

Whitwell and The Muddle and Go Nowhere

Whitwell Station was opened on the 1st of July 1882 when the section of line from Guestwick to Lenwade was opened up to passenger and goods traffic. This section was 6½ miles in length and initially there were four trains a day (with variations on Tuesday) which ran to and from Melton Constable. On the 12th of August 1880, the Lynn and Fakenham Railway was authorised to build from Fakenham to Norwich and the line was subsequently opened in stages as its builders progressed through the countryside of central north Norfolk; Fakenham to Melton Constable, then to Guestwick, to Lenwade and then to Norwich where the line terminated at the City Station. The whole length was officially opened on 1st January 1883. The Lynn and Fakenham was merged with a number of other local railways and they formed the Eastern and Midland Railway Company. For the next ten years the East Midland ran the system although by 1889 it had run into such financial difficulties that the Midland Railway and the Great Northern Railway made a joint offer to take over the Eastern and Midland system. This offer was accepted and after some four years of negotiation the new committee took control of the line from 1st July 1893 and the Midland and Great Northern Joint Railway was born (the M&GN). The forming of the M&GN was therefore a microcosm of the railway fever that had swept Great Britain in the 1840s; as the major cities were linked by the amalgamation of small railway companies so the towns and villages of much of Norfolk were linked by the amalgamations, forty-two Acts of Parliament and foresight that made the M&GN.

The Muddle and Go Nowhere as it was affectionately known retained its independent existence but finally ceased to exist under its own title on the 1st of October 1936 when it came under the control of the London and North Eastern Railway (LNER). It then became part of British Railways with the nationalisation in 1948 but to the end of its days the route was always referred to locally as “the old M&GN”.

The lines of the M&GN stretched from Little Bytham in Lincolnshire through the Fens and King’s Lynn with a spur to connect with the Great Northern at Peterborough; from King’s Lynn it ran across Norfolk to Melton Constable and on to Norwich with other lines running out from Melton to Sheringham and Cromer and another which went to Great Yarmouth via North Walsham.

As Melton Constable was the crossroads of these lines it eventually became the headquarters of the M&GN. This was due to a number of reasons; the first was geographical as it was below the ridge of high land running from Fakenham to Cromer and secondly the availability of 25 acres of land owned by Lord Hastings (with part of the eventual contract being the construction of his own platform and private waiting room). As a result of one of the earlier amalgamations the locomotive

shops of the Yarmouth and Fakenham Railway were moved to Melton and this was the initial impetus that was to create the “Crewe of Norfolk” and turn Melton Constable into historical uniqueness as the only railway village in the world. In 1888 it had a population of only 118 and this had increased to nearly 1,000 by 1901, the works gave a great impetus to the local labour force as an alternative to the only other occupation – agriculture. With the influx of labour into Melton it was necessary for the company to provide accommodation. Houses were duly built which included gas, running water and main drainage – all for a rent of 4/- a week which was stopped from the wages. A general store was built to serve the growing community and a school soon followed; this provision set the foundation for what was to be one of the most successful and happy railway companies in the history of steam locomotion. It is little wonder that there was such affection for the M&GN during its working life and for many years after it demise. Obviously the 43 years of the M&GN saw its ups and downs; on one occasion the company ran into such financial difficulties that they were unable to pay the men on a Friday night but on the Monday morning they all turned up for work as usual and the engineer in charge was physically reduced to tears at the loyalty of his workforce.

The engineer was William Marriott who was the chief engineer and manager of the M&GN system for 41 years. He was based and lived in Melton Constable and often worked from a railway carriage which had been turned into an office and in which he travelled round the railway system. His name became synonymous with the M&GN and he is remembered today in the new long-distance walk named “Marriott's Way”.

Whitwell and Reepham was a typical M&GN small country station which was staffed by a station master, a clerk, two signalmen, one porter and a lad porter who cleaned the lamps and carried out other general duties. There was a daily passenger service of four or five trains each way and there were regular goods trains that would deliver coal, artificial fertiliser and animal feedstuffs and would pick up grain and livestock and sugar beet during the winter months.

As with Reepham (North) the sugar beet was brought to the station by farmers' wagons (drawn by horses initially and then in later years by tractors). This crop was grown under contract to the Cantley factory and to get there it had to be hauled from Melton Constable to Great Yarmouth and then onto the line to Cantley. Both stations at Reepham were in the Cantley contract area and as the area was purely agriculturally based, they were both competing for the same type of business; the Whitwell Station generally suffered from this competition. Although there were large facilities at Whitwell for storage, the entrenched business of Stimpsons at Reepham Station meant that they enjoyed most of the trade in fertilisers and feedstuffs that was available although Stimpsons stored grain, etc., at Whitwell.

With the volume of sugar beet being loaded throughout the season meant that the railway gangmen often had the onerous task of clearing up the soil that would drop through the wagon doors. They would have to clear up the yard nearly every day and so much soil would be collected that it would be put into wagons and sent to the coast to be dumped along the sea wall.

The twelve-mile length of track which included the stations of Hindolveston, Guestwick, Whitwell and Lenwade was looked after by an eleven-man gang who were based at Guestwick and who used a motor trolley to travel up and down their length of track.

For much of the year the work of the gangmen was routine but it was often aggravated and at times made hazardous by the vagaries of the weather.

In the severe winter of 1947, many roads and rails were blocked by snow and two engines and a coach became stuck on Wednesday 5th March in high drifting snow in a cutting at Guestwick. Initially railway staff could not get to it by using snow ploughs so it had to be manually dug out. Troops based at the Weybourne army camp assisted by a number of German prisoners of war started digging from the Melton Constable side and a trainload of men (who were temporarily unemployed due to the weather) were brought from Norwich. The train also brought a refreshment van and a quantity of shovels supplied by R G Carters of Drayton.

After much hard work, the train was finally freed on Sunday 9th March when a snow plough coupled with three engines from the LMS was used to clear the final drifts.

Another great weather problem was the fog and in a poem about the job of a platelayer, Mr A L Jex, who worked on the length gang covering Whitwell, wrote that:

*When that black beast called fog descends,
A signal post he must attend;
Put detonators on the line,
So drivers may be warned in time.*

He recalls that he was on fogging duty at Whitwell one day and he cracked a fog signal to stop a goods train. After a while he heard what he thought was wagons on the rails and then through the fog came a brake van and eight wagons. The track was downhill from there to Lenwade so he jumped on the brake van and pulled up the wagons in the Black Water Cutting. He then went back to Whitwell Station and told the staff and they arranged for an engine to go down and pick up the wagons. His only reward for this was a few lumps of coal that he had off the tender; it was an offence to take these but the driver and guard were not in a position to say anything as the loss of their goods train was far worse than the loss of some coal.

In the days before large road transport the railway was one of two means of getting cattle to the main Norwich Market (the other was to walk the animals there). Every Saturday a special train would leave Melton Constable at 4 am and would convey the animals to Norwich, they would be unloaded at the City Station (near Heigham Street) and would then be driven to the market then situated in front of the Castle.

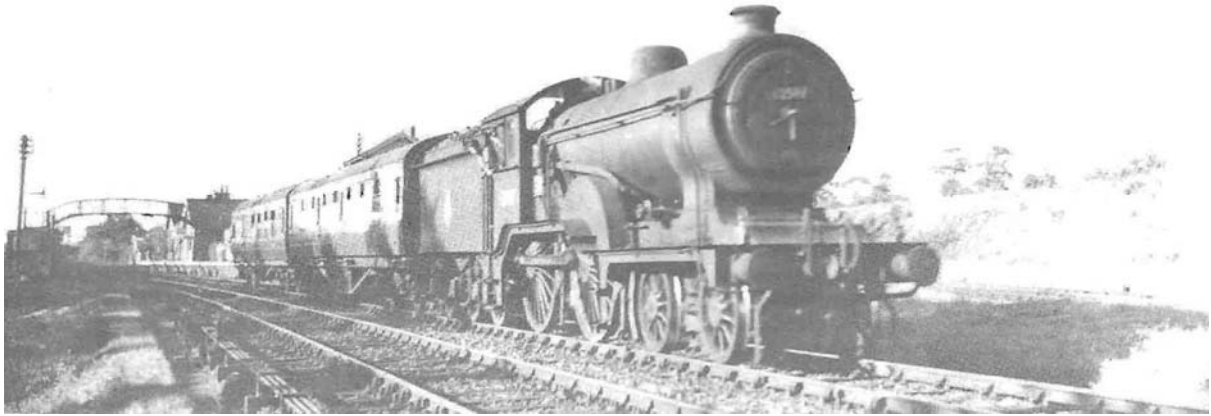
A large number of passengers (particularly on Saturdays) would be conveyed to and from Norwich, many farmers and businesspeople would go and make purchases and these would be delivered by the shopkeepers and merchants to the City Station ready for the “passengers” to pick them up when they came back for the return journey.

The agricultural goods traffic declined rapidly at Whitwell after 1945. There was the competition from the GER at Reepham and from the increasing number of road hauliers; full wagon loads from Whitwell became non-existent from the late 1940s onwards.

By the 1950s the passenger traffic had declined and this sleepy country station displayed a general absence of business. A member of staff from the Norwich office of the railway remembers a day in the mid 1950s when he went to Whitwell to catch the train back to Norwich. It was a cold day and the waiting room fire made a welcome place to sit by until the train came. There was no one about except a lady station attendant; when the Norwich train came in – she called “Whitwell and Reepham Station” three times – no one got off and just the one passenger got on; as the train slowly pulled out of the station, he remembers thinking “change and decay”. It was therefore inevitable that closure would come and in February 1959 the last passenger train steamed its way through Whitwell, the lamps were put out, the doors were closed and the cold winter’s day was warmed only by the nostalgia which so many felt for this much loved railway.

Michael Black

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



Above: D 16/3 No. 62597: Leaving Whitwell in the evening in June 1957. Below: The same view in June 1991.





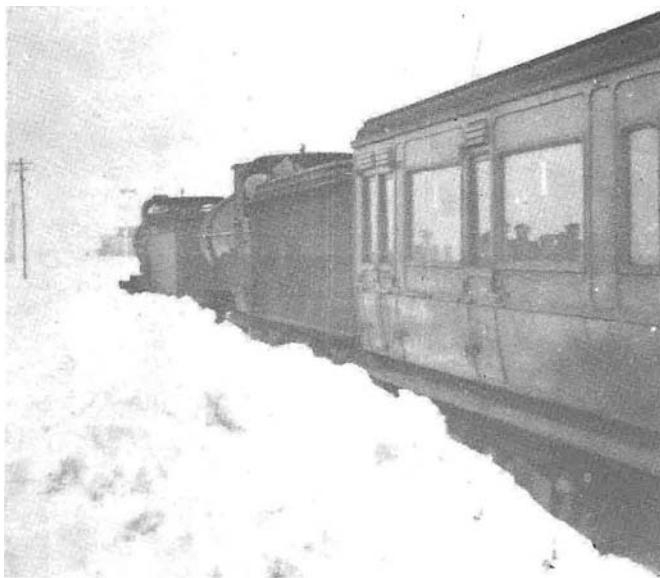
D 15 No. 62538: Taken in August 1950 this shows the best kept "Claud Hamilton" on the Norwich District at that time leaving Whitwell for Melton Constable.



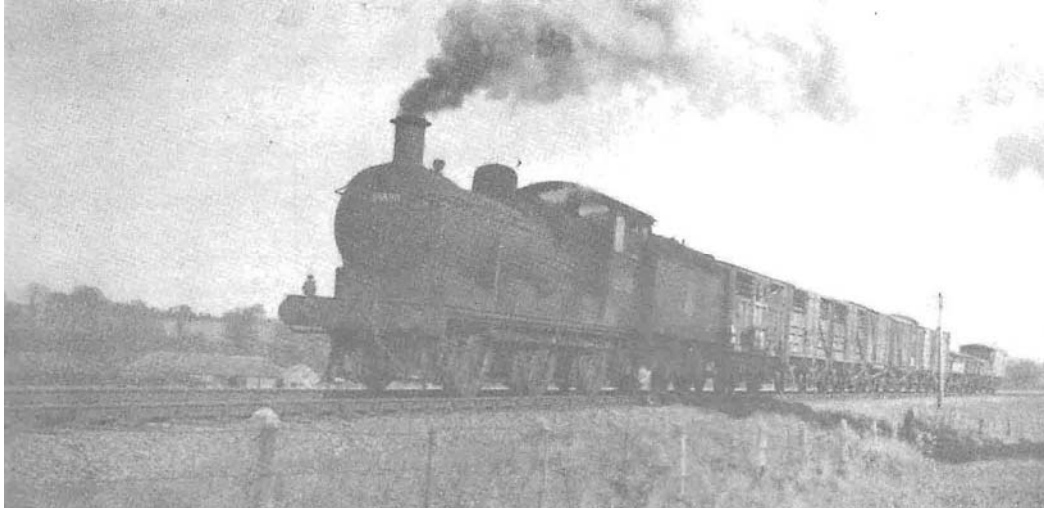
D 16/3 No. 62533: Hackford Bridge was removed a few years ago; this shows a full head of steam as the train heads from the bridge towards Themelthorpe in May 1957.



D 16/3 No. 62562: Before the passenger traffic declined in the 1950s the 10.41 am from Melton to Norwich leaves Whitwell in February 1949.



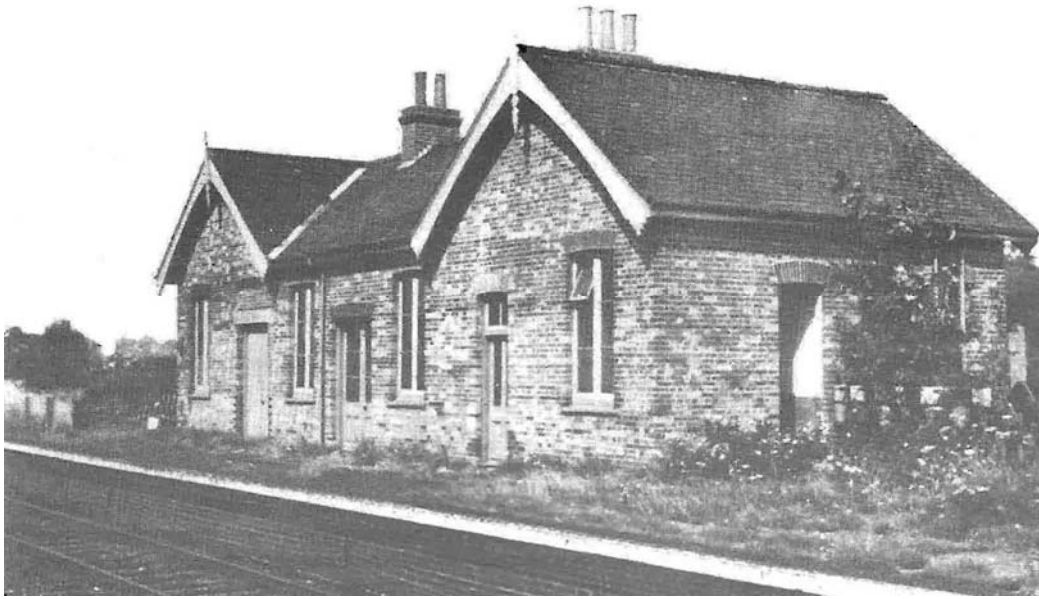
D 2s Nos. 2157 and 2195: Just before the train was released from snowdrifts at Guestwick, 9th March 1947.



J 17 No. 65588: The “afternoon freight” from Norwich to Melton Constable in May 1957.



4 MT No. 43111 (Goods) and D 16/3 No. 62515 (Passenger). A busy scene at Whitwell in September 1957. The goods train has shunted its ballast trucks into the yard to let the 9.37 am Melton Constable to Norwich City pass by.



Above: The main station building at Whitwell in August 1965. Below: ... and sadly its state in June 1991.





Whitwell Station – date unknown but believed to be circa 1920.