THE COMING OF RAILWAYS TO NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

Northamptonshire, as we all learned at school, is like a long leaf, 70 miles from south-west to north-east and only 5 to 25 miles from south-east to north-west. It lies across the main routes from London to the north, and four main lines traverse it: from west to east those of the Great Central, the London and Birmingham (later the London and North Western), the Midland and the Great Northern, while a fifth, the Great Western line to Birmingham and Shrewsbury, just touches the county at the south-western end near Aynho. These lines in Northamptonshire give us a sample of the problems of engineering met and of the social effects brought by the railways throughout the country, for the London and Birmingham, opened in 1838, was the first main great line in the world, and the Great Central, completed in 1899, was one of the last.

The routes of our main lines have associations reaching far into the past. The London and Birmingham, like the Grand Junction Canal, keeps closely to the line of the Roman road known as Watling Street, along which as one reads the Annals of Tacitus one can imagine the tramp of Roman legions recalled hurriedly from Anglesey to subdue Boadicea;¹ and now of course the M1 has joined the other three. At the other end of the county the Great Northern main line is virtually a railway version of Ermine Street; and the Great Central and the Midland made the best of what was left.

The county has its Neolithic highway in Banbury Lane, leading from Hunsbury Hill south-west towards Banbury and Wales; its two Roman highways, small parts of which have again come into use on our new motorways; and a network of minor roads as well as six turnpikes, a navigable river and part of the principal canal in Britain, the Grand Junction.² Until the advent of the railways many drove roads were in use, and it has been calculated that about eight thousand cattle a week were driven along them to London alone.

Conditions of travel varied here as everywhere. In the Wealden clay of Sussex in the eighteenth century a journey of nine miles once took more than six hours, whereas in 1774 John Wesley rode the 285 miles from Congleton to Bristol and back in under two days.³ In mid-eighteenth century letters commonly took a month to travel from Yorkshire to Oxford, whereas one of Cicero's had reached Athens from Rome in three weeks. Northamptonshire was lucky in having Thomas Telford to re-align the Holyhead road, but even earlier it seems from various indications that the county was not nearly as bad as some: in the diary of the boy Thomas Isham for 1672 we read on one occasion that Sir William Haslewood returned to Maidwell from London in a day, and on another that Sir Charles Harbord and his sons returned to Grafton Regis after dinner at Lamport, a distance of twenty miles.⁴

Just as we romanticise the dying era of steam trains, so past generations romanticised the stage coach, many of the most famous of which came along the Watling Street. A recent authority has this to say about them: 'It was the railways, even with their early third-class open trucks and first-class carriages like stage-coaches with flanged wheels, that first introduced the travelling Briton to something resembling comfort in motion. Before that he needed a hardy constitution and a mind of sufficient fortitude to disdain, or glory in, physical torment. Otherwise he was

¹ Tacitus, Ann., xiv 33. I have retained the traditional spelling of the queen's name.
² For much concise information about these I am indebted to the guide to an exhibition of transport held in Northampton in 1958.
⁴ Thomas Isham's diary for 1st and 24th August 1672.
better off walking, or staying at home'. Two characteristics he adds, of the British travelling public, grousing and taciturnity, were born in the stage-coach; I would rather say that the stage-coach brought out what was there already.

As to fares, the first-class fare from London to Thurso in 1962 was just over £10; an inside place in the mail-coach in 1835 cost £17, exclusive of meals and tips. Mr. Rolt remarks that the halts were not at all like those pictured on Christmas cards with jovial landlords and the like, but were much more like a pit stop in the Grand Prix car race—even horses with spare poles stood ready at some points.

Not that the by-roads were deserted. Sir R. Phillips, in a tour through the United Kingdom in 1828, gives an admiring account of the transport facilities in Leicester. There were six coaches daily each way to and from London, six to Birmingham, six to Stamford and the East Coast and 250 carriers who came in twice a week from the various villages.

The canals, too, were reaching the height of their prosperity when the railways came, and Northamptonshire possessed a large part of the most prosperous of them all, the Grand Junction, which went on with undiminished traffic though with diminished revenue till 1870 and later. How interesting and cheering it is to read that on June 18th-24th 1798 thirty barges took a considerable body of troops from Blisworth to Liverpool, taking six days instead of twelve, as they would have done on the march.

The history of railways in the county begins with an unsolved problem. In John Clare's diary for June 4th 1825 we read: 'Saw three fellows at the end of Royce Wood, who I found were laying out the plan for an iron railway from Manchester to London. It is to cross over Round Oak spring by Royce Wood corner for Woodcroft Castle. I little thought that fresh intrusions would interrupt and spoil my solitudes. After the enclosure they will despoil a boggy place that is famous for orchises at Royce Wood end'. This is an astonishingly early date for a railway scheme in East Anglia—three months before the opening of the Stockton and Darlington, five years before that of the Liverpool and Manchester and twenty years before any railway reached that part of the country—but Grinling in his history of the Great Northern railway mentions a first short epidemic of 'railway fever' in the years 1825-27, and as I shall show later in this paper some most unlikely schemes have been rescued from oblivion by patient research.

Paradoxically, a noticeable phenomenon of the coming of railways to Northamptonshire was its limited effect on the countryside. Mr. Rolt notices this in an admirable article on John Fowler published in 1962. Just as the waters of clear and polluted streams meet but do not mingle for some distance below their point of confluence, so, for a brief space in English rural history, the new world met the old without exerting any noticeable influence upon it. The trains hurried from growing town to growing town. The triumphant cry of a steam whistle drew the ploughman's eye from his furrow and straightened the reaper's back, but when the thunder of wheels had died away the old life that Chaucer and Shakespeare knew went on, its slow, ancient rhythm only momentarily disturbed. Mr. Rolt illustrates his point by a print of the Willington Dene viaduct on the Newcastle, North Shields and Tyne Railway, in the foreground on which is a ploughman at work with a wheel-less wooden plough such as we see in the illustration to a mediaeval psalter. 'So great and so poignant a contrast between old and new', says Rolt, 'had never been seen before in history and will never be seen again'. Next to the enclosures it was the steam plough of the 1850's that began to make detailed changes in the appearance of the countryside.

No more striking example of all this could be found than south-west Northamptonshire, that large tract of quiet pastoral country traversed anciently by Banbury Lane and now by the

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9 ib., p. 116.
road B4525 through Thorpe Mandeville, Canons Ashby, Litchborough, Bugbrooke and Kislingbury. At the remains of Culworth station, for example, a train may roar out of a green expanse and disappear into a similar expanse while all around are fields that breathe the very spirit of mediaeval England. Most striking of all is the contrast at Stowe-Nine-Churches, a village so old that no one knows what its name really means and whose church is famous for its early Purbeck marble effigy. This village looks down from its hilltop on the main line from Euston, where expresses roar onward as if in another world, as separate in spirit from the quiet fields as a space ship. The railways were not originally meant to open up this tract of country, and much of the activity they brought was a kind of camp-following, as in the Great Central locomotive depot at Woodford Halse.

This brings me to the famous case of Northampton versus the Railway, about which much nonsense continues to be written in spite of the exposition of the truth by Miss Wake in Northampton Vindicated, published in 1935, and by Mr. Victor Hatley in Northamptonshire Past and Present, vol. 11 (1959), pp. 305-9. The London and Birmingham main line is the most fascinating and most important of those which cross our county. Like its only great predecessor, the Liverpool and Manchester, it dates to the days when railway engineers had little experience of the effect of gradients on locomotives; in fact it is aligned as the old canals had been, which is not surprising when one remembers that most of its contractors and labourers had been employed solely on canals. With these it was always levels or locks, and we find that the main line from Euston has a ruling gradient of 1 in 330 everywhere except for a steep drop at 1 in 70 from Camden to the terminus, where the line was laid out for cable haulage. Hence the huge cutting at Roade, and the troublesome tunnel at Kilsby. These factors were probably decisive in the route taken which avoided Northampton, and can help us to arrive at the truth in spite of much conflicting evidence. For example Robert Stephenson, writing to Samuel Smiles in 1857, said that Northampton had 'distinguished itself by being rather more furious than other places in opposition to railways, and begged that the line might be kept away from them'. Mr. Hatley condemns the effrontery of this falsehood and suggests that Robert Stephenson might have wished to divert attention from his own part in the disastrous undertaking at Kilsby, but I think the truth is a shade less condemnatory.

For there was divided opinion at Northampton, as Miss Wake has shown. Some few landowners were against the railway whereas the majority of the townspeople were naturally all for it; and it is natural that Robert Stephenson should remember the energetic opposition of the Common Council of Northampton, including such landowners as Sir William Wake and the Duke of Grafton, and forget the less colourful efforts of the Town Assembly to obtain a line passing through the town, although these efforts had been strenuous and prolonged. With the issue thus in the balance I am sure that Stephenson and his consultants were not intending to include Northampton anyway, as this would mean a steep drop to the Nene and a long climb through Althorp, Long Buckby and Crick; and so they decided on a route which the landowners might favour. One other factor is important here, namely that the main line, like so many others, was planned to connect London with a provincial city, and intermediate traffic was a secondary matter. For instance Edmund Denison, chief promoter of the Great Northern, said at Peterborough in 1844: 'Our main object is to shorten the distance between London and Yorkshire. If a line through Peterborough is best for the general public Peterborough shall have it, but if not, it shall pass outside the town'. This apparent indifference to local traffic explains many of the outcries in the local papers on such matters as poor and badly-situated stations, inconveniently-timed trains, churlish service and the like; there was probably at least an element of truth in all these criticisms.

At Stamford a similar legend has grown about the opposition of Lord Exeter to a railway going through the town, and here too the truth is far from clear. A little book called 'The Annals of Stamford 1837-1887' by a local resident named A. J. Waterfield gives racy and amusing accounts of local events in the reign of Queen Victoria. On August 12, 1844 we read: 'This month great disappointment was felt in Stamford on it becoming known that the York Railway would go via

Peterborough, according to the decision of the engineer umpire, Mr. Locke, and would not come within several miles of Stamford'. From this and other evidence we at least know that the original decision to take the line over the flat country just east of Stamford was made by the engineers themselves, and there is no evidence whatever that the Marquis of Exeter disapproved of the obvious desire of the townspeople of Stamford to have the railway. In any event the Leicester and Peterborough line of the Midland passed within a mile of Burghley House, and there is no record of any opposition to this route. George Hudson and George Stephenson both visited the Marquis of Exeter at Burghley on the 14th of September 1844 'in connection with the projected line from Syston', and work went forward rapidly.

Six years were to elapse before the Great Northern route was finally decided on, and in that time the residents of Stamford applied renewed pressure to obtain a diversion of the route. From a collection of bills and public notices in the Stamford Public Library it is possible to trace the following sequence of events.

During 1846 and 1847 the representations of Stamford were supported by the Great Northern Company, whose chairman Denison assured a deputation on 25th May 1847 that the Company were sincere in their anxiety to come to Stamford, if they could do so on reasonable terms, or they would not have applied to Parliament for the Deviation, the Line of which was adopted to meet the views of Lord Exeter. It appears that Lord Exeter originally supported the townspeople in seeking a re-committal of the Great Northern bill, 'on condition only that they should apply the next Session for the Deviation then proposed by him'. Perhaps he had second thoughts, for another handbill dated June 18, 1847 gives the text of a petition from the Marquis to the House of Commons against the proposed deviation, on the grounds of noise, inconvenience and obstruction of navigation on the Welland. On June 5 Sir James Buller East, in answer to a question from the Marquis of Granby, had assured the Commons that the rejection of the proposed deviation through Stamford was entirely on public grounds. 'It came, therefore, to a nice account for the Committee to settle between Stamford and all the rest of the travelling world, whether the people of Stamford should go three miles out of their way, or all other travellers two miles. It was, as it was, a fair match between Stamford on one side, and all England and Scotland on the other; and we thought all England had it'.

Whatever may be thought of the Marquis' change of attitude here, he certainly did his very best to keep Stamford on the railway map later on, for when a separate company, the Stamford and Essendine Railway, had been formed as a kind of subsidiary of the Great Northern to run the little branch from the main line, he ran both it and the Stamford and Sibson (part of the Midland line from Leicester to Peterborough, with a branch joining the L.N.W.R. Blisworth line near Wansford) out of his own pocket for seven years, from January 1, 1865 to February 1, 1872. As late as 1877 Waterfield tells us that the townspeople were still petitioning for a loop line from Huntingdon to Grantham which would take in Stamford.

It is remarkable that the innocent-looking pastoral countryside of Northamptonshire should have offered the greatest obstacles to canal and railway engineers alike. Apart from Woodhead in the Pennines, the Catesby tunnel of 2,997 yards was the most troublesome of all their works to the engineers of the Great Central line in the nineties; and earlier, Blisworth canal tunnel and Kilsby railway tunnel had almost defeated William Jessop and Robert Stephenson. The two latter cases are almost identical. Blisworth hill is of rotten oolite and heavy shifting clays with powerful springs of water between them. These brought work to a standstill on the canal tunnel in 1795 and Jessop wished to abandon it in favour of locks, but on the advice of Whitworth and Rennie a new tunnel was laid out on a different line. A cast iron railway was laid over the ridge to take traffic to Stoke Bruerne, and when the tunnel was finished—and it took ten years—the rails were laid down from Gayton Wharf to the Nene at Northampton.
This history was repeated almost in detail at Kilsby Tunnel. Obviously Robert Stephenson must have known of the quicksands encountered not only at Blisworth but at Braunston and Crick tunnels on the Oxford canal, but what he knew nothing of was the cost of these obstacles, as of course the last thing the canal authorities wished was to help Robert Stephenson—in fact they even employed gangs to pull up the piles he had driven over the canal near Wolverton. So Robert had no access to Jessop’s records, and his own estimates for the line fell far short. James Nowell, the contractor for the tunnel, collapsed and died of a heart attack, while in December 1835 three other contractors were dangerously ill. After ten shafts had been sunk and repeatedly flooded and a driftway parallel with the tunnel had been submerged, Stephenson had to instal thirteen beam engines, which pumped 1,800 gallons a minute for nineteen months, before the quicksand was finally mastered. By this time every other part of the line was completed, though passengers were still taken by road coach from Denbigh Hall, where Watling Street passes under the line near Bletchley, to Rugby. It was not till June 1838 that the first trains ran through in each direction, though a roisterous inaugural party had been held at the ‘Dun Cow’ at Dunchurch in December 1837. In the columns of the Northampton Mercury and Herald one can follow the mounting excitement as the great day drew near. The final cost of the line was £5½ million, over twice the original estimate. This does not include £1 million for land valued at a third of that price. ‘If the landowners were shown blank cheques’ says Rolt, ‘the impending destruction of the noblesse miraculously ceased to be a matter of concern to them’.

All this work, on a scale unequalled since the Pyramids, was largely in the hands of the ‘navvies’, a race of men which sprang up with the canals and early railways and then vanished for ever. They came from the Fens, from Scotland and from Ireland, and formed an élite among the labour force. Since Kilsby tunnel was the work of these men I can hardly pass them over, but I am sure you will all know a great deal about them since writers like Hamilton Ellis, Roger Lloyd and Lionel Rolt have dealt with them and they figure in many early railway histories. Shanty towns quite as riotous as those in the Middle West sprang up, the largest being on the top of the tunnel at Kilsby with 1,250 men in noisome turf huts. These men wore white felt hats with up-turned brims, velveteen coats and scarlet plush waistcoats covered with little black spots, and rainbow-coloured neckerchiefs, corduroys and heavy calf-length boots. When William Morris saw navvies at Swindon he wrote as if they were giants. ‘As I was not half their height, from my point of view their heads and shoulders were thrown ... as it were, right against the heavens’. And of course he saw them surrounded by a Pre-Raphaelite halo.

Their speech was strange and they used nicknames, never their proper names: one of them, Catsmeat, is given to a rather different character in stories by P. G. Wodehouse. Their capacity for work was prodigious—each man could shovel twenty tons a day up into wagons above his head—and their chief food was beef and whisky—sixteen or eighteen pounds of beef each a week and no-one knows how much whisky, because they distilled their own. Their pay was about five shillings a day, but sometimes they were not paid for weeks, and they then proceeded to Saturnalia of riot and disorder. They were foolhardy in the extreme, and three were killed in trying to jump across the mouth of the tunnel shafts in a game of Follow my Leader. They recked not of God or man, and when one of their number was imprisoned they simply dug a tunnel and got him out again. Their loyalty was solely to their contractor and to one another, and when one of their number was buried at Kilsby, ‘five hundred of his comrades in clean short white smock frocks, with their black handkerchiefs tied loosley round their throats, are seen in procession in pairs walking hand in hand after the coffin of their mate’.

Forty years later, during the construction of the Kettering to Manton line of the Midland Railway, the first fine careless rapture had worn off, though we still hear of rough behaviour in the shanty towns at Corby Wood, Glaston and Wing, and still hear of huts with nineteen inhabitants—man and wife, seven children and ten lodgers—of drunkenness and profligacy. The Rev. D. W. Barrett, Vicar of Nassington and chaplain to the Bishop of Peterborough’s mission to navvies, wrote in 1879 a little book called Life and Work Among the Navvies, a kindly and typically
Victorian missionary tract full of curious information (who would have guessed, for example, that £400 a year was spent by navvies on pickles?) and great earnestness. Imagine the Bishop of Peterborough conducting a thanksgiving service in the depths of Glaston tunnel with an upturned wheelbarrow for a prayer desk, or Bishop Wordsworth of Lincoln being pushed along in an open truck to inspect earthworks.\(^\text{19}\)

What of the reception afforded to the new railway? The columns of the Northampton Herald and Mercury are full of it, and indeed one wonders whatever these two papers would have otherwise done for copy. They voiced two rival factions, the Herald for and the Mercury against the railway, and it is remarkable how early the traditional complaints of travellers found a voice. Burst parcels and mishandled luggage for example—the railway seemed to specialise in surliness, and of course in those days all luggage was carried on top of the carriages, and a porter just edged it off and left the rest to gravity—unless he received a handsome tip. One clergyman named Phillimore complained that when he had come forward to vouch for a lady whose ticket, though quite valid, was refused by a clerk at a junction, he himself was assaulted, or as he put it ‘collared’ by the station staff. Were they, he asked, being deliberately rude at certain stations to discourage passengers?

There was a long squabble over the rival merits of Roade and Blisworth as sites for stations, Blisworth being thought of as the station for Banbury. In the event, of course, there were stations at both places. A novel argument for stage coaches was that the earliest morning train left Roade for London at 9.55 a.m., so that by leaving Northampton in the small hours one could actually reach London earlier by coach. And where did the railways deposit you in London? ‘At Euston Square, a place very far from the points in London which nine travellers out of ten are desirous of reaching’. In spite of which the Herald deplores the fact that ‘the people seem railroad mad’.

The first class fare from Roade to London was 16/-, whereas an outside seat on a coach was 8/-. Originally railway trains were more or less stage-coaches on wheels, and rail fares were divided between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ or second class. G.M.T. was to be observed ‘with local variations’, each train would cater for 330 passengers and there was to be no tipping (tipping was a curse and a menace on the stage coaches).\(^\text{20}\)

Among early writers on the railway the greatest was Dickens, who in Dombey and Son describes graphically the building of the London end of our railway. On the whole the Muses have not found the machine a congenial theme; but the London & Birmingham called forth a remarkable series of guides—no other railway ever inspired half as many, presumably because the novelty wore off—and it seems that almost every literary hack in London tried his hand at describing the route. About the style of these works there is the faded correctness and pompous classicism that makes much late eighteenth century English prose and poetry so very dull. Much the most amusing of these guides is William Wyld’s of 1838. Mr. Wyld is resolved to enthral his readers. Let us look at his passage through our county.

Roade: (We pass over) ‘a little tributary stream of the Tow, whose silver cord may be dizzily seen wound in a thousand tortuousnesses on the surrounding lea (the living is a curacy in the archdeaconry of Northampton and diocese of Peterborough; annual value £48)’.

Blisworth bridge: ‘At this point, looking towards the right, the swelling hill and dale present a most pleasing and refreshing appearance, with which the true lover of the picturesque cannot fail to be highly ecstaticized, or even the only common observer to be somewhat cheered and delighted’.

Weedon barracks (all the early guides profess special admiration for Weedon barracks): ‘The scene which then appears stretched before us has not, perhaps, been excelled, if equalled, during our onward journeying, either in symmetrical arrangement of feature or pleasing shade of tint’. Then follows a rapturous description of the redcoats which reminds me of A Shropshire Lad.

\(^{19}\) D. W. Barrett, Life and Work Among the Navvies, pp. 16, 18, 114, 122-4.

\(^{20}\) All these and many other fascinating facts and arguments are to be found in the Herald and Mercury for 1838.
Daventry: ‘The streets are, for the most part, narrow, dirty and badly paved, and the houses of a mean description’.

Weedon: ‘Every needful affair having been transacted during our short stopping at the station, our journey is resumed’.

Brockhall: ‘A short length of road, neither properly called excavated nor embanked, but partaking of the nature of both’ (this must have been a remarkable piece of engineering).

Kilsby Tunnel: ‘Into which we need not, like the Trojan hero on his visit to the kingdom of Pluto, any skilful sybil to conduct us, nor any golden branch to awe the gnomes, in our progress through the regions of darkness: for our leader, who has hitherto conducted us, and iron-hearted though he be, is yet faithful, and may be safely trusted in the gloom as in the day-gleam.

...we at length burst forth into the broad light of the ambient heaven, which seems lit up with an unwonted cheerfulness, to welcome our return to the empire of day’.

This height of rapture could not be maintained, and in Samuel Sidney’s L.N.W. Guide of 1851 we find that Kilsby tunnel ‘was one of the wonders of the world; but has been, from the progress of railway works, reduced to the level of any other long dark hole’.

In 1840 was opened a branch of the Midland Counties Railway from Derby to Rugby, and for some years thereafter all rail traffic from London to the north travelled to Rugby, thence to Leicester and on to Derby and Normanton where it transferred to the York and North Midland. Peterborough was without rail communication with London until the branch of 47 miles was opened from Blisworth in 1845. This has recently been closed and it is salutary to remember that even in 1845, the peak year of the great Railway Mania, this line was sanctioned by a Parliamentary majority of one vote. The much more ambitious scheme of the Great Northern railway, which was battling through Parliament a few months later, met the combined weight of all opposing interests—coach-owners, landed proprietors and rural tradesmen who saw the end of their lucrative share of the traffic to Euston. In the end the G.N. spent getting on for half a million pounds in buying its way through Parliament, more than the Blisworth-Peterborough branch did to build.

The Blisworth-Peterborough line provided a through route from London of 110 miles in length. It was single from Northampton to Peterborough, and since it followed the valley of the Nene almost no earthworks were needed—in 47 miles there are 21 level crossings, and the whole line was completed in just over a year at an average of a mile every ten days. There must have been a fair traffic over it, because in spite of the imminence of the Great Northern’s bid for Peterborough the line was doubled in 1846. It was signalled by electric telegraph right from the beginning, a very up-to-date method indeed for those days, and was the subject of a piece of romantic prose by George Borrow, who wrote of a train on it: ‘With dragon speed and dragon noise, fire, smoke and fury the train dashed along its road’—how impressionable people were in those days. The spate of railway guides was not yet over, and those describing this placid line were of course lyrical about the churches en route—Whiston, Titchmarsh, Oundle, Fotheringhay (Earls Barton, being Saxon, was not yet the wonder in 1845 that we now consider it).

In the Record Office here is a letter of some interest relating to payment to the churchwardens and overseers of the poor. The London & Birmingham were paying yearly for the poor rates £160 a mile, and in 1850, in spite of the certain depreciation in value of the line when the G.N.R. should be completed, we find a Mr. Wilkins of Ringstead at the head of a group of parishes sticking out for £200 a mile. The letter I mentioned is signed by Edward Watkin, in 1850 a young man of 23, later to become one of the most formidable figures in railway history and personally responsible for the Great Central’s great move for London. This letter corrects some false impressions about Watkin’s early career: for example George Dow in his monumental history of the Great Central states that Watkin was touring the U.S.A. in 1851 before joining Captain Huish on the London & North Western, whereas we see he must have joined Huish early in 1850.

The letter itself, with its heavy invective, is rather like a steam-hammer to crack a nut, and concludes: 'Knowing (Mr. Wilkins') powers of calculation, whenever his personal interests are affected, I confess I can only reconcile the course he recommends with perfect rationality by supposing that having committed himself to results which he now finds to be futile, he has not the moral courage to draw back so long as he is supported by the parishes he has, so far, induced to combine'.

Peterborough is in some respects unique; a small city mediæval and diaconal in its government, dating back to the powerful religious foundation at Medeshamsted, on to which was grafted a new railway town with a population as radical and with houses as humdrum as those of Swindon; and of course the railway itself has brought not only obvious industries such as the brickworks but lesser-known ones such as the coke ovens which at one time supplied two-fifths of the requirements of the London and North Western (coke was of course the staple fuel of locomotives till the late fifties, because of the ban on smoke and because in small grates it burned better). To the social and economic historian Peterborough is a fascinating study.

It is interesting to note the order in which the railways reached the city. First came the branch from Blisworth in 1845, then the Midland branch from Syston, opened from the Peterborough end as far as Stamford in 1846, then the Ely and Peterborough branch of the Eastern Counties, which met the Midland at Peterborough East and offered Stamfordians a through route to London via Ely and Cambridge. The Great Northern, by far the most important of all these lines, was the last to reach Peterborough except for a branch of the L.N.W.R. from Rugby through Market Harborough which is evidence of the East-West dream of which more later.

The Midland extension from Leicester to Bedford, opened in 1858, is in great contrast to the London and Birmingham. It enters the county on a steep gradient from Market Harborough and reaches its highest point between London and Leeds at Desborough, whence it winds its way down to Kettering and Wellingborough. It is really full of curves here, and some of the high speeds run by expresses have always been exciting to say the least. At Glendon North Junction begins what is, I think, still the longest stretch of four-track main line in Britain, the 75 miles to St. Pancras, and since the later extension from Bedford to St. Pancras this is without much doubt the busiest main line to the north. The night-shift, which I have often watched, at Kettering is much busier than the day.

The line was built cheaply, at a rate of £15,000 a mile, and when goods lines were added in 1879 they were on easier gradients, so that the passenger between Glendon and Bedford sees the goods lines now above, now below him. For Kettering the line must have come almost in the nick of time. Nowadays one hears much of declining trade in Kettering, of shops standing empty in the High Street in consequence of the development of Corby's town centre, of the disappearance of its heavy industry (the Kettering Furnace chimneys were demolished on the same day that the town celebrated its quarter-century as a borough). These setbacks pale into insignificance beside the town's plight a century and a half ago, as depicted in Mr. Seyton's edition of Kettering Vestry Minutes, Vol. VI. of the publications of this Society. In 1821 half the population of Kettering (then 5,000) were in receipt of parish relief, and there was so little work that wages were at times even less than the dole itself, while dirt, disease and malnutrition took an increasing toll. I have seldom read so dismal a tribute to the good old days.

So eager were the landowners to have the railway that a Mr. Whitbread, through whose estates the line would run for seven or eight miles, promised to sell all the land the Company might require for £70 an acre, which was its simple agricultural value—in itself an astonishing change of attitude. The existence of iron ore along the line was known, but it is curious that the full exploitation of the rich fields round Desborough, Kettering, Burton Latimer and Wellingborough was incidental; it does not seem to bulk largely in any early statement about traffic, and as late as 1836 people had been boring near Northampton in the vain hope of coal and neglecting the rich veins of ore near the surface.

23 F. S. Williams, op. cit., p. 139.
24 ib., p. 378.
Both passengers and merchants from the north would breathe more freely when the line was opened, since three hours' delay at Rugby on the way to Euston had been a common experience, and queues of coal trains up to five miles long had been known at Rugby. Passengers to London went on from Bedford to the Great Northern line at Hitchin, and soon found that they were out of the frying pan into the fire; but at any rate one did not now travel from Kettering to Leicester by Wellingborough, Northampton and Rugby or Wellingborough, Peterborough and Stamford. A monograph awaits its author on the growth of the small boot-manufacturing towns of central Northamptonshire, Desborough, Rothwell, Burton Latimer, Finedon, Irthlingborough, Raunds—which all seemed to reach a population of 4,000 or thereabouts and then stop growing. Aristotle laid down the optimum size for a democratic city-state as 5,000; perhaps there is something in this.

When we come to the Great Central it is to marvel afresh at the power of the individual in the 19th century. As its most distinguished historian remarks, the London extension of the M.S. & L. was due almost entirely to the mule-like obstinacy of Sir Edward Watkin, now virtual dictator of half a dozen railway companies and the Railway King of the later Victorian era. He was dreaming of a line to London thirty years before, and in 1871 a bill was actually before Parliament for a line from near Doncaster to Rushton, possibly to join at Rushton with the Metropolitan, which was not averse from doing a deal with the M.S. & L. over coal traffic to London, but which at this time was no further north than Baker Street. At any rate Price, the chairman of the Great Northern, feared that the Metropolitan might wish to come north, and in the event this wild scheme of the M.S. & L. was thrown out and no more heard of. To think what engine-spotting might have come my way as a boy at Desborough!

The Great Central as built joined the Metropolitan just north of Aylesbury, and its passage through Northamptonshire is of no special significance. It is of course splendidly engineered with all the superiority of technique that sixty years had brought—there are particulars of every contract, numbers of men, engines, bricks, everything. The ruling gradient is 1 in 176, 30 feet to the mile, the long cuttings and long embankments exactly balance, every station from Finmere to Nottingham is an island, all the bridges are of blue brick and so on; but as far as our county is considered the line has been described as 'icily regular, faultily faultless, splendidly null'.

There was one spot where interesting developments took place. From Woodford Halse a line goes down to the Great Western at Banbury and has been a great boon, rendering possible through trains from the north-east to Bournemouth and the Great Western line—there was even at one time a through coach from Newcastle to Barry. This line was not put in for any such far-seeing purpose, but owes its existence to the petty enmity of two railway clerks. One, William Pollitt, eventually became General Manager of the Great Central, and the other, John Bell, General Manager of the Metropolitan, where they continued their feud. The Great Central wished to build a line under the Great Central Hotel to join the Inner Circle, by which goods traffic could pass to the south and west. Bell was so hostile to this move that in the end the Woodford-Banbury line was built so that traffic could be handed over to the southern companies at Reading. So true is it that on general or economic principles alone it is hopeless to try to understand the past.

Finally, what of the 'East-West dream' I mentioned earlier? This has taken various forms, some of which affected Weedon (was it the barracks again?). For example the Weedon and Leamington line originally formed part of a grandiose scheme for the 'rapid and increasing traffic arising from continuous lines between Lynn and Northampton, (which) demand(s) more direct and expeditious Inland communication than now exists, and this object can only be advantageously accomplished by the line of railway here proposed'. 'The In and Out Northampton traffic is performed upon lines of Railway, that impose distance and expense almost ruinous to industry'. 'One extravagant divergence, at Blisworth, is inadequately relieved by means of omnibuses, vans and various vehicles; at other points no remedy is provided'. This route would also provide railway communication with Leamington 'whose migratory population will necessarily

prove beneficial to railway interests’. But when the Weedon-Leamington line was built it carried little traffic—passengers from Leamington to London were already catered for. There was nothing from King’s Lynn.

The East-West dream also called into being the Stratford-on-Avon and Midland Junction Railway (the chances are that if you see a derelict embankment or cutting in south-west Northamptonshire it belongs to this railway). This imposing title denoted a series of bits and pieces built by different companies, each with a bigger name than the last. The Northampton and Banbury Junction, opened in 1872, reached neither Banbury nor Northampton, but ran from Blisworth to a point near Helmdon, and was meant to convey Blisworth iron ore to the furnaces in South Wales. Then came the East and West Junction Railway, opened by stages until in 1873 it ran from the Northampton and Banbury at Green’s Norton on through Moreton Pinkney, Woodford and Byfield to Stratford-on-Avon, whence yet a third company took the line a few miles more to Broom Junction near Evesham on the Midland. Finally in 1879 the Midland Railway, whose Bedford-Northampton branch was really part of the same East-West dream, interested itself in the Stratford-on-Avon, Towcester and Midland Junction Railway which ran from Ravenstone Wood Junction near Olney through Salcey Forest to Towcester, and can never have handled any passenger traffic whatever—who would join the train at Salcey Forest? So from Towcester radiated the four single lines of three railway companies—north to Blisworth, east to Olney, south-west to Banbury and west to Stratford-on-Avon. The little companies amalgamated into the Stratford-on-Avon and Midland Junction in 1908.

But the traffic never came. The Welsh furnaces began to import iron ore from Spain and of late years the main use of the 50-odd miles from Broom Junction to Ravenstone Wood was for banana trains from Avonmouth Docks to St. Pancras. Valiant efforts were made to attract traffic over this line to Stratford. A slip-coach for Woodford was provided off the 6.20 p.m. express from Marylebone to Bradford, whence connection was made to Stratford, and when in 1931 the Welcombe Hotel was opened at Stratford, Birmingham expresses to and from Euston called at Blisworth, whence a special train of one coach took an hour to do the 38 miles to or from Stratford. This service was withdrawn after a year. I travelled over the line a week before its closure to passengers in April 1952, in a raging blizzard, and I shall never forget the white empty expanses between Towcester and Moreton Pinkney.

The pull of London is so strong that none of the cross-country lines—Peterborough to Syston, to Rugby, to Northampton—has ever seemed able to rise above the status of feeder. It is still more convenient to travel from Kettering to Galashiels than to Birmingham, and the 90 miles to Worcester seldom take less than three to four hours by train, longer than the journey to Manchester or Leeds; they usually involve two changes as well, although Worcester and Kettering are on main lines of the same railway company.

I will end by making a confession: that all the things I have mentioned this afternoon are to me but a background for the long pageant, in memory and imagination, of the trains that used them; the little four-wheeled coppernobs of 1840 panting their way along the London and Birmingham, often three or four to a train and in a high wind on one occasion seven; the sparks flying during the races to Scotland in 1888 and 1895; the Silver Jubilee streaking over the Fens at 100 miles an hour; the shining crimson lake of Midland express engines; the engine Mallard running down past Tallington and into our county at 126 m.p.h. on a Sunday in 1938, the fastest speed ever attained by a steam locomotive. These are the sights and sounds that bring to life the drier details which have been my theme in this lecture.

NORMAN MARLOW.

This article is based on the lecture delivered to the Northamptonshire Record Society on October 19th 1963.

See an article by D. S. Barrie in the Railway Magazine for April 1933, pp. 235-42.
THE NORTHAMPTONSHIRE CROP RETURNS FOR 1801

In 1801 the Home Secretary, Lord Pelham, called for crop acreage returns for every parish in England and Wales. The returns for Northamptonshire are found, with Rutland, in the Peterborough Diocese papers in the Public Record Office (H.O.67/19). They are by no means complete, the 210 returns covering about 75% of the county.

The returns are the first attempt to determine crop acreages by parishes but the figures themselves are not perhaps very valuable. The acre was by no means a regularly standardised measure, and some of the clergy, who collected the figures, doubted the farmers’ estimates.

At Boughton the Rector, John Dixon wrote: “No means of ascertaining accuracy, if not quite correct I should judge it under the mark rather than over”. At Middleton Cheney, the clergyman noted: “Very improper employment for clergymen as where they draw their maintenance from tithes are unlikely to obtain a true and exact return. Besides clergy need not be degraded by such employment at a time when every ill-disposed person can open a conventicle for sedition at the very easy price of 6d.” At Everdon and Colly Weston, the farmers refused to communicate with the clergymen, and elsewhere as at Staverton it was felt that the figures underestimated the true acreage.

Whilst it is misleading to compare actual figures between parishes or assess the percentage of each parish under the plough, it is reasonable to expect that the proportions of crops in each parish are accurate. From this we can map out the major crops parish by parish. Wheat and barley were the most important major crops. Wheat was particularly important in the south-west and in the east around Oundle. Barley was the main crop in the extreme south-west around Aynho, in an irregular belt around Northampton, and in the Welland Valley where it extended into East Rutland. Oats was most common in pastoral districts, especially in the north-west pastures, extending into south-west Leicestershire. Rye however, was of little significance. The only parishes which grew more than 10 acres lie on the upper lias clays and inferior oolite close to Northampton with Naseby and Ecton most important. The Bramptons grew only 68 acres and yet in medieval times each had a field called Rye Field. At Gayton, marshings, a mixture of rye and wheat was grown, and the same mixture, called mistern, was important at Stow and Heyford, where it brought a price little inferior to wheat. Potatoes were still a garden crop and many parishes did not report any. Duston’s 64 acres was the highest.

Turnips appear to be replacing the old staples of open-field England, peas and beans. They were grown in the more progressive farming districts, around Northampton and in the Welland Valley, whereas the open-field and outlying villages still kept to peas and beans, especially in the east and south-west. Some returns include other crops in small acreages like lentils, tares, vetches and colesweed.

Further ideas about crop significance is given in the details of individual farms for Maxey and Woodford. At Maxey, all the farmers grew wheat, barley and beans but few grew anything else. At Woodford no single crop was grown by every farmer though barley was the main crop of most of them.

As in Leicestershire the clergy seemed pleased with the harvest. Good reports were made from all over the county, although the wheat had bunts in it at Maidwell and Weldon. The crops were good at Alderton but for one open-field farmer who neglected his lands. Only at Weston with Sutton is the harvest described as indifferent. We have crop yields for a number of parishes, and they seem to be about the same as the ones quoted for Leicestershire by Hoskins. At Thringdon (Finedon) they harvested 32 bushels of wheat from each acre, and 48 bushels of barley at Crick
and Wootton, but only 24 of barley at Hargrave. Oats gave 48 at Spratton, potatoes 100 at Glaston (Rutland), peas and beans 32 at Crick, turnips 97 at Finedon and rye 38 at Spratton.

There seems to be relation between the geology and the distribution of main crops. The parishes of the lower lias-clays had oats as their main crop,
middle lias—oats and wheat in the north with wheat in the south-west,
upper lias—wheat in the south-west, barley in the east and oats in the north-west,
lower oolite—barley,
upper oolite—wheat with peas and beans,
cornbrash and Oxford clay—wheat.

Amongst the notes several clergymen refer to the changes since enclosure. At Duston, two-thirds arable, 22 acres of heath which had been unproductive before enclosure were now under potatoes, and at Middleton Cheney production had increased since enclosure. At Alderton there had been an increase in grain in the old enclosures but a fall in the open fields. However at Welford much of the parish had been put down to grass since the 1778 enclosure, and Twywell reported less corn since enclosure. At Brixworth and Scaldwell the rector felt that there was too much land under grass.

There were very few parishes, except those of Northampton town, with such little arable land as many East Leicestershire parishes. Where there was little arable it occurred in old enclosed parishes like Fawsley, Stanford and Hothorpe which were parks or sheep-walks. On the other hand large arable acreages generally meant large populations, both as a source of labour and as a market. Preston’s 1704 acres being an exception for there were only 55 people in the Census of the same year.

There were a number of rather scathing comments on malpractises of landowners. Thomas Knight, the Rector of Kettering complained that: “Prices kept up by a set of wretches, who destitute of humanity combine together”. At Alderton the clergyman noted: “Bad practises of farmers who hold land in several parishes and fail to work lands properly. The middlemen are bad, especially the great farmers, use the County Banks to buy out the small farmers and then hold up corn till high prices, not cheapness just plenty”.

William Bartholomew, the Rector of Edgcott, after describing the small estate which supplied London with butter and skimmed milk to porkers says: “Price regulated by the Corn Dealers who make fortunes by speculation. Would not obligation to take out license to deal in corn above a limited quantity remedy this evil?”

However, other clergy blame the Poor Rates. At Corby they were 30s. in the pound, and some of the land could not be sown; at Chacombe the apprentices at a silk mill were badly paid and so burdened the parish, and at Twywell “small farms were abolished and poor rates much increased”.

There is much that we would like to know about farming in the Napoleonic Wars that cannot be learnt from the returns. Many parish historians will be dissappointed to find no return for their parish in my list deposited at Delapré, but nevertheless the Returns provide a valuable account, statistically and in notes, and will be more useful when all the country’s returns are analysed and the results made available.

DAVID M. CLARK.