

'NEW TOWN BLUES': HOW A RAILWAY COMPANY AVOIDED THE PROBLEM AT WOLVERTON

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Although lacking any body of doctrine or experience to guide them, the directors of the London & Birmingham Railway Company seem to have been keenly aware of their social responsibilities towards the inhabitants of the new town they had created at Wolverton. Mr Richards here traces the steps they took to maintain morale among people who found themselves among strangers in a strange district. His article is a valuable companion piece to Mrs French's study of immigration into Wolverton, published in Records 28.

The growth of industry not only transformed towns; it also created them.¹ But without transport, originally by canal, later by rail to bring in food from the surrounding countryside the size of settlements would have been severely limited.² Some towns were actually created by the railways: Swindon,³ Derby⁴ and Crewe,⁵ for example, are well known. Railway companies needed factories where rolling stock and all other equipment they wanted could be manufactured. Among the lesser known towns is Wolverton, near Milton Keynes, in Buckinghamshire. It was built by the London and Birmingham Railway Company approximately half-way between those two cities. It was designated the Company's 'Grand Central Station and Depot'. Initially all trains stopped there to take on fuel and water. In order to staff the works it was essential to persuade people to migrate there so as not to be far away from the place where they worked. This growth has been described elsewhere.⁶

In the middle of the last century, as today, once the labour was attracted somewhere by the promise of ample work and, by the standards of the time, high wages, the workers had to be persuaded to stay there. Although social theory had hardly developed, the management of the Company realized from the start that something had to be done to prevent an exodus of workers

suffering from 'New Town Blues' (although of course the term had not then been coined).

In 1946, a century after Wolverton started to grow, the New Towns Act was passed. The towns built under the auspices of that Act, were for a 'new way of life': they were to be established as self-contained and balanced communities for work and living.⁷ The concept of balance was central. They were, however, to be faced with profound social difficulties, including those created by the untypical age structure of the population (predominantly young and middle-aged), and the consequent pressures on schools, colleges, recreational facilities, commercial entertainment and jobs.⁸ In some degree this was the case with mid-Victorian Wolverton. With a very limited knowledge of social theory, however, the Directors of the London and Birmingham Railway Company adopted a number of measures to try and ensure a happy and contented work force.

One of the principles of planning the New Towns of the twentieth century, learnt by experience, was that the zoning of industry and residential accommodation, desirable as it might be on aesthetic and environmental grounds, was unwise, in that it involved long journeys to work which were both expensive and time consuming. At Wolverton the Direc-

tors built a considerable number of houses in a grid-iron pattern close to the station and locomotive works. The streets, which have only recently been demolished, were named after the Directors of the Railway Company: Glynn, Ledsham and Moorsom to name a few. Between 1831 and 1851, 300 houses were built in Wolverton and most, if not all, were built by the railway company for its servants. A typical comment in the *Minutes of the Board of Directors* entry dated 7 December 1838 reads 'Mr. Bury and Mr. Stephenson were requested to consider the best arrangements of cottages wanted at Wolverton . . . then report to the Committee of management'.

Another typical comment reads 'On the 22nd. May 1840 tenders were accepted for the building of 20 single and 30 double ones at the Wolverton works. Clerks especially were encouraged to live near the station'. The Directors' *Minutes* for the 12 June 1840 read: 'tender accepted for the erection of four houses at Wolverton station'. The company was very sensitive to the rents it charged for houses that it built, and 'would take into account any special circumstances in each case'.⁹

Most of the employees were young men; many of these were married and their wives expecting babies. Until such time as homes were built for them the expectant fathers were given travel passes to visit their wives at weekends.

As children grew up there were strong arguments for sending them to school. Factory Acts meant the end of child labour in factories and mines and attendance at school solved the problem of what to do with young children. In the mid nineteenth century all education was voluntary: it was provided by voluntary bodies, mainly the churches, and attendance too was voluntary. As early as 20 December 1839, when the line had been opened for just over a year, the chairman of the Board of Directors recommended that schools for the children of workmen in the Company's employment be established. This was approved and a special Committee set up for carrying it into effect. Six months later the Works' Committee was requested to proceed with school buildings at

Wolverton, including a reading room for the use of persons in the Company's employ.¹⁰ The Company wasted no time in accepting tenders for the erection of a school house and reading room at Wolverton Station.¹¹

Misfortune befell the Committee running the schools—a Mr Cropper was appointed to replace Mr Sturge deceased. Obviously the Board regarded it as important to keep the Committee up to strength.

On the 11 June 1841 a report was read to the Board of Directors from the Sub-Committee for the management of the Wolverton Schools. It was resolved that the appointment of Mr Laing on trial as Master of Wolverton School at £100 per annum plus house and firing be confirmed.¹² This was a good salary and conditions for mid nineteenth-century England.

The Schools were to have a clergyman, whose stipend was jointly paid by the Railway Company and the Trustees of the Radcliffe Estate, in sole control.¹³ It was resolved that the chairman be requested to express to the Trustees of that estate the wish of the Directors of the Railway Company that no time should be lost in the appointment of a minister for Wolverton. Until the Church was erected the Committee was authorized to appropriate a room in the School for the performance of divine service.

The Directors were obviously very sympathetic to the claims of religion—they ordered a return to be made of the arrangements at the several stations showing how much time the clerks and other servants of the Company had for the purpose of attending Divine Service.¹⁴ Within a month¹⁵ the Chairman reported on his communication with the Radcliffe Trustees with reference to the appointment of a Minister for the Church at Wolverton. The Trustees agreed that the Clergyman should have sole control of the Schools, and were willing to contribute £50 per annum towards his stipend. It was resolved also that the sum of £50 be contributed annually by the Railway Company towards the cost of the stipend of the Clergyman who would be appointed by the Radcliffe Trustees for the Church at Wolverton. Efforts

to find out if this is still true have failed. The Chairman was requested to make the same known to the Trustees and to state that the Board is willing to admit such clergyman as a member of the Committee for superintending schools.¹⁵

It was also resolved that £25 be expended in the purchase of books for the reading room at Wolverton under the direction of the same Committee and that Mr Pousett, possibly a local librarian, be desired to send for the Board's guidance a catalogue of books now belonging to the reading room. The Board was obviously taking education and religious observance seriously.

At the meeting of the Board on 12 August 1841 letters were read to the Chairman with reference to the schools at Wolverton, and a letter from the Bishop of Lincoln thereon. The next day it was resolved that the Company's seal be affixed to a memorial to the Bishop of Lincoln praying that a license be granted for the performance of divine service in a room appropriated for the purpose in the Company's schools at Wolverton and also to a minister of the Church of England to perform service therein. Mr R. B. Dockray, the Company's resident engineer,¹⁶ was required to furnish without delay all the wide variety of fittings required for the schools and chapel.¹⁷

At its meeting on 10 September 1841¹⁸ the Board ordered that a catalogue of the books in the library at Wolverton (based on that supplied by Mr Pousett?) be printed as soon as the purchases were completed and that a copy be sent to each of its members.

A house for the Anglican minister was provided—it was near the station and appropriated from the clerks; it would be let at a nominal rent. The Board continued to receive regular reports on the Management of the Schools. By January 1842 a mistress for the female school at Wolverton had been appointed.

Favourable reports had been made on Mr Laing's attendance at the Borough Road School (one of the earliest teacher training centres in

the country and now one of the constituent colleges of the West London Institute of Higher Education). Meanwhile the inhabitants of Wolverton sent a memorial to the Board praying for the erection of a Church/Chapel at Wolverton. The Board's comments are not recorded but shortly afterwards a church was built; a start was made on it in the Spring of 1843. The Company agreed that all materials required for the Church should be transported along the line free of cost to the Trustees.

The Revd G. Weight MA was appointed minister of the Church and Manager of the Schools. A new home was to be built for him, and the Company paid the taxes on that house amounting to £138. 12. 2d. per annum. His relations with the Company were good and the Board were very satisfied with the conduct of the Schools.¹⁹ Frequent inspections of the Schools were made by the Board.

Mr Weight was given a gratuity of £50, the first of many, to 'mark the sense which the Directors entertain of the important service rendered to the Company by his persevering supervision of the Board's Schools'. Subsequently this was to be a fixed allowance of £100 per annum.²⁰

The Company were anxious not to be partisan. On the 10th June 1842 the Board heard a memorial from ninety five inhabitants of Wolverton praying for the use of a large room adjoining the reading room as a Wesleyan Chapel. It was resolved that the memorialists be permitted to use the room for that purpose, provided their arrangements were not found to interfere with the general objects and convenience of the Company.²¹ Later the Company were to sell land to the Wesleyans, at a very reasonable rate, for a chapel.²²

The Company did not stop there: it fitted up a residence for the Surgeon; a gas works was built;²³ and the Board agreed that £10 be placed at the disposal of the Locomotive Committee for the band of the Musical Society at Wolverton.²⁴ The Company also undertook ornamental planting on the slope of wasteland near the station.²⁵ It must be admitted, however,

that stabilisation of the soil was as much a consideration as aesthetics.

The railway was very expensive to build; over £70,000 was spent to get an Act of Parliament authorizing the construction of the line, before any land was bought or raw materials purchased and the Company was anxious to make a profit. The steps taken by the Company were not in response to Trade Union pressure. Unions were slow to form amongst railway staff: it appears that the Bletchley Branch of the National Union of Railway staff was not founded until 1872.²⁶ No references appear in the Board Minutes to union activity. Nevertheless labour relations appeared to be good (again there are no references to disputes) and this must be in part due to an enlightened management—some of this enlightenment has been the subject of this paper. It is, of course, easy to pour scorn on the

Company's attitude, to regard it as paternalism—after all it was in the interest of the Company to have a satisfied and contented workforce and high standards were expected from their employees, but by the standards of the times working conditions and wages were as good as any and better than most.

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