

Kirby Muxloe Local History Group. 21 September 2006.

Mr Fred Hartley, Leicestershire Museums Service, on The Railways of Leicestershire.

Mr Hartley is Keeper of Collections on Working Life at the Museums Service, based at Barrow on Soar. Upon the difficult split of the former unified museums into City and County services in 1993, the county maintained the museums at Harborough, Melton, Donington le Heath, Snibston, etc. and retained most of the county-related material, putting much of it into store at Barrow, which opens to small groups and students. It contains archaeology, geology, some natural history, working life (craft tools, etc), home and family life, costume (notably the Symington corsetry collection) and a small selection of pictures; a Fearnley was donated this week. Material is lent out for exhibitions.

In the early 17th century Huntingdon Beaumont, a Leicestershire second son unable to inherit, interested himself in coal mining. He was the first to lay down a track of wooden rails, linking his Nottingham colliery to Wollaton Lane End, near Wollaton Hall. He then took the idea to Tyneside, where by the end of the 18th century several lines over 10 miles in length linked collieries to the river, laden wagons descending by gravity, horses back-hauling the empties. Iron plates were later laid on the rails and by 1800 timber was giving way to cast-iron rails. The locomotive, invented in Camborne by Francis Trevithick and first put into regular service at Coalbrookdale, soon appeared on the Tyne, cable haulage being retained on hills. The public Stockton & Darlington Railway was followed by the important Liverpool & Manchester line. Several recent conferences have elucidated many aspects of these early railways.

The Trent & Mersey and other canals brought prosperity to the Midlands. Landowners resisted a proposal to improve the Soar Navigation to Leicester as disadvantaging the Swannington/Coleorton coalfield. Perhaps as a sop, the Charnwood Forest Navigation was built in 1790 to link Coleorton with the Soar, by canal to Nanpantan then a horse railway down to Loughborough. William Jessop, a partner of the Butterley ironworks, was Engineer of this first Midlands iron way, Coalbrookdale's first line following a few years later. The two barge/rail transshipments prevented the Navigation from paying but the associated Coleorton horse tramway enjoyed prosperity until the 1860s. Its route can be traced along the verge of Jeffcotes Lane and one of two tunnels survives.

Nottinghamshire coal reaching Leicester by canal still undercut the Swannington mines. The Groby and Bardon quarries needed better transport. A local man, William Stenson, also had to get coal away from his new Whitwick colliery, the first using Tyneside technology to reach deep seams. Meanwhile, the Tynesider George Stephenson, having had his route (following the modern East Lancashire Road) from Liverpool to Manchester rejected, was struggling as Engineer of the L&M to drive the railway across the bog of Chat Moss. John Ellis, an entrepreneur and industrialist of Belgrave Hall, travelled to Lancashire to consult him. The story goes that a good dinner persuaded this famous expert to visit Leicestershire, when he agreed a railway from Leicester to Swannington was feasible. Himself contractually confined to the L&M, he recommended his son Robert [age 25] as Engineer. Mr Hartley's slides illustrating Museum artefacts included a notebook containing a contemporary accurate sketch of the 1829 Rocket locomotive's boiler, clearly showing the separate water-jacketed firebox and firetubes. Developed though not invented by the Stephensons, the concept proved good enough to last until the end of steam locomotive development 125 years later. The first L&S engine, Comet, was a small 0-4-0 built at Robert's new Newcastle locomotive works with improved Rocket boiler and delivered to West Bridge by barge [May 1832].

The route ran via Glenfield, whose mile-long tunnel gave endless trouble; to Bagworth where loaded descending wagons hauled empties up a "balanced" inclined plane; by Long Lane, soon renamed Coalville, to Swannington, where another incline, powered by a stationary engine, joined it to the Coleorton tramway. A timber wagon bridge over the Soar, designed by Robert to lift clear of barge traffic linked West Bridge to Frog Island. Its replacement, to the same design, is at Snibston. Whitwick colliery laid extensive sidings. George Stephenson, who with partners sank three collieries at Coalville, lived several years at Alton Grange near Ashby in the 1830s-40s while working on railway projects in the north midlands.

Charles Edwin Stretton recorded much early railway history. Son of a mayor of Leicester, he grew up in Saxe-Coburg Street (now Saxby St, the house survives) in the 1850s-60s and was fascinated by railways. He called himself C. E. but there is little evidence he practised civil engineering. He was a great supporter of enginemen accused of causing accidents, arguing root causes were poor brakes or working practices condoned by railway management. He wrote much but cites no sources and is sometimes definitely inaccurate. Often libellous, he eventually had to pay up for his incorrect account of one aspect of railway history. He collected many artefacts, some of dubious authenticity, copied old working drawings like a cross-section of Glenfield Tunnel, amassed thousands of railway pamphlets, photographed railway scenes and gave lectures. He took three tons of material to an 1892 American exhibition and eventually donated his uncatalogued collection to the Science, Loughborough and New Walk Museums. New Walk,

fed up of tripping over rusty rails in its basement, in the 1950s unloaded most of its stuff onto the predecessor of the National Railway Museum, York. Snibston retains some of his catalogues.

Mr Hartley showed us a seat pass, signed by Ellis, for the L&S inaugural run, 17 July 1832, where Stretton reckoned that Comet, having knocked the cap off its chimney in Glenfield tunnel, paused while ladies in the party washed their faces in the brook. Neither London nor Birmingham then boasted a railway. Stretton's story that a Bagworth level-crossing contretemps with a farm cart led to the invention of the steam whistle lacks corroboration.

The newly-formed Midland Railway bought out the profitable L&S in 1848 and built new links with Burton and, via Kirby, with its constituent former Midland Counties Railway at Knighton, thence to Leicester Campbell Street station. This handsome building with colonnaded portico, the old MCR headquarters, lay at the North end of the present station. The L&S was double-tracked, a new Thornton Deviation line fit for locomotives bypassed Bagworth incline and the Stag and Castle Inn ceased to act as a station – we were shown a pewter ½ pint mug engraved with the inn name. West Bridge station became a backwater but was rebuilt 1890 and ran passenger trains to Coalville [until 1926, the last goods service being 29 April 1966]. Special narrow carriages were used to clear Glenfield Tunnel; Mr Hartley showed us the key by which the guard locked the doors – they would have fouled the tunnel walls if opened. Few L&S buildings survive; a crossing-keeper's cottage cum booking office at Glenfield is intact but the incline overseer's house at Bagworth was demolished some years ago. Part of the Snibston track layout dates from 1833, the small engine shed probably being 1850s; its former cast-iron rails are now in the Museum. One of Snibston's first exhibits was Coalville Station signal box, a tall wooden structure formerly controlling the A50 level crossing, obstructed by many train movements. It is now beside nearly a mile of track carrying passenger trains on high days and holidays. Beside an "Austerity" steam colliery shunter, the speaker procured a small diesel shunter from Bardon Quarry for the Museum.

In 1849 Parliament decided to discourage railway amalgamations, until then rampant, to foster competition, forcing the companies to expand into new territory. The Midland soon spread widely and built a new line to London, terminating in the splendid St Pancras station and hotel, built of Midlands materials to demonstrate Midlands prosperity. We were shown slides of the Butterley Company's famous single span roof being erected. The Works at Derby built and maintained locomotives, carriages, signals and much else. Each railway was its own proud self-sufficient world – once a Midland man, always a Midland man. The Midland built handsome rural stations of standardised pattern, as at Kirby, helping ingratiate the railways with the community.

The Midland progressed in waves: by the '70s it was probably our finest railway, connecting London, Bristol, Carlisle, Manchester and, by joint lines, Norfolk and Bournemouth. Fresh competition loomed in the '90s when the thrusting Manchester entrepreneur Edward Watkin pushed the Manchester, Sheffield & Lincolnshire's new Extension to Marylebone and, hopefully, eventually perhaps the Channel Tunnel. So the Midland overhauled its operations and built the big London Road station to replace Campbell Street, improvements rippling down the branch lines.

Meanwhile golf courses were fostering leisure travel and encouraging country living. Kirby Golf Club and the Kirby Fields property development drew people from Stonegate to reside near Kirby station, 12 minutes from Leicester, a monthly season ticket costing 9s. Domestic servants came from as far as south Derbyshire, several girls settling here after marriage. The site of the first "Braunstone" station later became Ellis & Everard's coal wharf, [now Towers Close]. A quarter-mile west the replacement station, Kirby Muxloe, opened 1 July 1859 and closed 7 September 1964. [The first signal box opened 1877. It was renewed March 1897 and closed 18 February 1968. Coal has gone but the line, now single track, is still busy with stone traffic].

The MS&L (later renamed the Great Central Railway) Extension was almost the last main line to be built. It fired the imagination of another Leicester man, Walter Alfred Newton, born 1875. His father had photographic studios in Belvoir Street, then in King Street. Young Alfred's hobby was to photograph as many aspects of the work as he could, but he narrowly failed in his ambition to photograph all the many small contractors' locomotives. Travelling by train and bicycle, he lugged his plate camera and glass plate negatives all over the Extension. Although there was much pick and shovel work, one plate shows a big steam excavator deep in what is now the Victoria Centre, Nottingham. Newton superbly depicted the workmen, their camps and their families. Although earlier generations of navvies had been pretty rough, the ladies of the Navy Mission Society and others had now tamed them, their huts proving to be models of chintz and polish. Being "churchy", he would not venture out on Sundays, most of his travels being on Saturdays and public holidays. It is remarkable how well he got on with the workmen. Although safety had much improved, in several cases he was able to send families the only pictures of relatives who died in accidents. He eventually retired in the 1950s and offered his GCR plates to Newarke Houses Museum. The curator collected two car loads – thousands of plates – luckily ignoring his Director's instruction to

dump them as worthless. Catalogued by Mr Hartley, they form the finest archive of the building of a railway. Prints of all plates are available at the Leicestershire Record Office and on the Web. Newton's professional photographs of non-railway buildings have also survived.

Beside his good selection of railway slides, the speaker brought along old detailed Kirby maps showing the railway; gradient profiles; junction layouts and a few small artefacts from the Museum collection. Mr Kinder and Mr Briggs lent some Kirby Station photographs. Reminiscences of Kirby railwaymen were read out, highlighting the paternalism of the railway and the steady if low-paid employment it offered, although the shift work was difficult for a family man. Perquisites included two uniforms a year, children's outings and free holiday travel – Walter Toon, porter and shunter at Desford, favoured Bournemouth on the former Midland's Somerset and Dorset Joint line, but in the 1950s his family ventured from Kirby Station by sleeping-car trains through Belgium, France, Germany and Switzerland to the Italian Lakes. Don Holmes, the last Kirby station-master, died last year at Banbury.

Flanders and Swann's famous Beeching-era lament for closed stations, which includes Kirby Muxloe, made a fitting end to the evening.

J N Briggs, 3 October 2006.