

The Railway Comes to Cambridge

by
Enid Porter

We are accustomed, in these days, to the numerous and complicated plans and counter-plans for the building of new roads and motorways, but the schemes proposed for linking Cambridge by rail with London and other towns were, in earlier times, equally, if not more, numerous and involved.

It was in 1821 that a railway, to run *via* Cambridge from Bishops Stortford to Clayhithe, was first proposed by the surveyor James Walker, but nothing came of his scheme. Four years later, the matter of a railroad between Bishops Stortford and Cambridge was again raised and again rejected, the directors of the Company concerned preferring to concentrate on opening up communications between London and Manchester.

Another ten years passed, and then, on September 27th, 1834, a civil engineer, Nicholas Cundy, explained to a meeting held in the Cambridge Guildhall, his plan for a railway — to be called the Grand Northern and Eastern — from London to Cambridge and thence to York. Branches, he suggested, would run to Hertford and Ware and, from Cambridge, to Newmarket, Bury St. Edmunds, Norwich and Yarmouth. He proposed that the station in Cambridge be built in Huntingdon Road, near the site of the present St. Giles' cemetery, and he told the meeting that he estimated that the stretch of line between London and Cambridge could be laid in three months at a cost of £900,000.

The opinions of his audience were divided, so a sub-committee was formed to investigate his plan further. This committee eventually reported in favour of it. The scheme, however, was not put into effect, although in the following year another meeting approved a line, similar to Cundy's, which had been surveyed by James Walker.

Things progressed a little further in 1836, when a Bill was introduced in

Parliament for a railway line — the Great Northern — from London to York, passing through Cambridge where, it was suggested, the station might be sited at the east end of Jesus Green. The Bill was withdrawn on its second reading, but another proposed a London-Cambridge-York line, again similar to the one proposed by Cundy two years before. A committee, composed of members of the town and the University, was appointed to prepare a petition in favour of this Northern and Eastern line from London to Cambridge, with a branch from Trumpington to Newmarket, Thetford, Norwich and Yarmouth. But Parliament sanctioned only a direct line from London to Cambridge, and the Act authorised the London terminus to be at Islington and the station in Cambridge to be near the end of Latham Road, off Hills Road.

Further extensions planned

Once this Act was passed, the London and North Eastern Railway Company produced a number of plans for other lines which, if they had been built, would have made Cambridge an important rail centre. The Company suggested, for example, a line from a station to be built on or near Coe Fen, to Bury St. Edmunds; another scheme was for a Transverse Railway going eastwards to Newmarket and Bury St. Edmunds, and westwards to St. Ives, Kettering and Market Harborough.

Lack of money, however, prevented these plans from being carried out — indeed, not until 1840 did a line from London even reach as far as Broom's Barn, with an extension to Stortford in 1842.

In 1841 two more railways were proposed. The East Anglian from Stortford to a Cambridge station in Latham Road, with a branch to New-

market-Norwich-Yarmouth, and a revised plan for a London-Cambridge-York line, the station to be built in Cambridge nearly opposite the present Shire Hall. Lack of money again thwarted the plans.

But in the next twelve months the Northern and Eastern Company's affairs improved, and on July 4th, 1844, the royal assent was given to the Act which allowed the Eastern Counties Railway Company to make a railway from the Northern and Eastern Railway at Newport, *via* Cambridge, to Ely and thence to Brandon and Peterborough.

Communication established

So, twenty-three years after the first proposal of a London-Cambridge railway, communication was actually established, and the station in Cambridge was built on its present site in what, until then, had been open fields. The Northern and Eastern and the Eastern Railway Companies merged, the line from Newport to Cambridge and on to Brandon being built by the latter Company.

On July 29th, 1845, the railway from Bishops Stortford *via* Newport, Cambridge and Ely to Brandon was opened simultaneously with the Norfolk Railway from Brandon to Norwich. The Grand Opening Day was supposed to be a general holiday, but because the date had twice been postponed, some shops remained closed while others were open. Nevertheless, plenty of people went down to watch the exciting happenings at the new station, which was decorated with flowers and with flags lent by the College Boat Clubs. On the roof were placed, as the local papers reported, numerous cannons which kept up an almost continuous popping, until the most timid lady got brave enough to bear those warlike noises without so much as a start.

The Directors of the Eastern Counties Railway, with their wives and friends, left Shoreditch Station early in the morning and rode to Cambridge and on to Ely, where they met those who had travelled on the train from Norwich. At one o'clock both trains left for Cambridge, where a banquet was held in two pavilions, set up in the station yard, while the band of the Coldstream Guards played in a tent nearby. The workmen who had built the line were given "a substantial dinner in the luggage house, which had been tastefully fitted up". At 5

o'clock the two trains set off on their return journeys, one to London, the other to Norwich, and on the following day the lines were opened for ordinary passenger traffic.

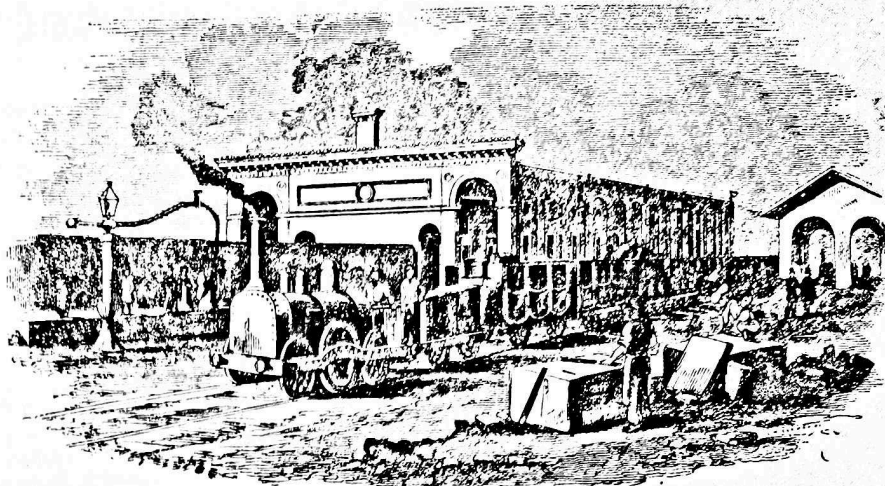
On September 6th, 1844, the first excursion train travelled from London to Cambridge, bringing 286 passengers at a fare of 5/- each. "An immense concourse of persons," we are told, "assembled at the station to watch the arrival of the curiosities who, by the way, conducted themselves very well during their stay here."

The influx of "day trippers" and of Sunday travellers had been viewed with some foreboding by Cambridge townspeople and by the University authorities, the last-named fearing, anyway, the effect of this new mode of travel on the students in their charge. They had, therefore, managed to have inserted in the 1844 Act the same clauses which Oxford had had included in the Great Western's Oxford Railway Act of 1843. These clauses gave the Vice-Chancellor and other officials amongst other rights, that of free access to every part of the station when trains were due to arrive or depart, and that of receiving information from railway officials concerning any member of the University who was on, or was going to the station. On Sundays, no passengers were allowed to be set down or picked up at the station, or within three miles of it, between the hours of ten in the morning and five in the evening.

Rail fever

From 1845 onwards, when the whole country was gripped by "rail fever", plans for more railways to Cambridge came thick and fast. Many of them included suggestions for alternative stations sited, for example, in Emmanuel Road, or near Peterhouse, or in Gonville Place, or at the junction of Sidgwick Avenue and the Backs. Many of the projected lines, however, were abandoned or rejected by Parliament. But by 1866 Cambridge had become a railway centre with, fortunately, but a single station on which the trains of four Companies — the Great Eastern, the Great Northern, the London and North Western and the Midland — converged from the four points of the compass. Present-day traffic problems might well have been even greater than they are had even one of the stations suggested in the past, been built.

The coming of the railway to Cambridge in 1845 had, for a while, an



CAMBRIDGE RAILWAY STATION IN 1847

Much endurance was needed to travel on these early trains. First and second class carriages were roofed but third class carriages were quite open.

adverse effect on the town's prosperity, for it took time to adjust to the new method of sending freight by rail instead of, as heretofore, by river. Between 1851 and 1854 a number of businessmen became bankrupts, and a thousand houses were to let in the town.

Nor did everyone take immediately to the new method of travel, and when the Eastern Counties Railway suddenly increased its passenger and freight fares in 1847, a Stage Coach Association was formed and, for about a year, a new, light four-horse post chaise, the *Defence*, carried goods and people daily between Cambridge and London. The sight of such a vehicle returning, if only briefly, to the local street scene, must have delighted many older people and, especially, the one-time coachmen who had lost their jobs and who had been obliged, in many cases, to find work on the railway. The first Station Master at Cambridge, in fact, was a former stage coach driver.

Certainly it must have taken some courage and much endurance to travel in those early trains, which seem to have been modelled on the coaches which they replaced. First class passengers, like the inside travellers on the old coaches, sat on cushioned seats and had a roof over their heads and glazed windows. Second class carriages had no cushions, and although they were roofed the sides were not completely closed in, but had large, oval, unglazed "windows" through which the wind blew and the rain came in. The poor, who could afford only third class fares, and the excursionists, were more uncomfortable still, for their carriages were un-roofed, had

only two small windows, one at each end, and were made to hold 50 passengers of whom only about ten had backs to their seats. It was not surprising that this class of traveller was covered with dust and soot long before he reached the end of his journey. Engine drivers and stokers, too, had no windows to protect them from wind and rain.

Eventually windows were added to the second class carriages, and roofs to the third, but the seats of the latter remained, for some time, far from comfortable. Indeed, even in this century, women who travelled to work at Chiver's factory in Histon, were put into uncushioned compartments, presumably in case their clothing might have become sticky from their jam-making and so might have spoiled more luxurious upholstery.

Although Cambridge is not usually thought of as a railway engineering town, yet it can claim the credit of having produced one early locomotive engine. This was the "Eagle", a small, single-tank engine with 4ft. 6in. driving wheels, built in 1849 for the Eastern Counties Railway by the brothers, J. & E. Headly at their foundry in Mill Road. In April, 1850, this engine, when travelling between Haddiscoc and Reedham in Norfolk, unfortunately ran over and killed a Mr. Newall, district superintendent at Norwich, who had gone to inspect the telegraph instruments which had then just been introduced.

The "Eagle" was subsequently converted into a special engine, with a saloon car attached to it, for the use of the Chief Engineer of the Great Eastern Railway.