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978-1-108-05036-4 - The Midland Railway: Its Rise and Progress: A Narrative of Modern Enterprise

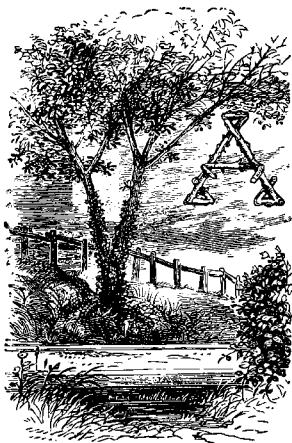
Frederick S. Williams

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I.

A village inn.—The Erewash* Valley.—The coal owners of the Erewash.—Navigable highways.—The river Soar.—An accident.—The Charnwood Forest Canal.—A new competitor.—Mr. John Ellis.—“Old George.”—The Leicester and Swannington Railway.—Cheap coals at Leicester.—Conferences of the Canal Committees.—The Midland Counties Railway projected.—Earliest subscribers.—Meeting at Leicester.—Mr. Jessop’s report.—Identity of the earliest scheme with that eventually carried out.—Mr. George Rennie’s report.—Mr. Vignoles appointed engineer.—Excellence of the route.—Trent Bridge.—Proposals of Northampton people and others.—Financial arrangements of the Midland Counties Company.—Evidence submitted to Parliament concerning the trade and trading facilities of the Midland counties.—Private Bill legislation of the time.—Objections to Railways.—Opposition to the Erewash Valley Railway project.—The North Midland.—“A slip ’twixt the cup and the lip.”—First general meeting of Midland Counties shareholders.—Progress of the works.—A curious incident.—Opening of the Nottingham and Derby portion.—Opening of the whole line.—Prospects of the undertaking.—Threatened competition.—The Birmingham and Derby.—Mr. Hutchinson’s protest.—Fierce contest.—Disappointment.—Reduction of expenditure.—After war, peace.—Amalgamation proposed and effected.



LITTLE group of plain practical men were, on the morning of the 16th of August, 1832, sitting round the parlour table of a village inn in Nottinghamshire. They were coal-masters—deep in mines, in counsel, and in pocket. Once a week they were wont to meet at “The Sun,” at Eastwood, to ponder their dark

* The initial letter represents the source of the Erewash, at Kirkby, in Nottinghamshire.

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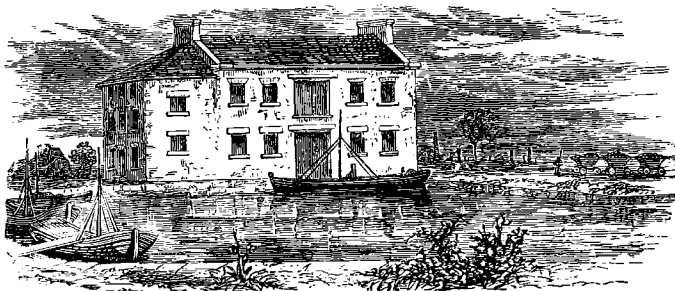
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THE PINXTON TRAMWAY.

designs; and, when business was over, they solaced themselves with the best fare the landlord could provide, and with wine from their private cellar, for the safe custody of which mine host levied a toll of half a crown for every cork he drew. From that hill-top could be seen the valley of the river Erewash, with its rich meadows and doddered willows by the water-courses, its grey uplands and scanty timber: that valley then, as now, one of the great highways of England, beneath which, centuries before, the lead-miners of Derbyshire had come to delve for coal, and where many a deep shaft had since been driven, and whence many a working ran.

Five miles to the north of Eastwood, a tramway, worked by horses, had for twelve years or more wound its devious way among the hills, carrying coals and cotton



PINXTON WHARF.

from the Pinxton wharf of the Cromford Canal up to Mansfield, and bringing back stone, lime, and corn to the canal. And many a deeply-laden barge floated from thence down the broad coal valley of the Erewash, past the hills and pits of Eastwood, across the Trent, up the Soar, and on to Leicester and the south, bearing comfort to many a hearth, and bringing back gold in return.

The coal-owners of the Erewash were a very prosperous race, and they won their prosperity by an accident. From time immemorial the coals that any district yielded had usually been consumed within that district; for pack-horses and mules could not bear so heavy a commodity very far from home. Thus the pits of Nottinghamshire had supplied Nottinghamshire, and those of Leicestershire, Leicestershire. But when the last century was drawing to a close, and inland navigation was spreading its watery highways far and wide through the land, canals were projected down the Erewash Valley to the Trent, and it was proposed to make the Soar navigable on to Leicester, so that the products of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire might be conveyed, not only into the town of Nottingham, but on to the Leicestershire markets and the south. The Leicestershire coal-owners were alarmed. They saw how, if these plans were carried out, it would soon be cheaper to bring coals by canal from the northward, than by road from the pits in their own county, and that their trade would be ruined. Resistance was organized. Nor was it stayed until the projectors of the Soar navigation undertook to make, not only their canal from the Trent to Leicester, but also a branch canal from Loughborough, across Charnwood Forest, to the Leicestershire pits at Coleorton and Moira. Thus, it was thought, equal facilities would be secured for each competitor: there would henceforth be water-carriage for both counties and from both coal-fields.

Events, however, issued otherwise. In the year 1798, the Loughborough Canal and the extension to Coleorton were made. But in the succeeding winter a very deep snow-fall was followed by a rapid and disastrous thaw, and the embankments of both the reservoir and the canal were broken down, and much property was destroyed. The works were never restored; and, in 1838, an Act was

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obtained to authorize the abandonment of the line and the sale of the land. And "The Charnwood Forest Canal" may still be traced among the wooded hills and dales of Leicestershire: anon a dry ditch, tangled over with briars and underwood, and then carried across massive bridges and along lofty embankments, the sides of which have been planted with saplings and burrowed by rabbits; here it has been levelled down by the plough-



THE CHARNWOOD FOREST CANAL.

share and is fruitful with grain, and there it is overshadowed by trees half a century old.

Meanwhile the Loughborough Canal prospered; and well it might. "There was only one Soar to be had," as the Midland Chairman remarked to us the other day. "It had easily been turned into a canal; it obtained the monopoly, and kept it." The shares, on which £140 had been paid, rose to £4500 each, and were considered to be as safe as consols. And so matters continued for more than thirty years.

But at length the monopoly even of canals began to be threatened. A new competitor was coming into the field. The Stockton and Darlington Railway had been completed, the Liverpool and Manchester line was in course of construction, and the idea was spreading that railways were

likely to succeed. Two or three enterprising men in Leicester shared these impressions, and they conferred on the subject with Mr. John Ellis, their townsman. He replied that he had no practical acquaintance with the making or working of railways; but he did not discourage the project. At that time he was associated with some other gentlemen in the reclamation of a part of Chat Moss,—that vast morass over which George Stephenson was then carrying the Liverpool and Manchester Railway; and Mr. Ellis promised that he would ask the advice of his friend Stephenson. Accordingly, a week or two afterwards, Mr. Ellis went from Chat Moss in search of the great engineer, and found him very busy, and, we must add, very “cross,” in Rainhill Cutting. “Old George,” as he was familiarly called, refused to discuss the matter. Mr. Ellis for a while forebore with his friend’s infirmity, and at length induced him to go to a village inn hard by, that they might have a beefsteak together for dinner. Here good humour soon returned; Mr. Ellis explained his plans, and George Stephenson undertook to go over to Leicester and see the country. He did so; and his report as to the practicability of a railway being carried through it was favourable. He was then requested to undertake the office of engineer. This he declined. “He had,” he said, “thirty-one miles of railway to make, and that was enough for any man at a time.” But, being asked if he could recommend any one for this service, he mentioned the name of his son Robert, who had recently returned from South America, and the father added that he would himself be responsible that the work should be well done. The matter was so arranged; and when, not long afterwards, a difficulty arose in obtaining the requisite capital for the new undertaking,—in consequence of many of the well-to-do Leicester people being already interested in canals,—

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George Stephenson further showed his practical interest in the work. "Give me a sheet of paper," he said to his friend Ellis, "and I will raise the money for you in Liverpool." In a short time a complete list of subscribers was returned.

The Leicester and Swannington line was commenced about the latter end of the year 1830; and one spring morning in 1832 Mr. Ellis said to his son, then a lad of fifteen, "Edward, thou shalt go down with me, and see the new engine get up its steam." The machinery had been conveyed by water from Stephenson's factory at Newcastle-on-Tyne to the West Bridge Wharf at Leicester; it had been put together in a little shed built for its accommodation; it was named "The Comet;" and it was the first locomotive that ever ran south of Manchester.

On the 17th of July, 1832, amid great rejoicings, and the roar of cannon that had been cast for the occasion, the new line was opened—a line which brought the long neglected coalfields of Leicestershire almost to the doors of the growing population and thriving industries of the county town.

These events could not but exercise a decisive influence on the position and prospects of the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire coal trade; and when the coalmasters met at the "Sun Inn" on the 16th of August, 1832, a shadow rested on their faces. The dry ditch in Charnwood Forest could no longer shut Leicestershire coal out of the Leicestershire market; the Swannington line had been five weeks at work; George Stephenson had opened his new pits at Snibston, and was delivering coal at Leicester at less than ten shillings a ton; and the people of Leicester would soon be saving £40,000 a year in fuel—enough to pay all the parochial and government taxes of the town. The Nottinghamshire coal trade had, of course, immediately suffered; and it was

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obvious that, unless the cost of carriage southward could be reduced, the coal masters of Eastwood and of all that country side would be excluded from their chief markets, and the mining population would be thrown out of employment.

Conferences had already been held with the committees of the Erewash, the Soar, and the Leicester canals; and the latter had admitted that they were "very desirous to endeavour to agree on such a reduction of tonnage on coals as would enable the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire coals to be sold in the Leicester market in fair competition with the coals brought by the Leicester and Swannington Railway." It was indispensable, however, that a reduction of 3*s.* 6*d.* on every ton of coals delivered at Leicester should be obtained: the only question was whether the coal-owners or the canal proprietors were to make the sacrifice. "After a consultation of two hours" the canal committees offered to lower their rates 1*s.* 6*d.*; but they insisted that the coal-owners should consent to reduce their prices 2*s.* a ton. "To this proposition the coal-masters did not see right to agree;" and they contended that each of the three canals ought to lower their rates a shilling, and the coal-owners would reduce their coals a shilling; a reduction, they astutely suggested, "which would have the effect of not merely enabling the Derbyshire coals to compete on equal terms with the Bagworth and other coals brought by the railway, but would have a great effect in deterring persons from investing capital in sinking to other and better beds of coal." In answer to this proposal, the canal committees gave in their ultimatum—that they would each allow a drawback of sixpence a ton "on such coals only as should be delivered at Leicester at 10*s.* a ton." This "extraordinary proposal" — as the coal-owners pro-

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BIRTHPLACE OF THE MIDLAND RAILWAY.

nounced it—was “at once rejected,” and the meeting broke up.

Such were the reports that were presented when the coal-masters met on the memorable 16th of August, 1832. After anxious deliberation upon all the facts before them, they proceeded to enter on their minutes the declaration, that “*there remains no other plan for their adoption than to attempt to lay a railway from these collieries to the town of Leicester.*” A committee of seven gentlemen was appointed to give effect to this decision by taking “such steps as they may deem expedient.” Such was the origin of the Midland Counties Railway; and the “Sun Inn,” at Eastwood, was thus the birthplace of the earliest of those lines which afterwards became united into what is now known as the Midland Railway.



BIRTHPLACE OF THE MIDLAND RAILWAY.

Further consideration served only to strengthen the resolution at which the coal-masters had arrived.

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MEETING AT LEICESTER.

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Eleven days afterwards—August 27th—at the neighbouring town of Alfreton, it was decided that the public should be invited to co-operate for a continuation of the Mansfield and Pinxton line from Pinxton to Leicester; and on the 4th of October, at a special meeting at the “Sun Inn” at Eastwood, it was unanimously decided, that a “railway be forthwith formed from Pinxton to Leicester, as essential to the interests of the coal-trade of this district.” Words were succeeded by deeds, and the following gentlemen put down their names and promises of subscriptions for the accomplishment of the object contemplated :

Messrs. Barber and Walker	£10,000
Mr. E. M. Mundy	5,000
Mr. John Wright	5,000
Mr. Francis Wright	5,000
Mr. James Oakes	2,500
Mr. Brittain	1,500
Messrs. Coupland and Goodwin	1,500
Messrs. Haslam	1,500
	£32,000

It was also directed that steps should be taken for giving the requisite notices preliminary to an appeal to Parliament in the ensuing session. It was subsequently announced that the Duke of Portland, Mr. Morewood, and Mr. Coke had each subscribed £5000; and deputations were appointed to endeavour to secure the co-operation of the Dukes of Newcastle and Richmond, of Lord Middleton, and Sir F. Freeling. It is significantly added in the Eastwood minutes that “a report on the subject of carriage by locomotive power was laid before the meeting:” no decision having then been arrived at on that essential matter.

A meeting also was held in Leicester, October 4th, 1832,

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of subscribers to the projected line; Mr. Mundy occupying the chair. "The construction of a railway from Leicester to Swannington," said the local journal, "and the speculations in progress for bringing the coal of the contiguous district into the Leicester market, having threatened the collieries of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire with the loss of that portion of their trade which they have hitherto enjoyed along the navigation of the Soar, amounting to a quantity perhaps not less than 160,000 tons annually," an effort had been made to induce the canal proprietors so to lower their charges that "the trade, or at least a portion of it," might be retained in its "antient channells." These attempts, however, had failed, and the coal proprietors had adopted the only alternative left to them, of proposing the construction of a railway to Leicester; in which, on account of the benefits it would confer on the town, and also as a profitable investment of capital, the co-operation of the public was invited.

It was added, that, "in the approaching session of Parliament, the legislative sanction is confidently anticipated for the formation of a railway from London to Birmingham," which, "on the completion of the Midland Counties Railway, would admit of a grand central communication being effected from London to Mansfield."

In February, 1833, Mr. Jessop, the engineer, reported to his friends at Eastwood that there had been "no possibility of bringing a bill into Parliament" during that session; but that they "had met with much encouragement in London to prosecute the measure before the next session." It has, indeed, been suggested that, at this period the original project of the Eastwood coalmasters was abandoned; and that the scheme eventually carried out was entirely new. "The former company," said Mr. J. Fox Bell, the secretary of the Midland Counties Railway, "now wound up its affairs and died."