

THE INFLUENCE OF RAILWAYS ON THE GROWTH OF WOLVERTON, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

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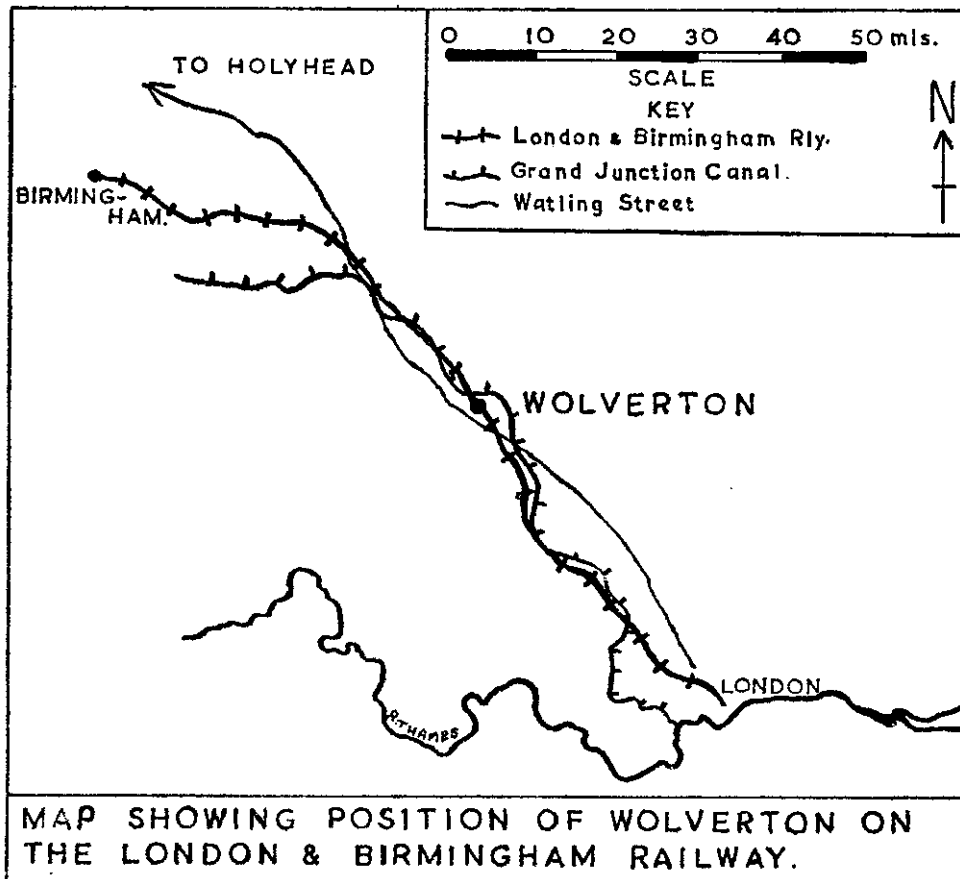
SMALL agrarian settlements such as Crewe and Swindon grew to thriving industrial towns because railway companies chose to site wagon, carriage and engine works there. The London and Birmingham Railway sited their engine works at Wolverton in Buckinghamshire. This paper is concerned with an analysis of the factors that caused this one-time village to grow into an industrial centre that must be one of the very few that did not owe their rise to fame because they were on a coalfield.

Fig. 1 shows Wolverton in 1834, a very small village some distance from the railway line that was completed in 1838. This original nucleus, later to be called Old Wolverton, goes back to medieval times; during the restoration of the parish church in 1902 a Saxon consecration cross was discovered and this may, like the name Wolverton, indicate an Anglo-Saxon settlement. The settlement, however, then known as Wluerinstone, was recorded in the Domesday Survey as belonging to Maigno the Breton, and in it were thirty-two villeins, eight cottars, ten slaves, and three thegns. These figures suggest that in 1086 the population was about 150. A manor house existed there from 1240 until the middle of the eighteenth century; in 1654 the village was enclosed.¹ Leland makes no mention of it in his *Itinerary* but Camden records it on a map in his *Britannia* showing that it is near the Ouse and is also the seat of the Longueville family. Lewis, in his *Topographic Dictionary of England* in 1831, has some details about the Church and records Wolverton's population as 335, the figure given in the 1821 Census. Between 1793 and 1805 the Grand Junction Canal was built² and the population rose from 238 in 1801 to 335 in 1821. This growth, occasioned by the canal, was to be dwarfed by the railway when the population increased by 1,600 persons between 1831 and 1851. Fig. 1 shows that the original nucleus in 1834 before the railway was built was a very small village west of the Grand Junction Canal and a mile or so from Stony Stratford, a town of some importance on the Watling Street. There was a mill on the Tow, a gentlemen's residence and a park. Most of the seventy-two houses were built along the road joining the canal and Stony Stratford.

¹ *Wolverton: The Official Guide*, 1953.

² G. H. Cole: *Persons and Periods*, London, 1945, Pelican Books, p. 96.

The railway company had originally intended to build their line so that it passed through Northampton and use that town for their central depot. However, local opposition and engineering difficulties, which could have been overcome, prevented that development. Wolverton was then chosen by the company, since it was almost exactly half-way between the towns of London and Birmingham and there was ample land available for development, if only it could be purchased. It thus became the site of what is continually called, both in the



Minutes of the various committees of the London and Birmingham Railway Company and contemporary guide books, the Grand Central Station and Depot (Map).

The company met with some difficulty from the Trustees of the Radcliffe Estate who owned most of the land near Wolverton.³ So much so that Roade, a village eight and a half miles north of Wolverton, was suggested as a more suitable site for Central Station because the Company already owned land there and more could be obtained easily. However, Mr. Baxendale, a director of the Company, was requested by the Board to negotiate with the Trustees of

³ *Minutes of Board of Directors of the London and Birmingham Railway Company*: Entry dated 13th June, 1839. Detailed references to these committee meetings are not given because of space.

the Radcliffe Estate for the purchase of extra land at Wolverton at a price not to exceed £200 per acre. The Radcliffe Trustees appear to have come round to the view that the railway was desirable, for it was not long before plans for a station, roads and bridges were ordered to be prepared and the Board set up a Committee to found schools for use by children of the workmen in the Company's employ; thereafter Wolverton started to grow in importance. The Board Minutes constantly refer to improvements and new equipment needed there. In early 1840 the Company received the first tenders for building twenty single and thirty double houses. By June 1840 the Radcliffe Trustees agreed to sell part of the estate and to lease another part to the Company, and Wolverton began to grow in size to become one of the first railway towns in the world. Though it never reached the size of Swindon or Crewe, nevertheless this building up of the town by the railway company is worth investigating.

Wolverton in 1838: an Early Railway Town

Many accounts, both contemporary and later, describe how the London and Birmingham Railway Company turned this hitherto unknown Buckinghamshire village into an important industrial town. Fig. 1 shows that the town, besides being half-way between London and Birmingham, had other advantages. It was about two miles from the A5 road, the old Roman Watling Street, which runs from London to Holyhead. The Grand Junction Canal (from which access can be obtained to many parts of the country through the canal network) borders the town on the north and the east; thus this site is convenient for communication by road and canal.⁴

At the approaches of Wolverton from London, on the western side of the line, and before the canal is crossed, is the locomotive engine station which was devoted wholly to repairing engines and machinery. For some years after 1838 all trains stopped at Wolverton to change engines—thus a large number of engines always had to be kept ready; also the passengers were allowed time there for refreshment. The locomotive engine station, built with Doric columns, was 315 feet long. Four hundred people were employed there in 1838. As well as an engine station, there were erecting shops for engines and carriages and around the courtyard were engine and tender sheds, joiners' shops, an iron foundry, hooping furnaces, iron warehouses, a smithy, turning shops, offices and a steam engine for giving motion to the machinery and for pumping water into an elevated tank. North of the Stony Stratford Road, between the building and the canal, was an area of two acres set apart for a wharf and store yard for timber and trucks, to facilitate the exchange of goods between the railway and the canal. East of the railway was a space of several acres for the reception of goods and cattle.

In order to accommodate the employees who later migrated there, the railway company built houses in very close proximity to the railway; in fact, just behind the locomotive engine house. The streets, Glynn, Ledsam, Creed and Young, were all named after directors of the London and Birmingham Railway Company. Since 1838 the town has grown to an important railway centre. The changes that brought this about will now be considered.

⁴ Roscoe: *Guidebook to the London and Birmingham Railway*, 1839.

WOLVERTON: THE GRAND CENTRAL STATION AND DEPOT OF THE LONDON AND BIRMINGHAM RAILWAY

Osborne, who travelled along the route of the London and Birmingham railway in 1840, described Wolverton as the Grand Central Depot of the London and Birmingham railway, and thought that a new town would grow up, because over fifty cottages belonging to the Company had already been built.⁵ Osborne's predictions were realised. The Board of the Company determined that neither expense nor energy should be spared to make Wolverton worthy of its title, the Grand Central Depot of the London and Birmingham Railway. Records of the Directors' activities are found in the monthly meetings of the Board, and references to Wolverton are frequent.

In May 1840 the Locomotive Committee was requested to consider the need for a fire engine at Wolverton. Earlier in that year an arrangement had been made with the Grand Junction Canal Company to supply water and some years later this arrangement was confirmed for the future. By June 1840 the Works Committee of the London and Birmingham railway was requested by the Board to provide school buildings and a reading room. In the same month a tender was accepted for the erection of four more houses for clerks employed at the Wolverton station. After further negotiations with the trustees of the Radcliffe Estate the company was able to buy some land and rent more at Wolverton. The platforms of the stations were lengthened and a tender for new engineering offices was accepted. Wolverton was also the home of the company's resident engineer, Mr. Dockray, a very able man, for whom a new house costing £500 was provided. In January 1841 tenders were authorised by the Board for ten water tanks and pumps and new refreshment rooms were to be built. Then in April tenders were accepted for four carriage sheds. Plainly the Board were doing everything within their power to make Wolverton into an important place. At the same time they authorised another crane to be built, thus providing evidence of increased goods traffic. Later in 1841 the Board sanctioned the expenditure of £100 towards the expense of making a proposed new road from Stony Stratford to Wolverton station. In June 1842 the Board confirmed the acceptance of the tender for the Wolverton coke stoves; all engines at that time used coke for fuel.

In May 1843 the Board accepted a tender for building a Market House at Wolverton and in November of that year they decided that fifteen more cottages should be built at Wolverton station on the unoccupied land in a line with Bury Street and the Church, of which the company had played a large part in the building and for which they had transported all the raw materials free of cost. In February 1845 the Company resolved to find out whether it was possible to obtain land for the establishment of a wagon construction yard. In June of that year it approved the construction of drains for the houses at Wolverton. This was before 1848, when Edwin Chadwick secured the passing of the first Public Health Act, and revealed the interest of the Company in the welfare of their employees.

By July 1845 it had become necessary to enlarge the engine shed at Wolverton. When the Board issued the order to the contractor they gave instructions

⁵ Osborne: *London and Birmingham Railway Guide*, Birmingham, 1840.

that cottages were not to be moved unless this was unavoidable. Certain alterations were also made so that the buildings were safer from fire. In May 1846 the Works Committee were ordered to have fifty more cottages built at the Wolverton station, and it was resolved that the Radcliffe Trustees were to be approached regarding the sale or lease of more land for that purpose and by July of the same year a contract for twenty of these cottages was accepted.

The records make it impossible to determine exactly how many cottages were built under the direction of the London and Birmingham Railway Company at this time because sometimes there were orders for the erection of cottages followed by the acceptance of tenders, at other times simply orders for cottages. However, it is safe to say that a large number of cottages were built. At the meeting of the Board of Directors in July 1846 further alterations at the Wolverton workshops were approved. Later in the same year a plan and estimate for the proposed baths were discussed at a Board meeting, thus giving another instance of the company's interest in the welfare of their employees. In November 1846 the Locomotive Committee were authorised to provide the necessary gas works for the Wolverton station. On 8th January, 1847, the Board resolved to purchase land at Wolverton for the proposed new gas works. At the same meeting they accepted tenders for forty more cottages and agreed to provide a thirty-hundredweight steam hammer for the works.

On 16th July, 1846, by Act of Parliament, the London and North West Railway came into being with Carr Glyn (the chairman of the London and Birmingham Railway Company and head of the banking house of Glynn, Mills Ltd.) as its chairman. This marks the end of the London and Birmingham Railway Company as a separate entity and a change which had an important effect upon Wolverton. This effect will be analysed later in this paper.⁶

THE GROWTH OF WOLVERTON: A STUDY IN MIGRATION

In their reports to the proprietors of the London and Birmingham railway for February 1844 the Directors say that "they were obliged to collect at Wolverton a population from nearly every part of the country". Schools, churches and reading rooms were provided in order to allow a population drawn from over a large area of England to settle down. The provision of these social services, including the foundation of the second technical institution in England, concerns us here in that it helped to retain the population which had migrated to Wolverton.

In 1831 this was 417 persons. By 1841 it had risen to 1,261 and by 1851 to 2,070, representing an increase of 1,653 persons over a period of twenty years. The Census Commissioners give reasons, where known, for any large increase or decrease in population, and in their notes for 1841 and 1851 they record that the increase at Wolverton was the result of the establishment of a railway station, and carriage and engine works.

It is clear that most of the increase in population was the result of migration. Although Wolverton is in Buckinghamshire, for census purposes it is included

⁶ Cleveland Stevens: *English Railways, their development and relation to the State*, 1915, cited by Sir J. H. Clapham: *An Economic History of Modern Britain*, Vol. 1, *The Early Railway Age*, Cambridge, 1939, p. 394.

in the Potterspurty registration district of Northamptonshire. The census returns (Table 1) record the birthplaces of the inhabitants of the Potterspurty district for 1851—of these, most were born in Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire, 8,701 out of the total of 10,663: therefore, 1,962 people moved into the area.

The census returns also give details of the population of the individual parishes between 1841 and 1851 in the Potterspurty area for 1831 and 1851 (see Table 2). Between 1831 and 1851 the total increase in population for all the parishes in the Potterspurty area except Wolverton was 633. (This figure was obtained by tabulating the increase or decrease in population between 1831 and 1851 for the individual parishes in the Potterspurty area and adding them up, omitting Wolverton: this has been done in Table 2,) Wolverton's increase in population over this period was 1,653, so the total increase in population for all the parishes in the Potterspurty district between 1831 and 1851 was 2,286; of these, 1,962 migrated into the area, leaving 324, representing an increase of births over deaths. Since 324 represents the increase in births over deaths for the whole of the Potterspurty area and Wolverton's total increase in population was 1,653, it follows that most of the population living in Wolverton in 1851 were not born there but had migrated into the district.

Reference to Table 1 shows that the original birthplaces of the migrants into the Potterspurty area, most of whom went to Wolverton, were scattered widely over the British Isles. Most of the people came from the neighbouring counties: Bedfordshire, Oxfordshire and Warwickshire in particular taking advantage of the short distance to travel. (Roads were bad, and travel at this time, though improving, was still expensive.) The London and Birmingham railway could transport a migrant from Warwickshire, but no railway could then carry him from Bedfordshire or Oxfordshire; however, the distance he had to travel would not be very great. This short distance or almost local migration could also be accounted for by the fact that the knowledge of the demand for labour at Wolverton would probably only reach neighbouring counties and, since newspapers were expensive, and advertising for labour uncommon, it is difficult to see how people in more distant areas would be aware of the attractions of Wolverton.

Before the railway was built the district surrounding Wolverton was entirely agricultural. Osborne noticed that in the parish of Hanslope, about twenty miles from Wolverton, there were formerly many small farmers, who had recently disappeared (he was writing in 1840) in consequence of the competition for land by a more wealthy class of men, into whose hands the lands of the neighbourhood had for the most part recently fallen.⁷ The old small farms were united into larger ones as the result of the policy of enclosure and engrossing. Osborne seems rather distressed at this because he notes that many of the ruins of old farmhouses, which, in the days of the small farmer, were the houses of industrious and respectable people, could be seen from the line:

"These remnants are sad testimonials of the social conditions of our country" and he goes on to ask: "Where have they gone, by whose care the now

⁷ Osborne: *op. cit.*

damp and wretched ruin was made a comfortable abode, covered with ivy, the rose, woodbine and moss, and surrounded by blooming gardens and orchards? Some have been forced on the records of Pauperism, others on those of crime, some have changed the healthy agricultural pursuits of the country for the unhealthy ones of the town.”

Probably many of these dispossessed agriculturalists went to Wolverton to satisfy the demand for labour there. Lancashire is the only distant county that stands out in the numbers of migrants to Wolverton. Lancashire was linked with Birmingham by the Grand Junction Railway, whose powers to build a line were sanctioned by Parliament in 1833 and time-tables were so arranged to provide suitable connections with London and Birmingham railway’s services to the south.⁸ Travel would not be too great a problem for the intending migrant, assuming he had the necessary financial resources, but what was the stimulus to travel so far, apart from the attraction of industrial work at Wolverton. Certainly at this time there was a decline in the wages paid in the cotton industry.⁹ Machinery was also rendering hand loom weavers redundant. It seems probable that some of these unemployed artisans would seek employment elsewhere and the very nature of the work at Wolverton required labour of the artisan type, and most likely they formed a great part of the labour that migrated from Lancashire to Wolverton.

From the rest of the country only a very steady trickle of people moved into Wolverton (Table 1). Scotland sent an average of four per county. The few that migrated from other parts of the British Isles, apart from the areas already mentioned, represent the adventurous spirits seeing an opportunity and taking it. Most of the migrants probably left agricultural work, except in the case of those who came from Lancashire, who left their work for reasons already given. By 1861 the population of Wolverton had grown to 2,370 people, living in 365 houses.¹⁰ Many of the employees of the works lived in the surrounding villages and between 1851 and 1861 the population at Hanslope increased from 1,604 to 1,792, due to the presence of a number of mechanics engaged at the Wolverton Carriage Sheds. Fig. 2 shows that by 1862 a completely new centre had grown up about one mile east of the old town of Wolverton. This new town was clustered around the railway and the workshops, and was known as New Wolverton. South-east of New Wolverton was the village of New Bradwell and many of the employees of the railway company lived in these two places.

Until 1860 Wolverton concentrated mainly on the construction of engines and then the Board of the London North Western Railway decided that the Wolverton works should manufacture carriages only and the engine factories should be moved entirely to Crewe. This removal took place between 1865 and 1877. Before that date the work of building and maintaining carriages had been divided: the building of the carriages was done mainly at Saltley near Birmingham and the repairs were done at Euston and Crewe.¹¹

The carriage plant was removed from Saltley to Wolverton and in 1877 the

⁸ Osborne: *op. cit.*

⁹ Bowley: *Index of Wages and Prices*, cited by J. H. Clapham, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

¹⁰ *Census Returns*, 1861.

¹¹ *Wolverton: The Official Guide*, Wolverton, 1953, p. 12.

last engine was repaired at Wolverton.¹² This removal of the engine factories to Crewe was accompanied by a corresponding migration of mechanics and artisans from the villages of Great Brickhill, Little Brickhill, Bow Brickhill, Woughten-on-the-Green, Great Linford and Cosgrove to such an extent that the Census Commissioners mention it. The first four villages are all about six miles away from Wolverton and near Fenny Stratford and the last two are each about a mile and a half away from Wolverton. The population for the west side of Stony Stratford also decreased for the same reason. Because the number of inhabited houses in these villages, particularly in Cosgrove, show only a very small decrease, it suggests that the men went first and the wives and families followed later.

Population decrease in the area around Wolverton				
Village	Inhabited houses		Population	
	1861	1871	1861	1871
Great Brickhill	147	130	590	566
Little Brickhill	83	72	423	291
Bow Brickhill	127	113	546	468
Woughten-on-the-Green	70	69	314	273
Cosgrove	143	140	776	646
Great Linford	112	102	557	468

Decrease in population is attributed to the migration of mechanics and artisans on removal of a portion of the railway workshops from Wolverton to Crewe.

The removal of the carriage works to Wolverton was accompanied by a remarkable increase in the number of inhabited houses and people in Wolverton and Bradwell.

Wolverton		
Date	Inhabited Houses	Population
1861	365	2,370
1871	539	2,804
1881	703	3,611

Increase in population is attributed chiefly to the influx of workmen to the railway carriage works recently moved from Saltley near Birmingham.

¹² Steele: *History of the London and North Western Railway.*

In New Bradwell the population increased between 1861 and 1871 from 1,658 to 2,409 and the number of houses rose from 233 to 506; this increase was attributed to the erection of a number of houses by the railway company and the sale of land for building purposes by a freehold land society.

This removal of people from the surrounding villages and the concentration of a new set of people in the centre, where the engineering works were concentrated, was probably a reflection of the distance needed to travel from the outlying villages to the works and the unwillingness of the new-comers to walk such distances and so increase the length of their working day.

The main line originally ran through the works, but in 1880 this was diverted to its present position, as a result of which a piece of land was left between the new main line and the works. This piece of land was converted into the present park and opened for the benefit of the town in 1885¹³ (see Fig. 3). In 1886 the works covered an area of 37 acres and approximately 2,000 hands were employed. This decline from 2,400 in 1861 is explained because carriage works, by the nature of the vehicles they produce, cover a large area but do not need the numbers of mechanics that engine building requires. What happened to the surplus workers is difficult to explain—perhaps they went back to agriculture. It was possible to move the engine works to Crewe, since it was no longer necessary, because of improved technical developments, for all trains to stop at Wolverton and change engines. This removal of the engine works to Crewe cost Wolverton much of its former prestige.¹⁴ The works superintendent at this time, Mr. C. A. Park, designed the power station which made Wolverton the first railway works to adopt electric power and lighting throughout.¹⁵ Fig. 3 shows that in 1887 the town of Wolverton had grown because of the increased acreage of carriage works and that the population had grown and with it the number of houses.

In 1907 the works area had risen to 80 acres and the staff to approximately 4,500. In 1921 the Railway Grouping Bill was passed in Parliament and Wolverton became part of the London, Midland and Scottish system. This involved another change, beneficial to Wolverton in that its activities were more diversified, wagons being produced here for the first time.

The area of the works is now 87 acres, of which 37 are workshops and offices and 3,987 people are employed there. Today the main work is the construction of new carriages, wagons and containers, and the repair of carriages, road vehicles, platform trucks and barrows, signal and telegraph equipment.

Apart from the railway workshops a large firm of official railway printers opened its main works at Wolverton, because the town had an ample supply of female labour, the daughters of the men engaged in the railway works which did not employ female labour until the 1914–18 war and the 1939–45 war, when men were needed for the armed forces. Most of the paper comes to Wolverton by road and most of the printed material is conveyed by road because road transport provides a better door-to-door service. There are other

¹³ I am indebted to the Chief Mechanical Engineer at Wolverton for information on this point.

¹⁴ Steele: *op. cit.*

¹⁵ I am indebted to the Chief Mechanical Engineer at Wolverton for information on this point.

small family businesses here, but little manufacturing goes on in the town, apart from that connected with the railway. Agriculture is important in the surrounding country.

Thus, has Wolverton changed from an insignificant agricultural town to a very important railway centre. The railway has had a very great influence on its growth, but has not caused the growth of any other major industries, probably because of its distance from large sources of raw material. The railway brings in raw materials for their own works very easily.

These conclusions are borne out by the figures of freight handled at Wolverton Goods Yard.

1. Traffic received for Carriage and Wagon Works per annum (post-1945):

Timber	..	..	..	10,000 tons
Iron and steel	..	..	..	5,000 tons
Glass	..	..	..	200 tons
Miscellaneous items	..	..	..	12,000 tons
Pig iron	..	..	..	750 tons

2. Traffic sent away from the Carriage and Wagon Works:

Carriages	..	..	..	5½ per week
Goods wagons	..	..	..	30 per week

3. Traffic received for consignees other than the Carriage and Wagon Works (post-1945):

Paper	..	..	..	1,000 tons
Fertilizer	..	..	..	200 tons
Miscellaneous goods	..	..	..	20,000 tons
Cattle cake	..	..	..	500 tons
Scrap tin (for manufacture of oxides)	..	..	..	4,700 tons
Coal	..	..	..	30,514 tons

4. Forwarded Traffic:

Printed matter	..	..	..	2,500 tons
General goods	..	..	..	200 tons
Firewood	..	..	..	70 tons
Ammoniacal gas liquor	..	..	..	250 tons
Scrap iron	..	..	..	8,000 tons
Sugar beet	..	..	..	190 tons
Waste paper	..	..	..	70 tons
Sawdust	..	..	..	20 tons

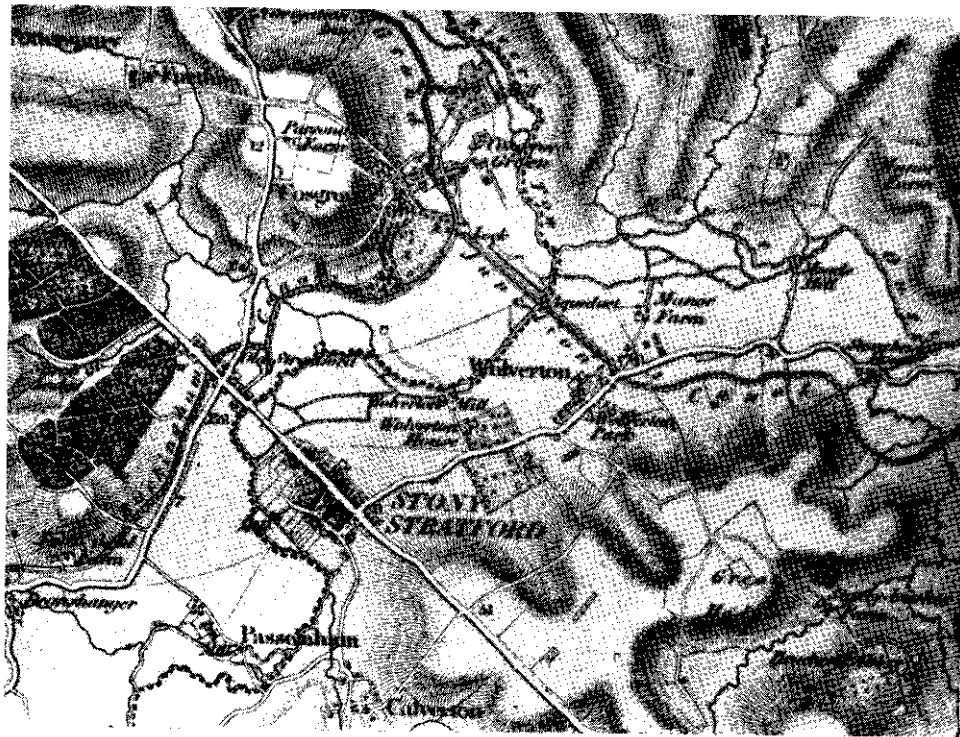


FIG. 1. Wolverton 1834. 1st Edition O.S.

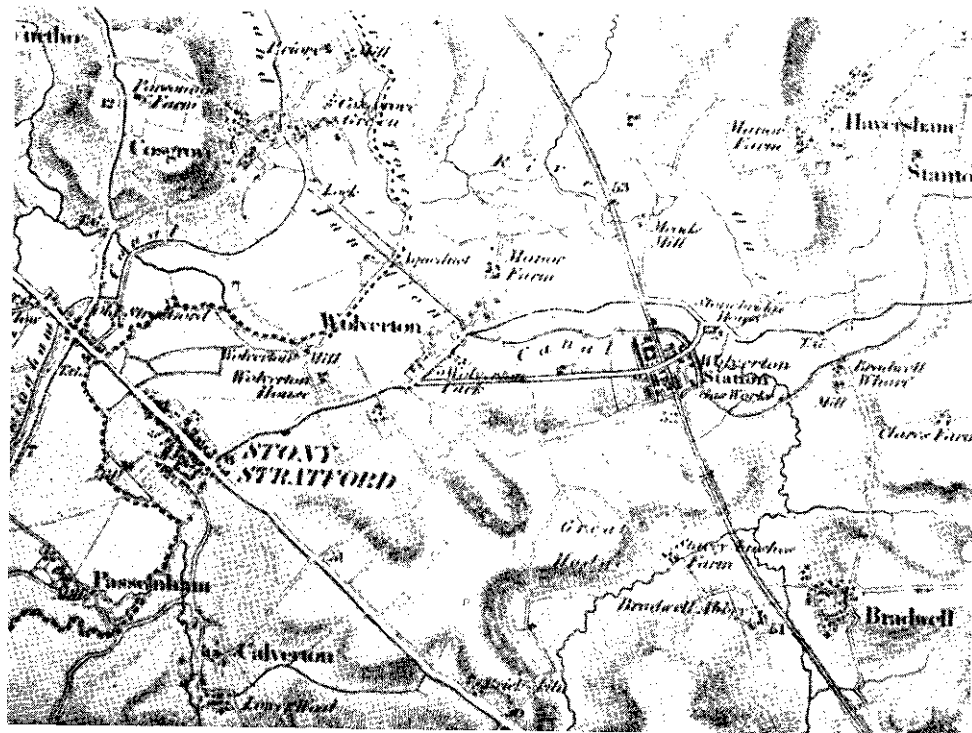


FIG. 2. Wolverton 1862. 1st Edition O.S. (Revision).



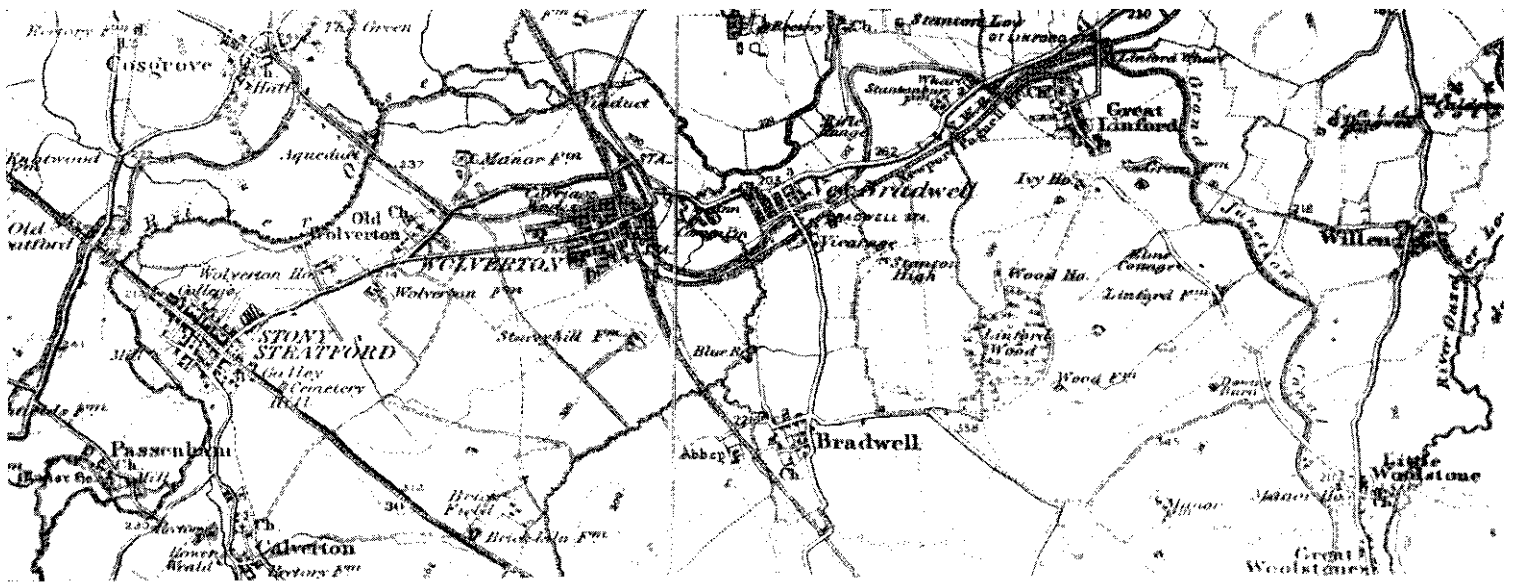


FIG. 3. Wolverton 1887. 2nd Edition O.S.

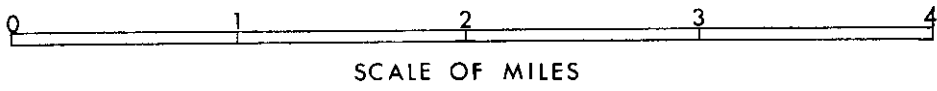


Table 1

BIRTHPLACES OF THE INHABITANTS OF THE POTTERSPURY REGISTRATION DISTRICT OF
NORTHAMPTONSHIRE, 1851

Birthplace	Over 20 years of age	Under 20 years of age
London (Middlesex)	118	71
(Surrey)	23	13
(Kent)	13	7
Surrey (Extra Metropolitan)	14	4
Kent (Extra Metropolitan)	22	4
Mddx (Extra Metropolitan)	11	4
Sussex	9	3
Hampshire	16	2
Berkshire	18	8
Buckinghamshire	1,369	1,483
Hertfordshire	7	7
Oxfordshire	156	50
Northamptonshire	3,065	2,784
Huntingdonshire	7	—
Bedfordshire	86	33
Cambridgeshire	8	—
Essex	17	5
Suffolk	28	10
Norfolk	23	1
Wiltshire	15	5
Dorset	6	3
Devonshire	15	1
Cornwall	6	—
Somerset	9	3
Gloucestershire	35	8
Herefordshire	8	5
Shropshire	9	2
Staffordshire	51	25
Worcestershire	28	12
Warwickshire	92	48
Leicestershire	51	16
Rutland	3	—
Lincolnshire	17	2
Nottingham	23	27
Derbyshire	27	16
Cheshire	17	5
Lancashire	96	65
Yorkshire	43	15
Durham	38	18
Northumberland	13	14
Cumberland	6	—
Westmorland	3	—
Wales	28	5
Scotland	127	23
Islands in British Seas	1	—
Ireland	41	3
Abroad and Born at Sea	7	8

Table 2
POPULATION OF INDIVIDUAL PARISHES IN THE POTTERSPOURY AREA

Parish	1831	1851	Population increase
Paulerspury	1,092	1,162	70
Potterspury	950	1,061	111
Yardley Gobion	594	673	79
Wicken	536	487	-49*
Passenham	828	969	141
Calverton	425	505	80
West Stony Stratford	1,053	1,256	203
East Stony Stratford	566	501	-65*
Cosgrove	624	641	17
Furtho	16	15	-1*
Grafton Regis	241	247	6
Alderton	162	139	-23*
Ashton	380	383	3
Hartwell	531	542	11
Wolverton	417	2,070	1,653

* Represents an actual decrease in population.

1831-51: Total increase of population in the Potterspury area: 2,286.

1831-51: Total increase of population in all the parishes of the Potterspury area except Wolverton: 633.

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