

The Reepham Line

The East Norfolk Western Extension Railway

Before the railways, communications in North East Norfolk were served by the turnpike system which in this area was sparse and followed the main coach routes and by a dense network of country roads, which until the 1870s was extensively served by carriers carts. Essentially all roads in this area seem to lead to and from Norwich. Passenger services on these roads were very poor, the smaller market towns such as Aylsham were well served with passenger coaches twice a day, but Reepham had to make do with a passenger service twice a week. Apart from these services the only alternative was to hire a horse and carriage or to pay for a seat on a carrier's cart.

In the 1860s and 70s the people of Reepham were able to journey to Norwich or have their goods picked up from or delivered to there by the two local carriers.

William Leeds, the proprietor of the Sun Inn, ran an omnibus and carrier service from that establishment every Wednesday and Saturday, leaving at 8 am and concluding the journey at the Moon and Stars Public House in Norwich, returning the same day at 4.30 pm in winter and 5 pm in summer, the journey passing through Booton, Alderford, Attlebridge, Taverham and Drayton.

William Stimpson-Lewis offered a similar service from Reepham on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday, and the Post Office operated a mail cart which left Reepham at 4.30 pm and returned from Norwich at 6 am the following morning.

Carriers' carts rarely took more than a ton of goods and were primarily to transport consumer goods to and from market centres and to supply local shops and businesses. Heavy, low-value goods were less often carried in this way. Farm waggons, droves of animals and walkers formed the rest of road traffic at this time. Footpaths were also intensively used by both locals and foot postmen. Carts were expensive, 8d to 1/- a mile, and more in bad weather and hence were a strong factor in the isolation of the communities in this area. During the mid-nineteenth century in the whole of North East Norfolk less than fifty passengers a day could be carried by public transport and yet there was little call for a more intensive coach service. This dearth of traffic was noted as a fact by the Board of Trade when the rest of the country was gripped by railway mania. North East Norfolk therefore lacked any manufacturing industry and lacked a transport infrastructure capable of supplying any new large industry or resort, the area was totally agriculture based and it was undeniably prosperous for the farmer if not for his labourers.

This area was, in the eyes of many an entrepreneur, ripe for the consideration of a profit-making line of communication – the railway! The first railway in Norfolk to be

built was the Yarmouth and Norwich railway conceived in 1841 by the Stephenson as the first link in an east-west trunk railway from Yarmouth to Peterborough; the line was completed in 1844.

The second stage of the Stephenson project was the railway from Norwich to Brandon which was duly built and when the line was extended from Brandon it finally allowed Norwich to be linked to London, although it was one of the last major urban centres in England to be so joined. Norfolk was linked to other main centres of trade but the route was often tortuous and the lines badly run but there was no reasonable alternative. In 1850 goods sent from North East Norfolk to Ipswich had to be carried by horse to Norwich and then consigned on the railway via Cambridge and London, a journey of some 200 miles as against 40 by road. This long journey was still quicker and more reliable as the turnpike in winter was invariably half a yard deep in mud.

There was then a flood of proposals for railways to fill the gaps in the railway map of the 1840s and 50s in North East Norfolk but for various reasons none were built. In the early 1870s construction began on the line from Whitlingham Junction to North Walsham and after the appropriate Board of Trade inspection it was permitted open to traffic as from the 20th of October 1874. The line ran through Wroxham and it was from here that the east-west extension was planned.

The East Norfolk Railway Act of 1864 had originally planned an extension to Aylsham but delays in building other extensions (notably to Cromer) and other financial problems slowed down expansion plans so that the Act to extend the line to Aylsham was not granted until the 16th of April 1876. Tenders for the work were submitted during 1878 and that of the lowest, William Waddell, was accepted and in August 1878 the work commenced. There were a number of initial problems particularly with the weather; bricklaying was stopped in December due to the severe frosts.

However in the spring of 1879, with a large increase in the number of men employed and with the assistance of two stationary steam engines and a traction engine, he was able to keep to his contract of "Coltishall by the middle of June" and estimated that he would be at Buxton by the end of June. The Board of Trade inspector declared the line adequate and the first section from Wroxham to Buxton was opened on the 8th of July 1879. The company however was running into financial problems and when shares in the Western Extension (to County School) were offered in September 1879 there was a lack of response and this coupled with proposals for extensions submitted by other railway companies in Norfolk meant that there was little chance of the Wroxham to County School extension becoming a profitable possibility if it ran on its own. It was inevitable that it would only survive if it were

taken over by a larger company; this happened in June 1881 when the East Norfolk Railway was amalgamated with the Great Eastern Railway.

During these troubled times, however, the building of the line continued with the extension from Buxton to Aylsham opening on the 1st of January 1880 and from Aylsham to Cawston opening on the 1st of September 1880. At the time of the Great Eastern Railway's takeover in June 1881 land for the two miles beyond Reepham had already been purchased and work from Cawston was proceeding on schedule.

After the amalgamation with the GER, the East Norfolk lines were developed as part of an integrated system but this development favoured the Norwich to the North East Norfolk coast area and this was further enhanced when a line from Mundesley to Cromer was opened in 1906.

The western extension of the North East Railway became the poor relation of the system; it proved to be an unpopular and profitless extension which slumbered along into the twentieth century; it epitomised the sleepy rustic branch line that our memories are so fond of.

The First World War brought a halt to the extensive holiday traffic to the Cromer/Mundesley area and there was compensation by an increase in military and general farm traffic as maximum production from the land was encouraged. The immediate post-war period continued this revival particularly as farm production stayed high but the first buses started to run scheduled services to Cromer and Aylsham. When the road surfaces improved during the 1920s and bus stops were introduced into the very centre of Norwich, the passengers started to turn away from trains onto the buses. They found they could catch a bus which passed through the village rather than walking up to two miles to a station to catch a train.

The Wroxham to Reepham and County School line really suffered in this inter-war period, being an east-west line when most of the traffic was north-south (to the coast and the Broads). Reepham to Norwich was catered for also by the M&GN line from Whitwell (which was 35 minutes quicker) and by buses. Worst of all in the inter-war period was the depression in farming and allied industries. Arable North East Norfolk was depressed more than most areas and with little money available to finance development or initiatives the railways were losing a lot of a decreasing total of traffic. It was not until the approach of the Second World War that traffic began to increase markedly. RAF stations built at Coltishall and Foulsham brought extra traffic to the line, agriculture revived as in the First World War and bus schedules were slashed. A great many people now had to travel and the only services available were the trains.

After the war there was a rapid decline in passenger traffic on the line from Aylsham to County School once the buses and private cars returned to the roads. The long

meandering line from County School to Norwich via Aylsham in a slow train pulling dowdy and worn carriages, which were at least 40 years old, were no match for the direct and competitive buses.

The passenger services from Wroxham to County School ceased on the 15th of September 1952 and the line from Foulsham to Reepham was closed to goods as well.

The line was linked to the M&GN line from Melton Constable to Norwich via Whitwell when the Themelthorpe curve was laid in September 1960 and this allowed concrete production from Lenwade to form much of the traffic for a few years until it finally closed to goods in 1982.

The line was last used in the mid 1970s when a small number of passenger trains were organised by the Aylsham and District Rail Action Committee. The journeys from Thorpe Station to Lenwade (and back) via Wroxham, Aylsham, Reepham and Whitwell were packed with passengers but they provided little more than evocative reminders of the slow pace of life of a bygone age, a service which could not be profitably sustained today.

Michael Black

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

Table 57

NORWICH (Thorpe), WROXHAM, AYLSHAM (South),
COUNTY SCHOOL, and DEREHAM

Miles		Week Days only						Week Days only									
		p.m.	a.m.	a.m.	p.m.	p.m.	p.m.	a.m.	a.m.	a.m.	p.m.	a.m.	p.m.				
3	London (L. St.) dep	10 25	4 25	10 20	1 0	3 40	6 40	...	54	London (L'pool St.) dep	...	8 50	...	5 50	9 20	12 25	...
	Norwich (Thorpe) dep	6 5	9 18	2 0	5 40	8 05	9 25	...	Dereham dep	6 38	8 23	11 05	...	12 00	10 8	...	
14	Whitlingham A dep	6 10	9 23	2 5	...	17 0	9 30	...	Dereham dep	6 45	8 30	12 3	...	12 8	2 18	8 14	...
6	Balhouse dep	6 20	9 33	2 14	5 27	7 10	9 40	...	North Elmham dep	6 50	8 37	12 8	...	12 15	2 23	8 20	...
6	Wroxham { arr dep	6 28	9 40	2 22	5 37	7 15	9 45	...	County School { arr dep	6 50	8 46	12 8	...	12 15	2 23	8 20	...
114	Coltishall dep	6 29	9 45	2 33	5 47	7 19	9 47	...	Foulsham dep	6 58	8 54	12 16	...	12 21	2 31	8 28	...
14	Burton Lamas dep	6 38	9 51	2 40	5 57	7 25	9 53	...	Reepham (Norfolk) dep	7 9	9 2	12 24	...	12 29	2 39	8 36	...
17	Aylsham (South) dep	6 48	9 57	2 48	5 57	7 31	9 59	...	Cawston dep	7 15	9 7	12 29	...	12 34	2 44	8 43	...
22	Cawston dep	6 51	10 6	2 53	5 58	7 40	10 8	...	Aylsham (South) dep	7 26	9 17	12 39	...	12 44	2 56	8 54	...
24	Reepham (Norfolk) dep	7 0	10 15	3 4	6 32	7 49	10 17	...	Burton Lamas dep	7 34	9 25	12 47	...	12 52	3 4	7 4	...
25	Foulsham dep	7 7	10 20	3 8	6 30	7 54	10 22	...	Coltishall dep	7 40	9 31	12 53	...	12 58	3 10	7 10	...
32	County School { arr dep	7 16	10 29	3 18	6 48	8 3	10 31	...	Wroxham { arr dep	7 47	9 36	12 58	...	1 3	3 16	7 15	...
34	North Elmham dep	7 24	10 37	3 26	6 56	8 11	10 39	...	Balhouse dep	8 0	9 37	1 0	1 24	1 24	3 18	7 17	...
38	Dereham arr	7 30	10 48	3 31	7 1	8 17	10 45	...	Whitlingham A dep	8 16	9 53	...	1 40	1 40	3 34	7 37	...
63	54 London (L. St.) arr	7 58	10 54	3 39	7 10	8 26	10 53	...	Norwich (Thorpe) arr	8 21	9 55	1 19	1 45	1 45	3 40	7 42	...
				6 45	...	2 30	3 London (L'pool St.) arr	11 34	1 35	4 40	5 8	6 8	7 9

A Station for Thorpe St. Andrew
 a a.m.
 i Runs 15th July to 9th September
 inclusive
 o 3 minutes later on Saturdays
 E Except Saturdays

F The East Anglian. Limited
 accommodation
 L Via Norwich (Thorpe) Dep. 10 p.m.
 on Wednesdays and 1 3 p.m. on
 Saturdays

8 Arr. 8 6 p.m. until 24th June
 P Dep. 10 25 a.m. on Saturdays
 q p.m.
 8 or 8 Saturdays only
 Z Dep. 11 25 p.m. on Sundays

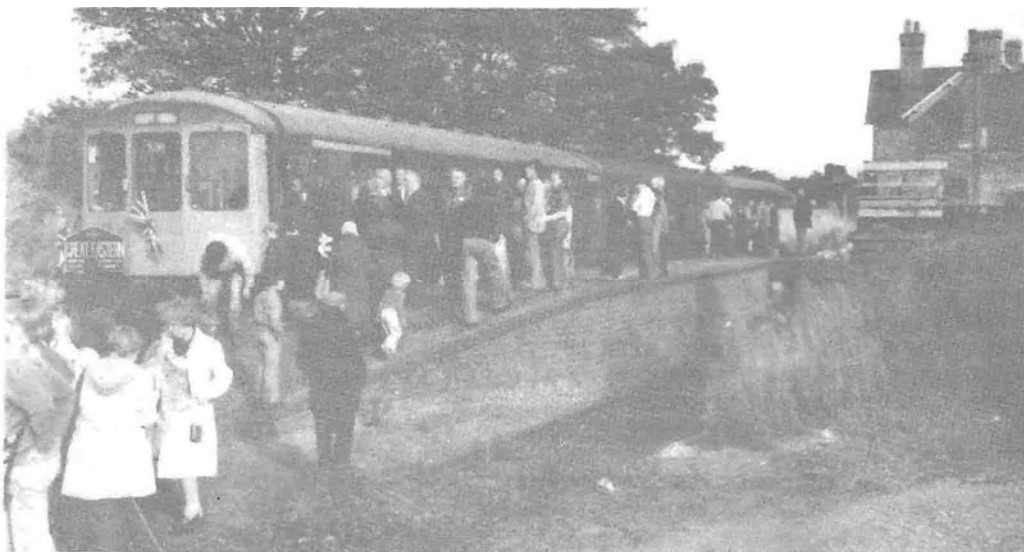
For OTHER TRAINS between Norwich and Whitlingham, Tables 55 and 58—Norwich and Wroxham,
 Table 55—Norwich and County School, Table 54—County School and Dereham; Table 54.



The station staff take time between trains to pose for the camera – date unknown, but probably the early 1900s.



A busy moment at the station during the inter-war period. The use of the railway declined during these years but was revived for a few years during the Second World War.



The last passenger train to stop at Reepham Station – organised by Aylsham and District Rail Action Committee in 1978.