

Reepham Station – The Stimpson Connection

As the railway builders moved on their relentless course from Cawston to Reepham and on to Foulsham during 1880 and 1881 the site of Reepham Station became an important point for the company building the line. The site occupied a large area which today is bounded by Stony Lane and Wood Dalling Road and it was developed not only to house the station, associated buildings and various areas of lines to be used for marshalling goods traffic but also included areas and facilities that at the time were vital to the railway building. There was a carpenters' shop, where level crossing gates were built and materials prepared to build the signal boxes. There was a blacksmiths' shop where the metal work for gates and buildings was forged and there were areas used for storing the sleepers, rails and the mass of other items that were brought in by rail to assist in the building of the line onto Foulsham and beyond. The site even included a bakery which was built to produce bread for the gangs who worked on the railway, many of whom came back at night and slept in and around the station area.

To encourage its usage the owners of the railway had to introduce and sustain goods traffic; they couldn't rely entirely on passengers to produce their profit and so the area round the station became a site of Victorian business development. Businesses were to be encouraged into the station area and hopefully would profit and expand from the regular delivery to the station by the daily goods trains.

The obvious business role was one that would satisfy the supply and demand of the agricultural needs of the areas and also to provide bulk goods for the business and domestic needs of the residents in and around Reepham.

The area to the south of the station buildings and the main up and down lines was developed as the business area; the railway built a large granary (approximately 200 feet x 50 feet), there was an area known as the coal grounds and a group of cattle pens all served by a series of sidings.

In the first year or so after the opening of the line Garrett Taylor, Sharpins and Collers all set up business in the station area, although Taylors was taken over in 1886 by the Sall Coal Company. Coal, animal feedstuffs and grain were the main business of Sharpins and Sall Coal whilst Collers mainly concentrated on the supply of coal.

The three companies continued in competition until 1927 when Sharpins closed down and their business area in the station yard and granary was taken over by the other two, although by this time the Sall Coal Company had changed its name to Stimpson and Hurn. Collers moved their Reepham area base to Aylsham in the early 1960s and the whole station site was then taken over by Stimpsons.

Mr Benjamin Stimpson was a farmer at Morton and Great Witchingham who purchased farm land at Sall in the early 1880s when Garrett Taylor had to sell up; Mr Stimpson also took over their Reepham Station business setting up the Sall Coal Company in 1886; the business continued during the next 100 years and the site is still used today by Pertwees for the distribution of seed corn, agricultural chemicals and fertilisers.

During the past 100 years the following name changes have occurred. From 1886 to approximately 1914 there was the Sall Coal Company, Ben Stimpson and E Stimpson; from 1914 to 1932 it was Stimpson and Hurn; from 1933 to 1965, E Stimpson and Son and then E Stimpson and Son Limited; from 1965 to 1980, Stimpson and Partners and Stimpson and Pertwee Limited, and from 1980 (and probably not finally) Pertwees.

Benjamin Stimpson (who was the grandfather of the present Mr Ben Stimpson) set up the Sall Coal Company, an agricultural merchants' business which dealt in animal feedstuffs, grain and artificial fertilisers; these were bought and sold throughout the local farming community and they also bought in coal which was then sold to business premises and householders in Reepham and the neighbouring villages.

The station coal grounds were served by two lines along which the trucks were brought to be unloaded; the coal was often stored in piles at the station and unless the coal could be directly shovelled out from the trucks then men were employed who would shovel the coal into skeps which were then carried away from the tracks and hand tipped into prepared wooden bays.

The coal would be distributed in various sized lots mainly to the more affluent households of the district who could purchase and store the coal in such bulk. The big houses in the area would order coal by the truck load and many a long working day had to be endured by the employees who were responsible for delivering the regular truckload ordered by the owners of such places as Haveringland Hall and Great Witchingham Hall.

When steam engines were used to thresh the corn, the farmer would arrange for a suitable amount of steam coal to be delivered to the farms and this would be supplied in bulk by Stimpsons and Collers, the deliveries being made to arrive in advance at the respective farms as the threshing contractor with his machinery made his way from one site to another. Some farmers would buy a truckload of steam coal for use in the house as well as for threshing. The coal was also bagged and weighed up in small lots which was then sold by a delivery roundsman who toured the local area. Stimpsons had their main rounds in Wood Dalling, Kerdiston, Whitwell and Sparham with most of the Reepham area being covered by Collers. The coal (as with

all other deliveries) was made by horse and cart from the 1880s until after the 1940s although the first motor truck entered service with Stimpsons in 1925.

The coal was usually bought through a factor such as Mellonie and Golder of Ipswich, Bessey and Palmers of Great Yarmouth or Vintners of Cambridge and was mostly obtained from the Nottinghamshire pits. A Stimpson inventory of 1887 shows that they were stocking best coals, kitchen coals, brick burning coals, smithy nuts, cobbles, screenings, coke, natural seconds, steam coal and household nuts.

In the early 1960s Collers moved to Aylsham and continued with their coal rounds but by this time there was a general decline in the demand for coal; the requests for bulk deliveries had all but gone and the introduction of oil-fired central heating had reduced the household demand. The closure of the goods traffic in the 1960s and the subsequent difficulties that would ensue in the delivery by road signalled the end, in 1965, of Stimpsons as coal merchants.

Most of the work at the station concerned with coal was carried on outside in the yard area, the granary was rented and used for the other sides of the business: the feedstuffs and grain and the artificial fertilisers. The company bought in general feedstuffs which were sold to the local farming community and it bought from the farmers their cereal crops which were then sold or stored depending upon the market demands at the time. The grain was sold at the Norwich Corn Hall in Exchange Street (now the home of Jarrolds department store).

A balance sheet from the end of the last century shows that the following feedstuffs were being sold to local farmers: bran, barley meal, cotton cake (square and long), decorticated cake, supers, linseed cake, maize (flat and round), malt culms, lamb food, black oats, rice meal, tares, porridge meal, fowls wheat, bullock food, beans and white peas. They also sold bar, land and rock salt.

At that time there was a small demand for artificial fertilisers and Stimpsons were buying in and selling on nitrate soda, phosphates, superphosphate, lime, bone manure and sulphate of ammonia. Much of it seemed to be recorded as manure: this would appear to have been a generic term to describe the product irrespective of whether it came from animals, chemical firms or as a by-product from the mining areas (basic slag was high phosphate).

Stimpsons were responsible locally for their pioneering approach to the manufacture of feedstuffs: whilst there may not have been a specific demand from farmers for animal farm compounds, Stimpsons recognised that balanced feedstuffs were much more beneficial (and cost effective) than single feeds and they developed products which were then sold direct to local farmers. In the early 1930s they started preparing mixed pig and poultry feeds and this soon developed into a wide range of similar products. In those early days all the feeds were mixed by hand shovel but as

the demand increased a mechanical mixer, hammer mill and oat crusher were all purchased and installed in the granary.

The early development with artificial fertilisers led to the setting up of an agency with ICI in 1930; sales increased during the 1930s and during the Second World War the business was almost wholly concentrated on it. There was a great need for the country to become as near to self-sufficient as was possible and at the same time Stimpsons had to sustain a decrease in their workforce as more and more staff left to take their place in the Forces.

With less staff available and with a growing demand for crop production Stimpsons concentrated on artificial fertilisers and decreased their activities with feedstuffs and grains.

Coal was freely available during the early years of the war but a decline in the number of men in the pits coupled with a particularly long and bitter spell in January 1942 caused the rationing of coal to be brought in later that year. Stimpsons had continued with their coal rounds, although the supply to them had been erratic, particularly during the winter months when the transport of coal by rail would sometimes break down completely. When rationing was introduced, the deliveries continued during the rest of the war but it was of specific amounts and to regular customers.

After the war some areas of business slowly declined and in 1965 (the year the coal sales finished) they merged with Pertwees: eventually the feedstuffs demised and today the whole business concentrates on artificial fertilisers, agrochemicals and seed corn.

For many years, the business relied heavily on horses for their delivery work and also for use in the yard to shunt the trucks into the granary ready for unloading. The station yard diagram shows two lines of track, one which goes behind the granary, this was known as the "back road", and another which goes in one end of the granary and out the other end, this was known as the "shed road". Two horses would be used and they moved the trucks around in the sidings until the ones to be unloaded were in position, they would then be pulled by the horse to the south door of the granary.

There were two mixed goods trains a day which passed through the station and every afternoon if trucks arrived for unloading then the trains would leave them in the area to the west of the station site. There was a gradient up through the coal grounds, until it reached the granary door; there it levelled out. If the trucks required unloading in the coal area or other outside sidings or in the granary then they were pulled into position by two horses. One was fitted with a special harness and pulled nearest the truck and the other outer horse was fitted with an ordinary trace.

Both horses would walk on the right-hand side (not between the rails) and they would pull the trucks on the long haul up from the dip to the granary doors. Once they reached the doors the gradient levelled off and by now there was sufficient motion for the trucks to run on inside the granary (the horses having by now been released) or if the trucks had stopped, they would be pushed or “pinched” along by hand by means of a long pinch bar.

There was a gradient up to the granary; once unloaded (and with the downward gradient out) the trucks could be pushed manually down into the sidings. Stimpsons had horses available for the coal delivery and each day, for six days a week, one of these would be out on a round in the morning and then back to shunt the trucks in the afternoon. As the shunting was really a task for the GER, they paid Stimpsons for the facility of the horses doing the work of a train. In 1890 there was an income of nearly £90 a year from the GER for this work. (The GER also gave a first class return ticket to London which was invariably made use of by Mr Stimpson.) The amount of work must have been extensive when you consider that the average wage of a labourer of the time would be little more than £25 per year.

The daily shunting was physically hard even for the horses and they did not last too long on this work; it was a necessary task which had to be carried out. If the trucks were not unloaded within three days, then the buyer would be charged “demurrage” by the GER. Another problem, particularly during the colder months, was that the grease on the truck wheels would begin to harden and this made their movement a lot harder, particularly for the poor horses pulling them uphill.

In the late 1920s a horse named “Smut” was regularly used on this work and it cost Stimpsons £1 2s 0d a week to supply this service; it cost 10/- a week for oats, bran and cut hay to feed Smut and a labourer cost 1/- an hour for two hours a day, six days a week. If none of the horses were available to shunt the wagons, then a horse from one of Stimpsons’ nearby farms would be brought in. The shunting with horses started in the early 1880s and carried on until the mid 1930s when the operation was then taken over by trains.

Throughout the country the railway companies used many horses as an alternative to trains to shunt goods trucks and in the larger stations they were also used for the delivery of goods. Grass alongside the rural lines was cut and dried and sent as fodder to the horses based in the urban areas, notably London. The companies employed inspectors who would travel around their areas and inspect the horses on a six-monthly basis. If horses had not been available at Reepham from Stimpsons then it is reasonable to assume that the GER would have had to supply and look after them.

When the line was being laid a carpenters' shop was built at Reepham which carried out most of the specialised woodwork requirements of the line as it progressed towards Foulsham. After its short but vital working period the building was left vacant and was eventually hired by Stimpsons for them to stable their horses in; it held up to six. Collers also had horses and they were stabled in the area now occupied by the new industrial units in Collers Way. The stables used by Stimpsons horses are still there today; it is the dilapidated wooden building on the north side of Stony Lane. Any visit to it should be taken with care as the building is leaning badly and will probably collapse in the not too distant future. However, a visual inspection shows its history: the floor is laid in a number of places with small square stable bricks, part of the floor has been laid with old redundant sleepers, possibly the only ones that can now be found in the station area, and under the present roof you can still find remains of the felt covering that was put on by the railways builders in the early 1880s

A great deal of other work was carried out at Reepham; there was the seasonal need for the loading and movement of sugar beet to Cantley and large consignments of grain, fruit and vegetables were sent out from the station, all of these were manually loaded and unloaded for many years by the local farm labourers. The station had the use of a group of cattle pens and these were used for cattle going to and from the local Reepham Wednesday Market. Cattle sent from the Reepham area to the main livestock market in Norwich were invariably sent from Whitwell, the journey from Whitwell to Norwich was much quicker than the journey from Reepham Station which would deliver the cattle to Trowse Station whereas the Whitwell line ended at the City Station which was then a much shorter drive (up Westwick Street and St Andrews) to the market held each Saturday morning in the area around Norwich Castle.

The imbalance in the business for transporting cattle was partly offset in the warmer months of the year when large numbers of local cattle were sent to Reepham Station for the journey to Acle marshes where they were grazed during the summer.

On the edge of the main platform there was a loading dock with a small manually operated crane which was used to lift farm machinery on and off trucks, machinery that was bought and sold by Eglington's and Randell's, the main agricultural machinery merchants in the area.

The loading dock was also used by the loading and unloading of horses; these animals whether for hunting or for working on the farms or to work with local business people were highly valued and could not be driven and packed into trucks like cattle. The M&GN supplied special covered wagons (which contained seats for grooms and other workers who rode with the horses) and these had large sides

which would drop down onto the loading dock and down which the horses could be led. It was common practice for horses travelling to and from local hunts and race meetings to be loaded and unloaded in this manner, although such events never happened in Reepham.

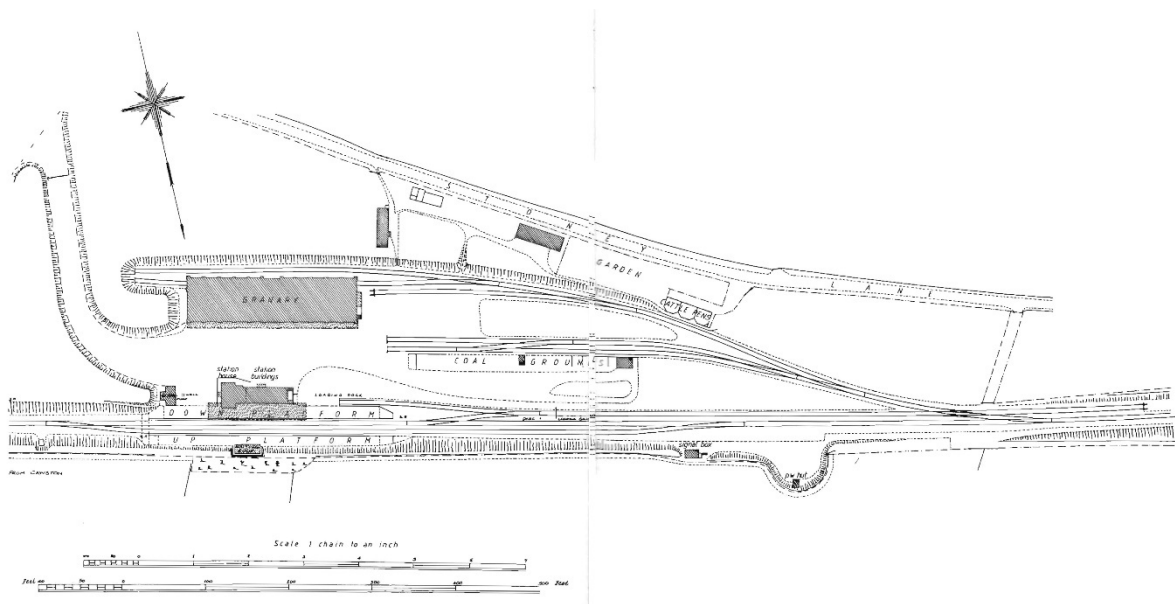
The GER had a parcels office (the small building next to the station) which was used for small parcels and they also had an area in the granary which was used for storing or holding the larger items.

Reepham was the epitome of a country station which served a small but busy market town, acting as a centre to the surrounding rural area. The area was wholly agriculturally based and the station and its five-acre site adequately served Reepham's needs during the seventy years life of the railways. The GER Reepham station was always in competition with the M&GN at Whitwell but there was little doubt as to which one was the more successful.

Reepham was always full of people, horses, traffic and generally displayed an air of business; Whitwell was the one which won prizes for its flower beds and settled into a rural quietness between trains and which dealt with goods on an intermittent rather than a regular basis, with the exception of the animal trade on Saturdays.

We miss them both and although Whitwell has deteriorated to a state of dereliction, the buildings at Reepham in their soft cream brown brick remain and as a permanent reminder of their former glory. The station master's house with the attached booking office and waiting rooms, the small parcels office and the large granary are all in current use. No doubt whilst they remain as working buildings they will be preserved in good order and will act as a living reminder of their contribution to the history of Reepham and its area.

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



Reepham Station as it was built and laid out in the 1880s. The only items that remain today are the granary, the station buildings and the old carpenters' shop (later used by Stimpsons for stabling horses); this is the shaded building in the upper centre of this layout.



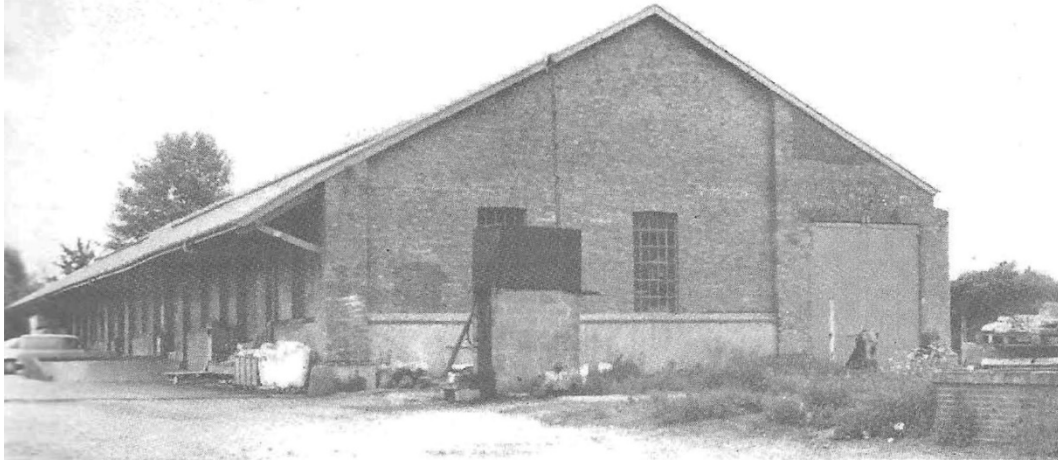
Taken about 1930 it shows Stimpson and Hurn staff with some of their delivery wagons. Mr Thomas Hurn is second right from the centre horse and Mr Ben Stimpson stands to its left.



Mr Ben Stimpson supervising another delivery of artificial fertiliser from ICI in the 1950s.



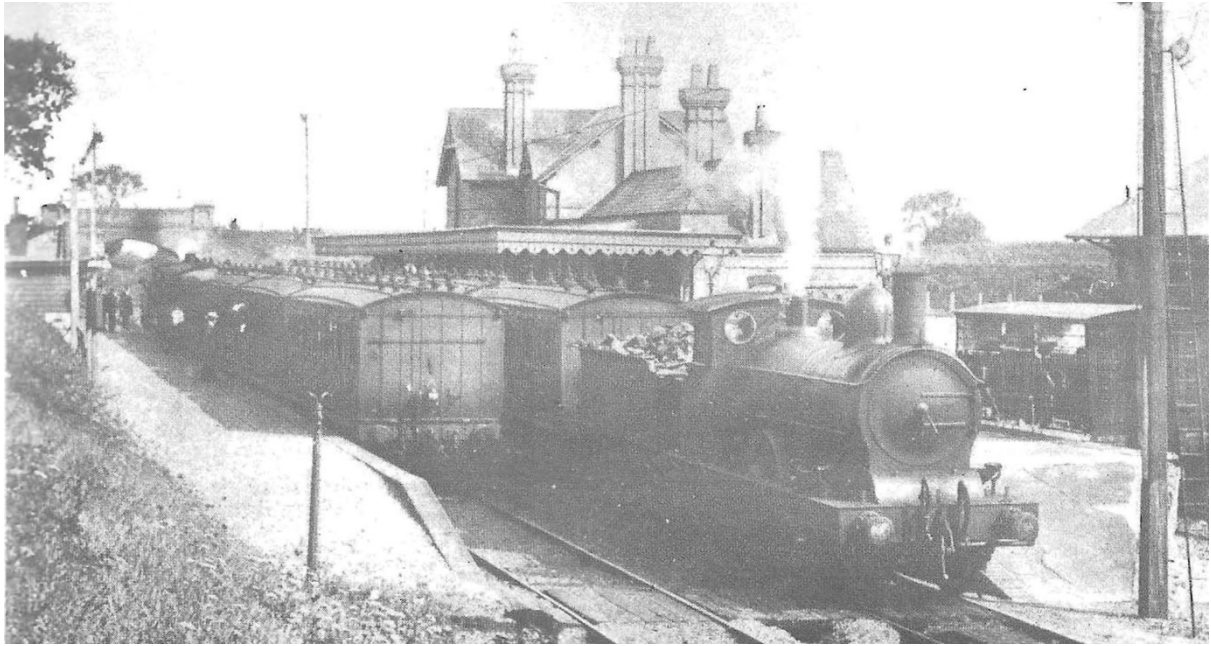
Towards the end – Stimpsons unload another delivery in the 1960s, also artificial fertiliser.



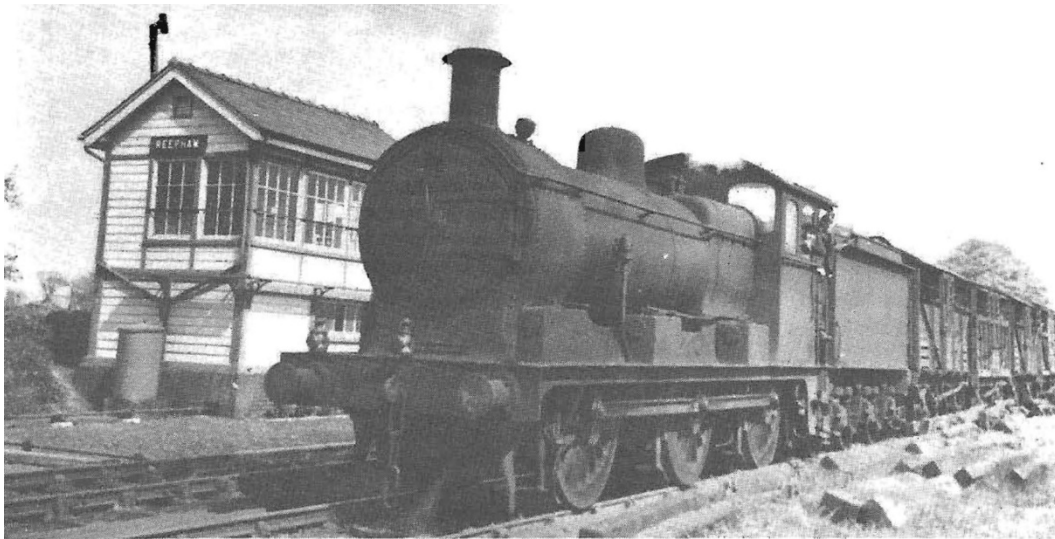
The granary today, little changed in its structure since the 1880s. The goods trucks were pulled into the building through the large doorway on the right-hand side.



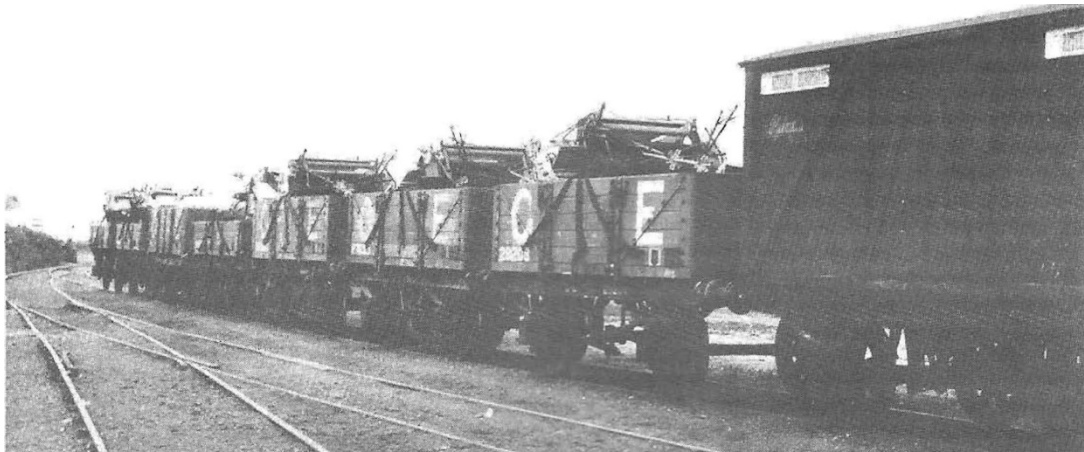
The original carpenters' shop, still standing but only just!



On each weekday the 6 pm from Wroxham and the 6.05 pm from Dereham met briefly at Reepham at 6.38 pm.



J 17 No. 65534. A train of cattle trucks wait to pull away in April 1950.



Harvest machinery waiting to be unloaded, probably destined for sale by Randells to farmers in the district.



Reepham Station, mid 1930s.



The loading gauge, unused now for 30 years and nearly smothered by nature's unchecked growth.



A present-day view of the station buildings. The parcel building is the small separate unit to the right. The two-storey part of the building was the station master's house.

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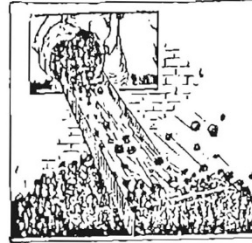
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