

BUCKINGHAM AND THE RAILWAY

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BUCKINGHAM is a small market town, an ancient borough and sometime county town, at a crossing near the source of the Great Ouse. A branch canal from the Grand Union Canal at Cosgrove was opened to Buckingham in 1801. The first railway in the area, the London & Birmingham, passed through Wolverton, ten miles to the north-east. This line opened throughout in 1838, and from then on, a mail coach from Banbury ran daily through Buckingham to Wolverton, leaving Banbury at 7 a.m. and returning from Wolverton at 2.15 p.m.

In 1844 capital became available for railway speculation, and many grandiose schemes were put forward, threatening the established routes. The existing companies, alarmed by this trend, encouraged schemes which would feed their own lines, or thwart their rivals' plans. Buckingham lay in an area over which the London & Birmingham and the broad gauge Great Western Railway fought. (The Great Western had reached Oxford from Reading in 1844.) Out of the Parliamentary battles emerged finally the Birmingham & Oxford broad gauge line, protégé of the Great Western, and the Buckinghamshire Railways' standard gauge lines from Bletchley to Oxford and Brackley.

The Buckinghamshire Railways' Brackley line was the truncated remains of a proposed line from Tring to Banbury, linking up with an intended Warwickshire & London Railway between Banbury and Hampton-in-Arden, a proposal defeated by the broad gauge Birmingham & Oxford line. The original Act (Cap. CCXXXIII—for making a railway from the Oxford & Bletchley Junction Railway to Buckingham and Brackley) received the Royal Assent on 27th July, 1846. The Act authorised a capital of £200,000 and stipulated fifteen directors, six of them to reside locally. The line was to be constructed by, leased to and operated by the London & Birmingham Railway Company. In the following year an additional Act was obtained, authorising extensions to Aylesbury and Banbury, and an increase of capital to £795,000. The Aylesbury extension was never built, but on the strength of the extension to Banbury, the London and North Western Railway Company, successors to the London & Birmingham, obtained running powers over the broad gauge Birmingham & Oxford line between Banbury and Birmingham. This section of the line was built in mixed gauge, and a connecting line over Duddeston Viaduct, Birmingham, was also provided to give access to the L.N.W.R. Curzon Street station in Birmingham. These running powers were never used.

So much for the national implications of what was destined to remain a purely local line, built with local support. The original prospectus listed the patronage of the following local dignitaries—the second Duke of Buckingham,

Lord Nugent, Sir John Chetwode of Chetwode Manor, Sir Harry Verney of Claydon, Messrs. Aubrey of Oving, Pierrepont of Evenley, Dayrell of Lillingstone Dayrell, Morgan of Biddlesden, Bracebridge of Chetwode Priory, Price of Westbury, Bailey of Shenley, Horewood of Stean Park, Lowndes of Winslow, and Parrott, Dewes, Humphreys and Stowe, all of Buckingham.

The contract was awarded to William Brassey, who appointed Samuel Horn as his agent, with offices in Castle Street, Buckingham. A poem written by a local poet, Charles Whitehall, lists many of the subcontractors and their workmen, together with the quantities of earth moved and materials used. (A copy is in Buckingham Library.) The first sod was cut near Buckingham on Tuesday, 20th July, 1847, by Dr. Fell of Brasseys. The incursion of a large number of labourers into the area brought its own troubles, anticipated by the Board at its second meeting, 20th August, 1846, when a resolution was passed, stipulating that the contractors were to provide huts and lodgings for their workpeople, pay weekly on Fridays in cash, and not pay out in public houses or beershops. There was to be no work on Sundays, and policemen were to be placed on the line where required by local magistrates.

The last provision did not prevent a Buckingham Watch Committee minute, a year later, 10th August, 1847, when the Superintendent of the Borough Police reported that he received no assistance from the railway police, and that he was obliged to have the whole of his force in the town on Saturday nights, in consequence of the numbers of labourers about. A further complaint was made (7-7-47) about the obstruction of the road bridge over the River Ouse by the railway water cart—Mr. Horn undertook to remove it.

The national financial crisis of 1847 was reflected in the Board's decisions (10-11-47) to stop work on the Oxford line for seven months, and delay starting work on the Banbury extension until the new year. Further economies were needed in 1849, achieved by laying only a single track from Claydon Junction to Oxford and to Banbury, and selling the surplus rails to the L.N.W.R. Company. Contracts entered into for the purchase of rails and chairs included—

<i>Firm.</i>	<i>Quantity</i>	<i>Price.</i>	<i>Delivery.</i>
Bagnall	6000 tons rails	£57,000	Feb. 1847 to Feb. 1850
Thompson & Forman	3000 tons rails	£27,000	April to October 1848
Haywoods	1750 tons chairs	£11,000	November 1847 to July '49
Sparrows	3250 tons chairs	£21,000	December 1847 to Jan. '49

These contracts would include materials for the Bletchley & Oxford line as well as the Claydon Junction to Banbury section.

The sites of stations had been agreed by a special committee, including Sir Harry Verney and the Hon. P. S. Pierrepont, which met "in the country" on 16th/17th November 1847. The sites of Mursley (later Swanbourne), Winslow, Claydon (later Verney Junction) and Padbury Stations were agreed, but Buck-

ingham and Westbury station sites were left unresolved. At Buckingham, the alternative sites were "Field No 39 behind the Cross Keys" (the eventual site of the passenger station) and "Field No. 114 near the crossing of the Tingewick Turnpike," which became the separate goods yard. Water Stratford, Bacon's Wood and Fulwell Farm were all considered for the next station, and although Fulwell Farm was finally chosen as Fulwell & Westbury Station in 1879, it is notable that Bacon's Wood Crossing long boasted a siding for farm traffic, and Water Stratford finally achieved a halt in the diesel experiment in 1957. The original stations all had low platforms, necessitating portable steps for the less agile passengers.

Although Buckingham Borough Council minutes record that the contract for Buckingham Station had been let to Mr. Dunckley of Bletchley for £20,000 in 1849, the station was not built for several years. From the opening of the line in 1850 a wooden building was in use on the Lenborough Road side of the line. In 1854 the Borough Council was urging the railway company to build a "new and sufficient station, now that an excellent road had been formed at no expense to the company." This referred to Chandos Road, promoted by the Marquis of Chandos, running from the New Inn on the London Road to the east side of the railway. A number of villas were built along this road, and in 1857 the Castle Iron Works was opened adjoining the station. Four years later the Borough Council appointed a committee to view alterations being made at the station, which suggests that at last something was being done. Padbury Station opened 1-3-78, and Fulwell and Westbury Station opened 2-8-79, both amidst scenes of rejoicing after the long delays.

Incidents recorded during the construction of the line include the bringing of the first engine, 'Trio', by road from Wolverton. After lying overnight in the Market Square, the engine stuck fast on the hump-backed Tingewick Road Bridge, demolishing the parapet. This would be a contractor's engine used in building the line. The local poet, Charles Whitehall, records that Bath Lane railway bridge collapsed soon after a train of spoil had passed over; Harrison, in *Leisure Notes on Buckingham*, says that Bent Hill bridge over the railway also collapsed during construction. The 31 miles of line from Bletchley to Banbury were opened 1st May, 1850, and the Oxford line was opened from Claydon (later Verney) Junction as far as Islip on 1st October in the same year. Claydon Junction was not a station; passengers between Banbury and Oxford lines changed trains at Winslow until 1868, when Verney Junction Station opened in conjunction with the opening of the independent Aylesbury and Buckingham line, Verney being its nearest approach to Buckingham.

A photograph of Buckingham Passenger Station soon after its opening shows the Station Gates between the Ironworks corner and Brookfield Drive—Station Road did not exist at that time. The sleepers (or blocks) were completely covered in ballast, and a solitary signal, with an arm for each direction, stood in the centre of the station, between the up and down loop lines. A poster on the platform encouraged emigration to New York via Liverpool.

The authorising act contained clauses about the rates to be charged for merchandise—

<i>Commodity</i>	<i>Rate per ton per mile</i>	<i>In Railway Co.'s wagons</i>	<i>Hauled by Co.'s engine</i>
Compost, lime, dung, manure, limestone	1d	plus ½d	plus ½d
coals, coke, culm, charcoal	1½d	plus ½d	plus 1d
Sugar, grain	2d	plus ¾d	plus 2d
Cotton, wool, manufactured goods	3d	plus 1d	plus 2d
Carriages under 1 ton	6d each	plus 2d each	plus 2d each
Horses	3d each	plus 1d each	plus 1d each
Calves	1d each	plus ¾d each	plus ¾d each
Passengers	2d each	plus ½d each	plus ½d each.

The passenger fares quoted were the standard fares, and there were many cheap excursions. Items at random from local newspapers illustrate the commercial activities of the railway. In 1851, an excursion train was run to the Great Exhibition in London "and the offer of a cheap trip was availed by a great many persons". An enterprising Buckingham baker sent by rail 200 dozen Banbury Cakes per week to the same exhibition.

In 1869, E. F. Gravestock advertised coal ranging from Kitchen Nuts at 12/- per ton to Cannel Coal at 21/6. Excursions in the same year were run to Euston, fares 10/- first class, 5/- covered carriage; to the Royal Show at Manchester; and to a Temperance Fete at the Crystal Palace. The Euston trip at Whitsuntide attracted a hundred passengers. A brief newspaper item about Christmas arrangements in 1879 contrasts with the present day—*daily papers* would not arrive until 1 p.m. on Christmas Day because a Sunday train service operated; for Christmas Mail, an extra bag would be despatched by the 4-30 p.m. train on Christmas Eve!

Another item of 1879 does not read so strangely to modern eyes—a letter to the Buckingham Express complains of mismanagement on the Banbury and Oxford branches, instancing bad connections between the two lines, and ending, "Is this arrangement likely to save the Company the loss (they state themselves) of £20,000 on the Banbury branch?" The branch lingered for a further 85 years.

The branch played a small part in a local cause célèbre of 1887, when two Salvation Army officers were charged with unlawfully playing musical instruments in the town. They chose the martyrdom of 14 days in Aylesbury Gaol, rather than pay a £2 fine, and their supporters flocked to Buckingham Station to see the two prisoners depart. The Borough Police were astute enough to send the two by horse and trap to the next station, Padbury, and so avoided a popular demonstration. On their return from gaol, the martyrs received a hero's welcome; railway excursions from Northampton and Oxford brought 800 Army members to join the local Salvationists.

The carriage of agricultural produce was of great importance, and all the principal farmers had accounts for sending milk to Watford or London. A daily milk train ran, and there was many a wild race to the station to catch the train. Dried milk, condensed milk and chocolate from the milk factories in the town were other staple traffics.

Edwardian times saw the peak of passenger travel, when both Buckingham and Verney Junction Stations boasted bookstalls, and a regular Thursday excursion to Euston allowed of a late return at 12-10a.m., arriving in Buckingham at 1-50a.m. One could also return from Euston by through slip-carriage detached at Bletchley and due in Buckingham at 5-39p.m. The White Hart Hotel in the town boasted "every train is met". Traffic waned in the inter-war years, and after the brief busy period of the Second World War, declined again. Special excursions to seaside resorts and London Ice-Shows did little to improve matters, and closure was mooted in the early fifties.

One new feature of the inter-war years was the regular vacation specials for Stowe School boys between Buckingham and Euston, and these continued after the end of the regular passenger service, up to Christmas 1965. On the return trip from Euston, tickets were collected on the train, and when it arrived at Buckingham there could be no attempt to draw up the ten carriages in turn to the four-coach platform. As the train slowed down, all the doors flew open, and the boys made a mad rush over point rods, signal wires, ballast and sidings to be first in the waiting motorcoaches.

In 1956 the branch was selected for an experiment with the new diesel railcars, and additional halts were built at Radclive and Water Stratford. The guards issued tickets from these halts. An article in "The Times" of 19th January, 1957 writes of "our lighthearted little craft, scuttling to and fro" and "the station staff so busy that the station dahlias will not go on being so good as we expect" followed by a rueful "still have to leave Euston at 3p.m." In these remarks can be seen some of the faults of the experiment—the station staff was so busy because the experiment was confined to the Buckingham and Banbury section, with a steam pull and push service continuing between Buckingham and Bletchley. Consequently every passenger and every parcel had to be exchanged at Buckingham, and the meeting of trains and occasional exchange of horseboxes was a ritual dance as trains arrived, reversed, changed platforms and departed whence they came.

Although commercially it could be claimed that the experiment resulted in a 400% increase in passengers, the actual numbers were disappointing except on Saturdays, when the cars had to be duplicated; the Buckingham and Banbury section closed to passengers on 31st December, 1960. The single railcars were then used to replace the steam service between Buckingham and Bletchley.

During the 116 years that the line was open, there were several ceremonial occasions at Buckingham Station. In 1881 the 3rd Duke of Buckingham returned from his successful governorship of Madras to a civic welcome at the station, travelling from Euston in a special saloon train as befitted a former chairman of the L.N.W.R. The station was bedecked with flags and evergreens, and the Duke was greeted by the Mayor, then departed in a procession including the Member of Parliament, the Magistrates, the Coroner, the councillors and aldermen, the Recorder, the Vicar and the local townspeople and tenantry. Four years later, similar junketings welcomed the Duke home with his bride.

Another four years on, a special train for mourners was run from Buckingham to Quanton Road, connecting with the Brill Tramway, on the occasion of the Duke's funeral at Wotton. After his death, Stowe was leased by

the Comte de Paris, and Neele records that special arrangements had occasionally to be made for the Comte and his distinguished visitors. These included H.R.H. the Princess of Wales, later Queen Alexandra, who travelled incognito to Buckingham in 1892. The Comte died at Stowe in 1894, and many distinguished mourners, including the Prince of Wales, came by train to Buckingham. A special train to Weybridge conveyed the body of the Comte for interment there.

The Prince of Wales came on a happier occasion in 1898 to review the Royal Bucks Hussars on manoeuvres at Stowe, and once again the station was decorated, appropriately with red, green and white bunting, and plumes of feathers. A final occasion of this nature was the arrival of H.M. the Queen and H.R.H. the Duke of Edinburgh by Royal Train on 4th April, 1966, eighteen months after the regular passenger service had been withdrawn. The Royal couple had slept in the Royal Train the previous night at Padbury. In the circumstances the station was not decorated, except by the assembled dignitaries led by the Lord Lieutenant, gathered to greet the Queen.

After the withdrawal of the Banbury service in 1960, the Bletchley service continued until 7th September, 1964. It was one of the many lines included in the famous Beeching Report, and, although objections to closure were made, they were not enough to justify retention of the service. On this occasion the United Counties Omnibus Company voluntarily provided a connecting service between Winslow and Bletchley, and the only subvention was of a minor service once daily between Verney and Buckingham.

Besides the traditional coal traffic, the goods depot had boasted two oil depots from the 1920's together with farm provender stores. With the closure of other smaller goods depots, goods were delivered over a wide though sparsely populated area stretching from Grendon Underwood to Lillingstone Lovell, and from Finmere to Thornborough. These local deliveries ceased in March, 1966 and the line was closed completely at the end of that year. The rails were removed in 1967 and the buildings stand derelict and forlorn.

The other part of the original Buckinghamshire Railways, from Bletchley to Oxford closed to passengers in December, 1967. Other local lines have come and gone. The Aylesbury & Buckingham Railway opened to Verney Junction in 1868, became part of the Metropolitan Railway in 1891, with Pullman Cars to and from the City in its heyday, but closed to passengers in 1935 and had its rails removed in 1957. The Northampton and Banbury Junction line, which joined the Buckingham to Banbury branch at Cockley Brake, opened in 1872 and closed in 1951. To the west, the Great Central line passed within four miles of Buckingham at Finmere, joining the Metropolitan line at Quainton Road in 1899. This line was closed in 1966 and the rails have been lifted.

The coming of the railway to Buckingham must have been an exciting time for the rural borough, but it seems to have had only a neutral effect of saving the town from the actual decline which absence of a railway would have meant in that railway age. It certainly inspired no large-scale expansion or prosperity, and its final withdrawal was scarcely noticed.

Principal Sources

British Transport Historical Records

Buckingham Borough Council Archives

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H. G. Lewin: *The Railway Mania and its Aftermath, 1845-52*, London, 1936.

The Buckingham Express