sense of 'rag' although the modest ceremony devised by Reepham Chamber of Trade and Commerce quickly bore the stamp of an 'occasion' of some importance with the general public not lacking in initiative.

"Quite 300 people were gathered on the platform, as above their hum of animated conversation the strains of the Reepham Band were heard. With unexpected near-punctuality the long train from Cawston signed its approach at the railway bridge and slid with the noiseless efficiency and grace of an express of a more aristocratic line into the station where the Chamber's guests, Mr Edward Gibbs and Mr H E Hawes, were engulfed with the spectators, and the other 35 or so passengers from Cawston disembarked.

"The former should have been welcomed by the Chamber, but in view of the length of the train, which almost measured that of the platform, and the surge of the crowd, it is not possible accurately to state what happened to this part of the programme. It is understood that a few of the Cawston passengers made the return journey home on foot.

"Then public initiative took command, as Mrs Matthews offered bouquets as a spontaneous gesture of appreciation to the engine driver and fireman. To make the occasion the more impressive, press photographers hoisted her on to the footplate and in the flash of their camera bulbs the public had a better view of what was happening.

"In the meantime, the District Passenger Superintendent, Mr D S Lewis, his Chief Staff Clerk, Mr Birkett, and the Reepham Stationmaster, Mr S B Bass, were being welcomed and entertained in the station waiting room by Mr Ben Stimpson, chairman, and members of the Management Committee of the Reepham Chamber of Commerce.

"So amidst the strains of Auld Lang Syne from the band, in which the crowd joined, the waving of handkerchiefs in sad farewell, the train mounted steam to roll outward into the darkness for the last time. As it gathered speed, rockets (another unofficial addition to the programme) mingled with the scurrying smoke in tribute.

"The final scenes took place in the waiting room, where Mr Stimpson thanked the general public for their grand support, the band for their great help and Mr Postle and the Aylsham Chamber of Trade and Commerce for their friendly co-operation and association. Mr Postle thanked the Reepham Chamber for their hospitality and

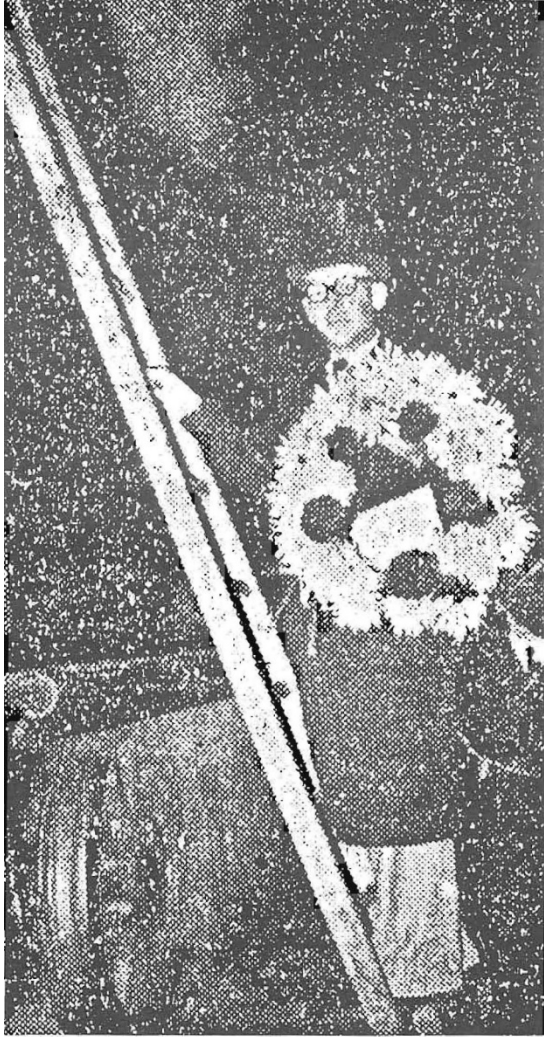
Mr R C Seals replied for the band in which he thanked Mr Skoyles of the Aylsham Band for taking the trouble to come over and conduct the Reepham Band on that occasion. They were proud of the honour he had accorded them."

So a service that had existed for 70 years came to an end; it was poignant that a number of the older spectators at Reepham included some who had been marched by Mr W Pitcher from the school to the station bridge to watch the first train into Reepham Station.

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



With a "funeral oration" from the footplate and wreaths to bedeck the engine, there was a suitable farewell at Reepham Station on Saturday night for the last passenger train on the Wroxham – County School line.



Mr J B Postle, president of Aylsham Chamber of Commerce, placing a wreath on the train when it arrived at Aylsham on its return journey.