

TRANSPORT AND SUBURBAN DEVELOPMENT IN MIDDLESEX DOWN TO 1914

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Suburbs and transport — the two ideas seem to be inseparable from each other. Suburbs, by their nature, must be accessible from their city centre; accessibility is provided by transport in its different modes; so transport is a *sine qua non*, a necessary element in suburban settlement. Some historians of suburban places seem inclined to conclude that transport *makes* suburbs, just like that; and they appear to imply that if you establish the chronology of the establishment of transport facilities then you have explained the settlement and growth of the suburb. But, while the fundamental point is indisputable — no transport, no suburb — the actual process has been nothing like a simple case of cause-and-effect. Transport has been, to vary the Aristotelian phrase, a necessary cause but not a sufficient cause. The process of events leading to the settlement of each suburb has been different: each has been in its own way unique: it calls for careful and sometimes subtle inquiry to develop a reasonable theory of why any particular place ceased to have a strong independent economic life of its own and became a full-blown suburb just when it did. This article gives some illustrations of the process as it unfolded down to 1914 with reference principally to the Middlesex suburbs of London, more especially to the north-western ones, but also mentioning certain developments in Essex across the Lea and Surrey south of the Thames by way of contrast.

In this inquiry the specific detailed story of each place is all-important. Generalisations are almost valueless — at any rate until a much more soundly-based body of underlying facts has been assembled on which to found new generalisations; and this is not yet the case. But a sketch can be provided of the development of the different transport modes, with their potential and actual consequences; this will supply a general framework, but not more than that. London suburbs are here understood as those districts linked to London by continuous or nearly continuous building, a considerable proportion of whose earning inhabitants perform their daily work outside the district in which they reside (not necessarily in the centre of London). The transport dealt with here is the daily movement of persons to and from work, not the intimately related matter of the transport of freight, which is an important but separate matter.

The most important geographical and historical fact about London and its home counties is the existence of the River Thames as a navigable waterway. There is no need to elaborate this statement: it is attested by all we know of London's early recorded history, and archaeological evidence takes our knowledge a good deal farther back into very early times. The Thames was a regular traffic route; and the earliest mention of daily conveyance of passengers to and from the city, "daily-breaders" or "commuters" as we now call them, so far found relates to the Thames: in 1636 the Privy Council, having forbidden communication between London and Hampton (where the court then was) on account of the plague, observed that

“divers Londoners obtained houses near Hampton Court and Oatlands, and these inhabit, going daily to and from London, which cannot be without great peril to their Majesties”; they were ordered to give up this practice and stop their servants going up to London.¹ This of course concerned the well-to-do, with more than one house; we are into the 18th century before we find persons of lower rank living in suburban places and working daily in London.

The Thames continued to be an important passenger transport route throughout the 18th century and into the 19th. Chiswick, Isleworth, and Twickenham, in particular, flourished as places for week-end residence, or for pleasure visits, because of the facility afforded by water-carriage; but of true suburban traffic, daily to-and-froing, it is difficult to find evidence until the steamboats came in. The first regular steamer plying on this part of the river was the *Endeavour* of 1830; by 1842 there were four companies in the business. Richmond was the up-river terminus; the locks of that time prevented steamers going above the tideway. The up-river steamer traffic, however, was never anything like as important as that down-river between London and Greenwich, Blackwall, Woolwich, Gravesend and beyond.²

There is no evidence of any regular passenger traffic carried on the Lea, Colne, or Brent rivers, or the canals of Middlesex — the well-known packet-boat on the Grand Junction, commemorated by the inn of that name at Cowley, seems to have been a summer excursion affair. It is however recorded that the canal was considered objectionable by some inhabitants of Harrow because its proximity at Greenford would tend to open up and develop the country. (Certain influential inhabitants of Harrow have been heard protesting about every successive form of transport — railway, tramway, motor bus — for the same reason.) Anyway, when the Baptist church at Byron Hill was to be opened in 1812, a canal boat brought friends, ministers, and others from London; and the Harrow school boys pelted the visitors on their return journey with mud and stones.³ But canals, though they were important for the location of certain kinds of industry, made no suburbs.

We can detect the beginnings of regular daily travel from Middlesex districts to and from London by persons other than the wealthy and their dependants quite early in the 18th century. In 1709 Edmond Skinner claimed exemption from parochial office in Enfield, where he lived, on the ground that he travelled daily to the City, where he was a haberdasher of petty wares; fifteen years later a stage-coach proprietor of South Mimms was excused from serving as high constable of Edmonton hundred because he resided chiefly at his place of business in Goswell Street and could not execute the office without prejudice to his own affairs.⁴

It is particularly difficult to form a well-considered judgement on the roads of 18th century Middlesex because practically every mention of them in the literature and records is a complaint. This cannot be helped; public services are most often mentioned to be criticised. Some of the expressions were highly critical: John Middleton, the agricultural surveyor, wrote in 1798 that the roads in Middlesex were not as bad as in Sussex — which was his way of saying that they were nearly as bad as bad could be; though some others thought that they were pretty fair. All the principal Middlesex roads were turnpiked in the first twenty years of the 18th century, so that by 1815 thirty-one per cent of its roads (the old county, that is) were turnpiked: a very high percentage, compared with Suffolk and Essex's ten per cent, Lincoln's eleven. Anyway, the main roads through the county were good enough to give rise, if not to compliments, at least to the remark that at Newport Pagnell and other places

within sixty or eighty miles of London shopkeepers were complaining that their opulent neighbours were supplying all their wants from London.⁵

The Middlesex main roads in the first thirty-five years of the 19th century were crowded with traffic of all kinds, with short-distance vehicles as well as the more glamorous (and more easily ascertainable) stage and mail coaches and waggons to and from more distant destinations. Hounslow — ‘the first posting town in the Kingdom’ — and Barnet, on the North road, and other roadside towns and villages grew prosperous on this road traffic, with all the employment it created for men and horses. But in between the great roads, lanes of sticky mud or hard-caked clay ruts persisted as the only communication with villages until unbelievably late in the century.

Roumieu’s *Ruislip*, written in 1875, says ‘It would seem impossible that such a quiet and secluded spot could exist within fifteen miles of Hyde Park Corner . . . It has dropped, as it were, from notice, and instead of being a place of importance as of old, has been passed in the race of life by smaller and less noted parishes, till it has become in fact ‘a no man’s land’.’⁶ Over on the other side of the county, it was recorded in 1873 that within the past fifty years a lady, when she intended to make a call on a friend living at East Lodge in Enfield Chase, used to send out men two or three days in advance to fill the ruts with faggots so as to enable her carriage to pass.⁷ In 1908 the by-roads in north-west Middlesex were scarcely ever passable for pedestrians before July; the lane from Harrow to Wood End, Northolt, was called alternatively Mud Lane or Love Lane.⁸ The Middlesex main roads affected only a narrow strip.

In 1831 the turnpike tolls at Whetstone were let for £7,530 a year to a lessee who must have expected to make a profit at this figure. In 1838 there was no bidding for them at the old rates.⁹ The London & Birmingham Railway was opened for traffic throughout in that year, and on its way through Middlesex it opened one station only, at Harrow. Willesden, Sudbury, and Pinner got stations in 1844, but the provision of trains was not encouraging to suburban settlement, nor was it intended to be: in 1845, three down and five up local trains on weekdays, three each way on Sundays, and only one a day for third-class passengers. The company was preoccupied with the more profitable long-distance traffic.

The Great Western out from Paddington on its way to Bristol had a station at West Drayton, for Uxbridge, when this part of the line was opened in 1838; within a year others followed at Ealing, Hanwell, and Southall. Ten years later these stations were served by eight weekday trains each way — only the 7.05 a.m. departure and 6.40 p.m. Paddington arrival had third class (the latter had started from Exeter at 6.30 a.m. and stopped at all stations). A short single-line branch to Uxbridge came in 1856.

We have a near-contemporary account of the effect of the Great Western on a Middlesex village. ‘A remarkable change for the worse took place about this time in the hitherto retired neighbourhood of Southall Green. The Railway spread dissatisfaction and immorality among the poor, the place being inundated with worthless and overpaid navigators — the very appearance of the country was altered — some families left, and the rusticity of the village gave place to a London-out-of-town character — moss grown cottages retired before new ones with bright red tiles — picturesque hedgerows were succeeded by prim iron railings, and the village inn, once a pretty cottage with a swinging sign, is transmogrified to the ‘Railway Tavern’, with its intimation gaudily set forth that ‘London Porter’ and other luxuries hitherto unknown to the inhabitants were to be procured therein.’ This seems to

support the clap-of-thunder theory about the railways turning village life upside down; but even if the authority is taken absolutely literally, it refers only to the area immediately adjacent to the line, and it is the period of construction, with the influx of navvies, that is specifically referred to, not the period after opening for traffic. In fact, between 1841 and 1851 Southall — then called Norwood Precinct for census purposes — added 308 to its population, not markedly more than the 249 in the decade 1811-21.¹⁰

The third railway in Middlesex was the line up the Lea Valley, opened in 1840 from Stratford through Tottenham and Ponders End on its way to Cambridge, with a similarly modest local service; a branch to Enfield through Edmonton was added in 1849. The Windsor, Staines & South Western, soon absorbed by the London & South Western, was opened from Richmond straight across the southern part of Hounslow Heath to Staines in 1848, with a loop through Brentford and Hounslow in 1850. The Great Northern was opened through Wood Green and Potters Bar in 1850 also; in 1868 the Midland came down through Mill Hill and Hendon; and a number of branches and extensions crawled over the northern and south-western parts of the county thereafter, the Metropolitan alone striking up through the north-west past Harrow and Pinner in the eighties. By 1900 there was still a large area untouched by railways in the angle between the Great Western main line in the south and the scissors-like pattern of the North Western and Metropolitan lines crossing below Harrow.

But the map and the chronology are far from telling us everything we wish to know about the railways' impact on individual places — indeed, they can be quite misleading if the policies and commercial attitudes of the different railway boards and managements are not brought into account. It may be stated, broadly and subject to minor qualifications, that down to the end of the 19th century the London & North Western, Great Western, and Midland Railways did not care very much about London suburban passengers, whose trains merely got in the way of their vastly more important and remunerative long-distance passenger and freight trains. In 1882, the vicar of Wealdstone said: “so far as the general aspect of the locality was concerned, they might just as well be in a remote part of Yorkshire for all the difference that their vicinity to the great metropolis brought to their comfort and convenience”.¹¹ In 1858 the London & North Western Railway had offered a first-class season ticket free for eleven years to every occupier of a new house in Harrow over £50 annual value; but in this district that was exceptional and not the rule. One suspects that the railway was more concerned with building up its local coal traffic; there was not so much as one stopping train an hour on the London & North Western Railway main line until 1879. The London & North Western Railway's own superintendent of the line, G. P. Neele, wryly recounted how one day, presumably in the 1860s, he took a train for Kilburn which did not stop there and carried him on to Harrow; it was 5 p.m. and there was no train back to London till 7.¹² But in the nineties, when Kodak had opened their factory, Wealdstone grew quickly as a working-class suburb. Farther in, Willesden, criss-crossed by railways as it was, a railway place *par excellence*, developed in an extraordinary patchy way, right down to the 1930s; it remains a mysterious story.¹³

On the other hand the Great Eastern Railway in the Lea Valley and the London & South Western south of Hounslow had much more interest in developing local passenger services; the Great Northern, with its local stations on the main line and its branches to Edgware, High Barnet, Alexandra Palace, and Enfield, tried to provide for an extensive suburban traffic

in addition to its long-distance business and nearly throttled itself in the process. There was a special feature about the Great Eastern: it was obliged to provide a workmen's service at low fares — 2d. return — from Edmonton, Tottenham, and Walthamstow to Liverpool Street under its Act of 1864 to compensate for the destruction of dwellings for the Liverpool Street extension, so those three districts were flooded with an immigration of new, low-income residents after about 1870; they were changed in population and social character very quickly as a direct result of the railway. But where relatively high fares and sparse train services prevailed, no such influx occurred. Palmer's Green and Winchmore Hill, with stations from 1871, developed very little, although there were thirty trains each way a day by 1880. The big landowners refused to sell; and Winchmore Hill station was approached along a country lane which only in 1902 was named Station Road.¹⁴ Closer in, however, at Harringay, Hornsey, and Wood Green, dense suburban settlement had arisen round the stations. In 1866 passengers waiting for the 8.45 at Hornsey station watched a hare being chased and getting away to Harringhey park;¹⁵ but in 1891 there were six times as many inhabitants as in 1861; typically clerical and lower-middle-class people, as described by Arnold Bennett (who lived there for a short time) in *Hilda Lessways*, and not the artisan, workmen's-ticket sort of people of Tottenham and Edmonton.

In the 1880s the Metropolitan and the Metropolitan District railways were pushing out fingers to the north-west and west, through Harrow to Pinner and Northwood, to Ealing and Hounslow. They were concerned almost wholly with short-distance passenger traffic; but the Metropolitan, at least, was not sanguine about the prospects — in the years after 1880 it ran without a station between Kingsbury & Neasden and Harrow, and when it did open Wembley Park station in 1894 it was to serve an amusement-park development and not in any great hope of ordinary suburban traffic. Some indication of the general pessimism about the prospects for railways in Middlesex in the second half of the 19th century can be derived from the number of schemes that were promoted and then dropped: continuation of the Shepperton branch to Chertsey Bridge, dropped in 1862;¹⁶ the Great Northern's Hertford Loop beyond Enfield, authorised in 1865 but not ready for passengers until 1910 and 1924;¹⁷ the Metropolitan's proposed branch of 1884 from West Hampstead to Hendon;¹⁸ the Harrow and Uxbridge scheme of 1882, which lapsed in 1887.¹⁹ Two funny little branches did creep into life; West Drayton to Staines in 1884/5, and Stanmore in 1890. People observing these two, and the Great Northern's Edgware branch, must have wondered what conceivable hopes of gain had induced investors to subscribe their savings for the operation of railways in these sleepy hollows.

The later nineties and the Edwardian decade brought striking changes to the Middlesex railway map which were pregnant for the future; their effects only began to be felt before 1914. The changes were created by two separate causes: one in the area of main-line railway policy, driving the Great Western, with the Great Central as a junior partner, to shorten its over-long Paddington-Birmingham run by building a new line from Old Oak Common, Acton, through Greenford and Ruislip, with a Great Central link from Neasden to Northolt Junction and a spur branch to Uxbridge; the other the technical development of electrification, which gave the impetus to the District's Ealing and South Harrow line (opened 1903), the revived Harrow and Uxbridge (1904), and the "new lines" of the London & North Western, virtually a segregated special-purpose passenger railway, which

came into use, with many new intermediate stations between Willesden and Watford, in 1912 and 1913, though electric traction did not begin until 1917.

In the Edwardian decade also the tube train entered the then county of Middlesex: in some ways its most significant transport development in this century. Golders Green, when the Charing Cross, Euston & Hampstead Railway got its Act in 1902, was regarded as only a temporary northern terminus; an Edgware & Hampstead Railway was approved in the same year, a Watford & Edgware the year after. Golders Green was reached in 1907, Hendon and Edgware (but never Watford) after the war. The causal connection between the tube railway provision and the development of the Hampstead Garden Suburb and the other Golders Green estates is very clearly established — it is almost the classic case among the London suburbs. It was rightly described in 1901 as “absolutely open country, for the simple reason that there is no means of getting to it”; building of the railway began in 1903, and development of the necessary local services, roads, drainage, and so forth, in the same year; so that every year between 1908 and 1914 more than three hundred houses were completed, with a peak of 744 in 1911.²⁰ But Golders Green was not typical of the years before 1914; the rapidity of its development, and the closeness of its link with railway transport, were characteristics of the 1920s and 1930s, and in this Golders Green was a forerunner.

The railways in Middlesex have been treated at some length because, within the area and the time limits being discussed, the railways present the most difficult and teasing problems of historical interpretation. Much briefer reference is made to the omnibuses and the tramways, but not because when they came, and particularly after petrol engines and electric traction respectively replaced the horse, they were less important than the railways; at the end of the period, indeed, the tramways may have been quantitatively more significant. But unlike the railways, their aims were undivided and straightforward: to carry as many local passengers as soon as they could. They went in to create settlement quickly in the most likely places. If you found a tram out in the country, as between Hayes and Hillingdon, or between Whetstone and Barnet, it was because someone had a reasonable hope that that stretch of line would not remain rural for long.

There were horsed tramways north of Finsbury Park and Stamford Hill up to Wood Green and Ponders End by 1887 and in the west at Acton and Chiswick; an unsuccessful experiment with steam traction in the north was ended in 1891. In the ten years 1901-11 a complete and ramified electric tramway system sprang into being covering virtually all the principal roads of inner Middlesex, running out beyond the county to Waltham Cross and High Barnet, stopping short of Harrow (the last mile or so from Wembley was as usual opposed by influential Harrovians and successfully cut short at Sudbury), reaching out in the west to Uxbridge, Hounslow, and Hampton Court.²¹ Lines were authorised but not built to Staines, Cranford, and Sunbury; Maidenhead, down the Great West Road, was just too much for the authorities to swallow. The tram, with relatively low fares (including workmen’s, which the buses never offered), good services, and inner terminals either at railway stations (usually on the Underground) or with forward connections or even through cars to the London County Council system, brought a density and type of traffic that the railways had not produced, except in the north-east. Development usually leapt forward when the electric tram came, and development of a kind (then called “cottage property”) which many of the existing ratepayers did not care to contemplate. The local elections at Ealing in 1898 were dominated by this topic; the pro-tramway faction won. Tramways did carry mobility down

the social and economic scale, and relatively low-paid workers could reside along them considerably farther away from their places of employment. The memorial to the trams is to be found in many Middlesex commercial centres — the “parades” (that is what they were almost always called) of shops with dwellings above in what may be called the “Metropolitan Electric” style of architecture. They are to be found at Cricklewood, Golders Green, Palmer’s Green, and plenty of places in between.

It is interesting to speculate how different things might have been if mechanisation had been successfully applied to omnibuses a few years before it was to tramcars; but it is wholly unprofitable. Electric trams got in first, by a very few years; so Edwardian development in the suburbs was denser and more ribbony than if the more nimble and flexible motor bus had set the pattern. There had been infrequent coaches between London and some villages off the railways, like Stanmore, throughout the 19th century; otherwise the horse buses, as at Pinner and Southgate, plied to the nearest railway station. The motor bus was not mechanically sound and financially secure until 1910, though there had been earlier motor buses in Middlesex — the London & North Western Railway’s hourly service from Harrow & Wealdstone station to Watford began in 1906.

The battles which determined which was the fittest machine and the fittest company in the London motor bus world to merit victory and survival were largely fought out along the Edgware Road as far as Cricklewood. The victor was the London General Omnibus Company, and its first route map, of March 1911, shows outer terminals at Turnham Green, Ealing, Wormwood Scrubs, Harlesden, Kensal Rise, Willesden Green, Dollis Hill (on the Edgware Road), Child’s Hill, but none in Middlesex county east of that.²² In 1912 the London General Omnibus Company’s outward expansion began, with extension to Twickenham, Southgate, and beyond Hounslow down the Bath and Staines roads. The powerful impact of the motor bus was hardly to be felt until the 1920s.

One of the most important clues to the settlement process is the availability of land. With this as a starting-point, the historian of a suburb must also consider whether developers were ready to put down investment in building; whether the respective authorities were willing to provide roads, water, and drainage; whether building-society or other forms of borrowing were at hand to enable people to purchase their houses, or alternatively whether it was attractive to build property for rent. Ilford is about 7½ miles from Liverpool Street; Wimbledon is about the same distance from Waterloo; both had stations on the main lines of railways opened by 1840; but they developed very differently. Ashted in Surrey, reasonably well served by railway from 1859, started on its real development only after 1879 when the big estate was broken up by sale, and land became far more easily available;²³ there were farms close to the station at Mottingham, 7¼ miles from London Bridge, until after the second war. The attitudes of landowners and the influential inhabitants mattered; so did soil, water, and air; and, in the end, it mattered perhaps most of all whether the tide of continuous building, having first flowed along the most obvious channels, where there were no defences against it, finally rose to engulf the remaining islands of green country, as it did at Kingsbury, for example, only in the 1930s. The Green Belt was enacted just in time to prevent the same thing happening north of Edgware. Perhaps one of the most interesting subjects for research would be the policies of the great institutional landowners in the London suburbs — not the landed families, who wanted to move away anyway or were forced to sell to raise money to pay death duties, but the colleges of the old universities, King’s at Ruislip,

All Souls in Willesden, Hendon, Kingsbury and Edgware. The example of the Dulwich College estates, on the other side of London, is instructive, but is it typical?²⁴

There may have been cases in the London suburbs where availability of houses preceded adequate transport. Certainly on the Essex side there was one which is very fully attested: north Ilford, along and above the line of the Eastern Avenue through Gants Hill, where by the early 1930s settlement had outstripped transport capacity, by any ordinary standards of 'adequacy'.²⁵ It is doubtful whether any such case could be found in Middlesex before 1914.

In sum, the local historian, when he looks at the development of transport facilities, must be very, very careful what conclusions he draws. Other things were often just as important. That is, or should always have been, self-evident. But this remains: suburban development is unintelligible unless the facilities available for personal transport are carefully ascertained and these facts used, with population figures, maps, and other kinds of evidence already mentioned, to produce a coherent account not only of what happened but also, so far as any historian can without arrogance make a judgement, *why* it happened *when* it did. Let the inquirer avoid the anachronism of supposing that effects which flowed from given causes in 1910 must equally have flowed from the same causes in 1850 or 1800. But if he remembers to be careful and humble in the face of his evidence, then transport is the key to unlock the door behind which the solution of many a suburban mystery is to be found.

NOTE

This article is based, with minor revisions, on the text of a lecture given to a local history conference held at the Harrow College of Further Education on 4 February 1978.

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