

Leicestershire Railways: Documentation and Observation

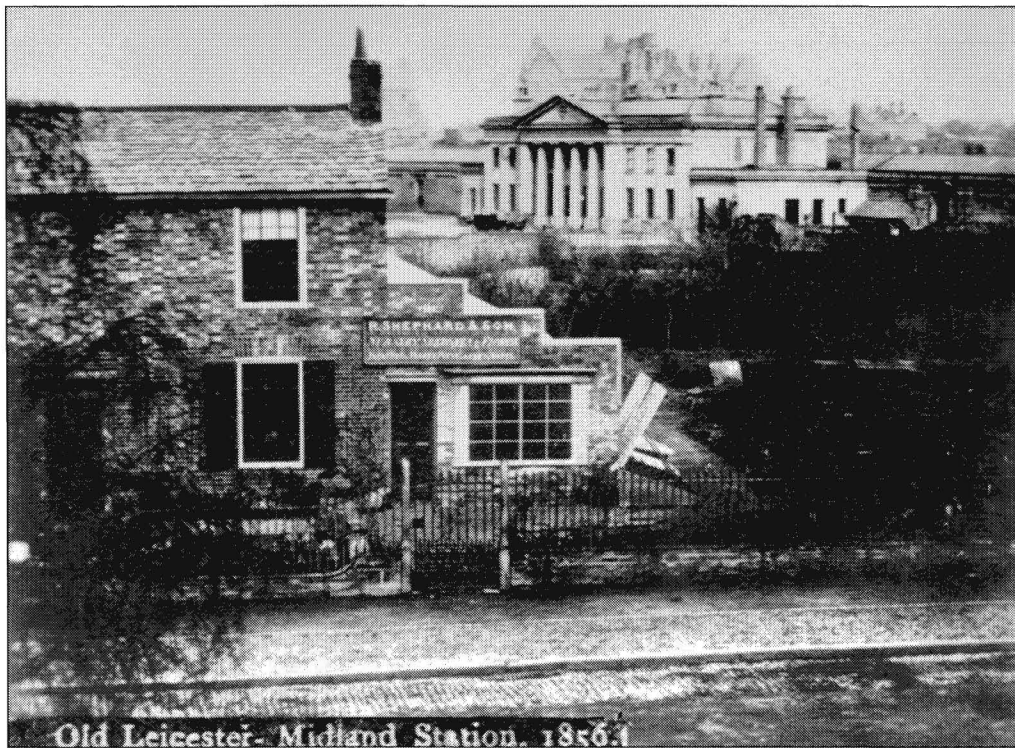
by *John Gough*

The archive of the railway industry is very rich. However, this article asserts that to study railways from the records held in that archive alone, without taking account of what is – and what was – to be seen on the ground, is to forego an important part of the totality of the evidence for the history of this industry. It takes a number of examples, primarily from Leicestershire, to show how aspects of the railway on the ground not only answer questions raised by a study of the records but also suggest significant questions to be followed up in the records.

‘Railways on the Ground’ is the title Jack Simmons gives Chapter VII of his *Railways of Britain*. The chapter marks a change of perspective, explained thus by the author: ‘We have so far examined the British railways from two points of view. Their historical development has been sketched; we have considered some of the elements that compose them and the equipment they are worked with. The object throughout has been to look at railways as a *physical fact* [my italics] and to see how they have come to assume their present form. In this chapter the method changes. We pass on here to an examination in some detail of a number of different sections of railway.’

The railways are very much a physical fact in their impact on the landscape and the townscape. Who can forget, for example, even after seeing them just once, the great viaducts across Ribblesdale or across the Welland Valley, across the Tweed estuary at Berwick, or dominating the old town of Stockport? Sometimes the impact is less splendid, as for example in the sprawl of a traditional marshalling yard or the way the railway can cut a town in half (even if what the railways did is generally as nothing in comparison with the visual and aural intrusion and pollution of motorways and other major roads). Yet it is very easy – and sometimes tempting – to study the railways without ever looking at them as a physical fact.

Here is an industry of long standing that has generated a huge archive – perhaps the richest continuous record for any single industry anywhere in the world. This is assuredly by accident rather than by any design, but it is there. By the latter part of the Victorian era the major railway companies were huge, in capital terms and by the number of staff they employed, and their tentacles spread widely. The largest were on the way to being well-nigh self-reliant. The Midland Railway, for example, not only ran its trains and maintained its infrastructure, but also had a significant civil engineering capacity, operated a large telecommunications system, was a harbour and steamship operator, had a road distribution network, built its own rolling-stock and its own signalling, could equip and furnish its stations, and ran a major hotel and catering business. The London & North Western even produced its own steel and rolled its own rails. Between the wars the Grouped railways extended their interests into bus-



1. The 1840 main building of the Campbell Street station, with its impressive classical façade, seen from the London Road in 1856. (author's collection)

operations and even into domestic air-services. The railways had an influence well beyond their immediate significance as transport-providers to the industrial revolution: they placed major demands on the labour and capital markets; they were substantial customers of the iron and coal industries; their rapacious appetite for land had a significant impact on the development of major cities. The location of junctions and workshops could create whole new communities – Crewe, or Swindon – or monopolise an old town: at the turn of the century 10,000 of the 100,000 population of Derby worked for the Midland Railway. And the railway industry has been a focus of political attention almost from its origins.

Inevitably, businesses like these generated voluminous records. Not only do railway companies seem to have been hoarders by inclination, but they also tended to stay put in the same offices over very long periods. Many of the pressures that forced a disposal of records in other industries simply did not apply to the railways. Thus at nationalisation there was an enormous historical record that could be separated out from operational material and made available to the public. The extent of the railway records means that they are of interest to a very wide range of people, professional and amateur. The railway records themselves are illuminated by the record of parliament's dealings with the railways, coverage in local and national newspapers, and all sorts of books and journals on a topic that has fascinated the public from the origins right up to the present day.

The documentation is there in abundance – more than enough for the student to be able to go off and write the history of a railway company simply from the paperwork. But to work from the records alone and not to look at the railway on the ground (or, as all too often, the remains of the railway on the ground) is to see a partial picture and to fail to encounter evidence for the answers to small but fascinating questions which may have little to do with the broad sweep of the history of a great industry but have a great deal to do with the details that fill in and enrich the picture and give it local interest. The relationship with the archive works in two directions, of course. The student can go to the records to try to find the answers to questions that have arisen from what he has seen, or he can come from the records to the ground to try to make sense of what he has been reading.

This paper is primarily concerned with Leicestershire, so the examples are taken mainly from this county, beginning in Leicester itself. Today's station is not the one opened by the Midland Counties Railway in 1840. That was William Parsons' Campbell Street station, which disappeared rather over a century ago. If you stand towards the northern end of platform two of the present station, you are probably standing on the site of the principal down platform of the old station, even though there is nothing of that first station to be seen. Indeed, there is now relatively little to indicate the one-time expanse of goods facilities just to the north, which disappeared much more recently. Yet there are things to be seen that raise questions in the mind of the curious observer. Note, for example, the strange way in which the up and down main lines kink so markedly both north and south of the station. What civil engineer worth his salt would plan anything like this?

If we assume that engineers generally adopt the most technically elegant solution – which in the case of the main lines through a station is a straight run through – then here is a question that demands to be followed up. It is not a trivial one, for it has a significant impact on the working of the railway to this day. It is also a question where trying to find answers reveals the limitations of the surviving paperwork. Although decisions that have much to do with what we see are duly minuted, there are no explanations of how those decisions relate in detail to what is on the ground, and the supporting documentation on the basis of which those decisions were taken has not survived. We have to read, look, look elsewhere, and then try to piece together an explanation to fit what we have seen.

Campbell Street station originally had just one platform, on one side of the line – a type of layout quite well known in the early days of the railways and still to be seen at Cambridge. We know this from early descriptions of the station like that in *Allen's Guide*, from the illustrations of Queen Victoria's 1843 visit in the *Illustrated London News*, and from the (very schematic) diagram of the layout that appears in the deposited plans for the 1847 Leicester & Hitchin Bill. The platform served a line additional to and on the down side of the two running lines. As early as 1846 the Midland was conscious of a lack of space, talked of the need for what it termed a 'second station' on the other side of the line, and sought powers for enlargement. Although these powers were obtained, nothing was done, as is confirmed by a *Leicester Journal* report on the opening of the Hitchin line ten years later, in 1857, which remarks that: '... the train moved up the platform (Leicester contrives to make one do the work of two)...'

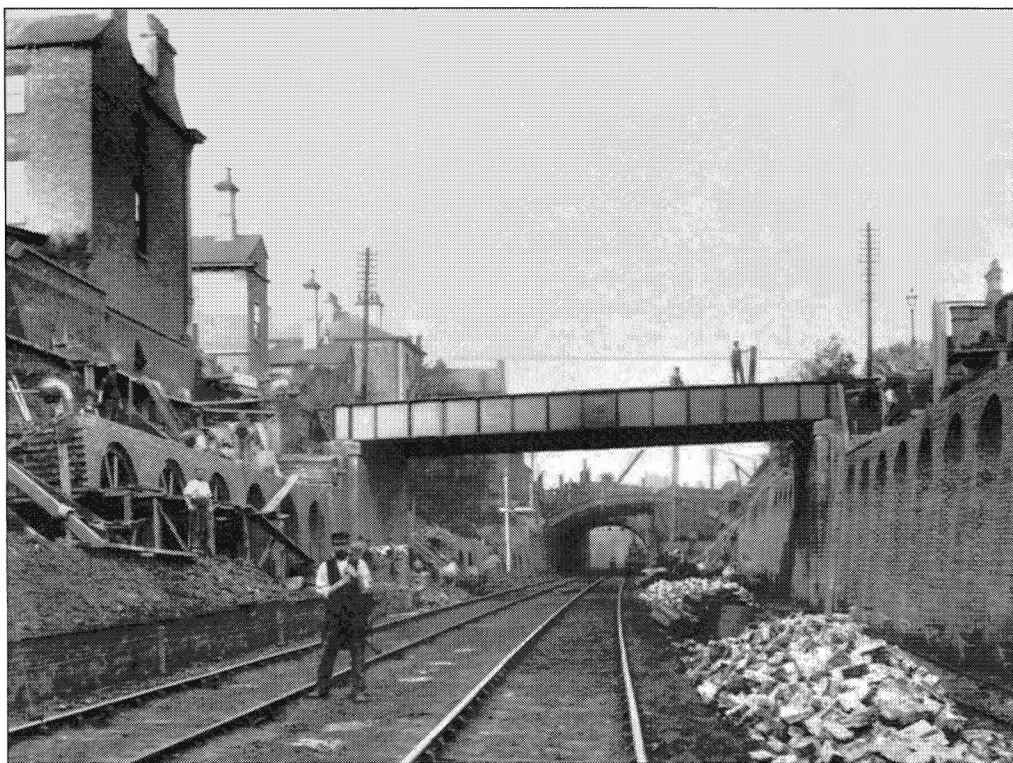
The opening of the additional route proved the spur to action. Midland records tell us that work was to be done, and they tell us how much it cost. But they do not indicate what was to be done. However, a plan in the County Record Office from October 1858 shows that there had been major changes to the track-layout. Instead of up and down main lines running clear of the platform line, the



2. This view of the new London Road station (and of St Stephen's Church still on its original site) shows clearly the two arches marked 'Departure' — as well as Trubshaw's love of *terra cotta*. (author's collection)

platform line has now become the down main line, the former down main line has become a siding, and the up main line now serves a platform face. The north-end kink we still see comes from that change of use of the lines in front of the Campbell Street station building 140 years ago. There is thus a perfectly logical explanation to something that at first sight must arouse curiosity. (There is, however, no such logical explanation for why things were not improved during the re-signalling works undertaken in the mid-1980s.)

A glance across towards Conduit Street shows a curious excrescence of brickwork in the side of the railway's cutting. What is it, and why is it there? This is the point at which Upper Fox Street bridged the railway. The bridge was a very early one which may well have originally been an occupation bridge to connect portions of land owned by Millicent Fox and severed by the construction of the line. By the time the Midland came to rebuild its premises in the 1890s (thus creating London Road station as we know it), Derby Street had long since been built, at right-angles from Upper Fox Street just before the railway and running into Sparkenhoe Street. The corporation took the view that, instead of having the Upper Fox Street bridge replaced during the rebuilding of the station, it would prefer a bridge on a new alignment. Plans were prepared, originally for a curved bridge. But by the autumn the corporation had changed its views and instead of a curved bridge into Sparkenhoe Street it now suggested a straight bridge, with steps up to it from Constitution Hill. There was also to be a nine-foot-wide footway, along the workhouse land, connecting the new bridge with Hutchinson Street. All this was done, and the corporation contributed to the costs. It can all still be seen, though the footway has been modified somewhat. So why that brick excrescence? It shows the point at which Upper



3. This picture shows the widening works in progress south of Leicester station. The station signalbox, on the other side of the London Road, can be seen in the distance. The New Walk tunnel is still in place, with the steel arch for the replacement bridge being built on the south side, and the Princess Street bridge is already in place. The picture shows how the widening work is on the east side towards the station but is moving across to the west side at the point from which the photograph is taken.

(Photograph courtesy of National Railway Museum, York)

Fox Street was rounded off into Derby Street, right up against the boundary of the railway land.

If you now look up at Swain Street Bridge, you will see what look rather like buttresses on both sides of the railway. Look south, and you can see openings in the brickwork of the London Road buildings immediately above the ends of the platform (one of these now serving the football steps, the other having been in recent use for the temporary ramp provided during repairs to the main footbridge). Out on the London Road, two of the entry-arches to the station have 'Arrival' inscribed above them and two have 'Departure'. Nothing that I know of in the written records will explain any of this, and none of it seems to make much sense in the way the station is used today, but maps, plans, and pictures provide the answer. The station had north-end access, with stairs from the platforms up to the Swain Street bridge. I have found no description of what facilities were available, or details of when they were closed. The design of the south end was more complicated, but it showed advanced thinking. Passengers arriving by rail made their way to the extreme south end of the platforms, where staircases took them up to those openings in the wall. They got into their cabs, which left the station under the 'Arrival' arches. Passengers joining trains entered under the 'Departure' arches, were

dropped off by their cabs, and made their way into the booking-hall, where they booked their tickets at the separate Midland and London & North Western booking-offices before making their way down to the platforms by way of the present footbridge. Parcels traffic was handled on another bridge. There was a complete segregation of flows. The corporation, incidentally, tried to have a say in how passengers should get to and from the platforms. It maintained that an incline would be preferable to steps, for the safety and comfort both of the old and of the very young, but this civic view came too late: the Midland had already firmly decided to stand by its original decision to opt for steps down to the platforms, and those steps are still there.

The problem of the south-end kink in the running lines may also be resolved by observation. The old station was shorter than the present one: there was space between its south end and the London Road overbridge for a signalbox and a junction with the goods lines. The two-track railway then curved gently away to the south in a cutting, through a short tunnel under New Walk, and on to the Knighton Tunnel. The Midland was a successful company and by the 1870s it had to start building additional lines to keep its ever-increasing (and slow) goods traffic clear of passenger trains. Over a forty-year period major sections of the main lines were widened. Between Welford Road and London Road new passenger lines were built on the west side of the railway and the old passenger lines were made the goods lines. On the curve at the Welford Road end the transition into the new tracks could be gentle, but at the London Road end the switch back to the old alignment was much more difficult, and this created the kink we now see. Why did the Midland do it this way? The company records provide no answer, but I should like to suggest that a look at the surroundings may.

First thoughts of extra tracks in this section came up in mid-1870, when the widenings both north and south of Leicester were also in the air. These latter were completed in 1874 and 1875, when two goods lines were provided between Wigston and Knighton and between Leicester and Redhill. As to Leicester itself, James Allport commented during the 1873 parliamentary hearings into proposals for railways in East Leicestershire that it would be very costly to quadruple the line here, though he noted that the task would have to be undertaken one day. (The problems of Leicester and the cost of solving them by widening the line south of the station itself are probably the reason why the company considered in 1875 the construction of a loop-line around the town.) By the time the railway came to undertake the widening in the early 1890s, burials had begun in the cemetery not only on the 'upper' side of the bottom path but also on the narrow strip of land between that path and the railway. To widen on that side would have involved disturbing quite new graves. I want to suggest – with no evidence to offer, as I have not been able to find papers dealing with any discussion of this issue – that this, rather than the somewhat easier topography, is most likely the reason for choosing the west side for the widening works over this short section and thus effectively forcing the creation of a kink at the station end. Photographs in the collection now at York show very clearly the way in which the widening works move from one side of the line to the other side in the New Walk cutting.

At New Walk the corporation took an interest in the works, as it had done fifty years previously. The arrangements agreed for the widening included an open cutting on the site of the New Walk tunnel, but there was to be a covered space of twenty feet on the north side of the New Walk to correspond with that already there on the south side. The tops of these spaces were to be kept planted with trees and shrubs by the railway company – the trees which could be seen until the Leicester City Council's Waterloo Way 'improvement' works. (At the same time the corporation stipulated that the

Lancaster Road bridge should have parapets with a panelled design, white brick walls for the piers abutting onto the roadway, and a width of forty-four feet. The Welford Road bridge was to be forty feet wide, the portion over the Cattle Market Siding to be kept in repair by the corporation. A walk in the area will shew the agreement between the reality and the specifications.)

There was once a short branch in this area of which not a trace seems now to remain. In July 1868 the Royal Agricultural Society held its annual show in Leicester, on the racecourse (Victoria Park). In connection with this event the Midland and the London & North Western Railways built a half-mile siding from a junction with the main line 29 chains (approximately $\frac{3}{8}$ of a mile) north of Knighton North Junction (virtually at the site of Cattle Market Sidings signal box, brought into use in early July 1873 to serve the new cattle market) up to the Agricultural Show Yard, over which heavy machinery and other exhibits could be taken directly to the exhibition-site. In curving up to the racecourse the line must have run across what is now the newer part of the cemetery – and it must have climbed on quite a steep gradient. This siding was demolished again on the conclusion of the show. Also built for the show, but in this case surviving for general use afterwards, was the third platform of the old Leicester station, provided with a direct bridge connection to the London Road so that show-visitors might have the shortest possible walk up the hill to the main entrance to the show-ground at the corner of Victoria Park.

There is one other feature in this area that merits mention. The sharp-eyed observer will still see a few traces of construction on the down side of the line between Knighton tunnel and the Welford Road bridge, and some may even remember seeing a long-disused platform at this point until its removal in July 1985 to allow landscaping works to take place. They may well have wondered what this platform on one side of the line only was for. It has an interesting history. Pressure for a station in this area began in 1872 when one Mr Swann wrote to the Midland asking for a train from Burton to stop on market-days at the sidings by the new cattle market. The answer was no. Then at the beginning of 1874 the corporation urged the railway company to provide stations in the Welford Road, at or near the cattle market, and at Humberstone Road. Within two months sketches for stations had been approved, and an alighting platform was duly provided at the Welford Road, served from November 1874 by a number of morning trains on the various lines coming into Leicester from the south and west. Over the years the number of calls was cut back, but final closure did not come until February 1918. There were never trains in the reverse directions. Presumably those attending the market were thought capable of walking the short distance to the main station for their return – or maybe it was felt that after their transactions in the market they might well have business, of one sort or another, in the town. Anyway, that is why there are no relics of any platform on the up side of the line. (The other station requested, at Humberstone Road, was duly opened in July 1875. It proved to be the last Midland station opened in Leicester. There is still visual evidence to indicate its former presence.)

Away from the immediate area of Leicester itself but not very far to the north is the location of a long-vanished station on the original Midland Counties line, at Cossington. The road-layout has clearly been changed to accommodate a bridge that cannot have been original, which may be enough to raise questions. But of the fact that there was once a station, there is no evidence. A minute from October 1845 reads: 'Platforms to be laid down at Cossington Gates.' The Rugby to Derby table in Bradshaw for November 1845 first mentions Cossington Gate in that December: 'On Saturdays, the

2 45 p.m. train from Leicester, will put passengers down at Cossington Gate.’ ‘On Saturday the 8¹/₂ a.m. train will take up Passengers at Cossington Gate for Leicester.’ Saturday calls at Cossington Gate by one or two trains in both directions continue to be shewn by a footnote in Bradshaw, but unlike Countesthorpe station to the south (which began the same way, as a stop for one Saturday train each way to and from Leicester at Countesthorpe Gate House) this stopping-place never became a regular station. However, the platforms were widened, along with those at Long Eaton in 1849 – so clearly there once were platforms of some sort. And a minute of 1865 tells us: ‘Thornton Platform / Ordered / Tenders be obtained for constructing improved platforms at Thornton Station similar to those erected at Cossington Gate.’ By the autumn of 1873 there were calls by the 7.40 a.m. train from Derby to Leicester and the 4.15 p.m. train from Leicester to Derby and Nottingham only. Closure appears to have come with effect from 1 October 1873, as a result of the widening of the line and the provision of a bridge – which accounts for the road layout we see today. Minute No. 18579, 5 August 1873, of the Traffic Committee reads: ‘A statement was submitted shewing the receipts at the Cossington Gate Station for the five months ending May to be £3:0:7., and it was explained that when the Bridge, which it is proposed to construct there in connection with the widening of the line, is carried out, it would not be necessary to keep a man at that place. / Resolved that as the receipts are so small, the Station be closed when the Bridge is completed.’ No traces of any platforms are to be found at Cossington Gate today, and no records indicate precisely where they were located. However, at milepost 105¹/₂ are the remains of a level crossing that has been replaced by a bridge slightly to the north, and this seems the most likely site. The former crossing is about 2 chains south of the 105¹/₂ milepost, and the bridge is about 2 chains north of that milepost. This appears a much more likely site than the next bridge to the south, at 105³/₁₆ miles, where there are no signs of any earlier level crossing.

At Market Harborough, on the southern border of Leicestershire, the station stands out as markedly different architecturally from the others on the Leicester & Hitchin line, and it lies on a short section of railway that throws up a whole string of questions for the interested observer. Why does the Midland line go up and over the remains of the line to Stamford? What is the disused alignment that curves so clearly through the land now used by a riding-school? Why are the two parts of at least one bridge of different materials? What has happened with the levels of road and houses at Great Bowden? And why is that station building so very different from the others? Observation suggests that interesting things are likely to have happened here, and investigation does not disappoint.

By the time the Midland came to build the Leicester & Hitchin line, money was very tight, and the company decided that at Market Harborough it would use a short section of the existing Rugby & Stamford line along with its station rather than build another set of facilities. The section of old railway through the riding-school is the old main line leading to what was once Great Bowden Junction. The Midland line diverged again at another junction at the south end of the old Market Harborough station (which lay a little north of the present one). By the 1880s this layout was finally no longer acceptable and a major redevelopment was undertaken. The Midland line was taken over the Stamford line by the bridge we see, down on the east side, and then through the Great Bowden area on a new pair of tracks. The level crossing was removed, and the stubs of the old road on both sides show where it was. A completely new station with separate platforms for the two companies was built for their joint use, the architect apparently being the LNW’s engineer Francis Stevenson. It was – and remains – distinctive.

The Leicester & Hitchin line continues south into Northamptonshire, where the two



4. This view of Wellingborough (looking north) shows the original ironwork of the canopy on the down (northbound) platform and the much newer work on the island platform serving the up line.
(author's collection)

major towns served are Kettering and Wellingborough, both of them with interesting stations. At Kettering the buildings and canopies of platforms two, three, and four all appear to go together stylistically, with the same type of partly-wooden buildings and the same quite elaborately-ornamented ironwork for the canopies. The buildings on platform one are quite different. They are clearly newer, and they clearly have something in common with the road-level buildings at Leicester which survive from the 1890s station. At Wellingborough, it is obvious that the ironwork of the down main platform and the station's main buildings (including the derelict goods shed) are old, and both features of the building and the design of the ironwork are the same as at Kettering. The up platform has different buildings and a completely different style of canopy.

These are cases where the records offer clear answers to the questions that arise in the observer's mind. Kettering's original platforms were today's slow-line platforms (numbers one and two). (Incidentally, there is a certain linguistic interest here: there were two pairs of lines through Kettering from 1879, and they were certainly known as 'fast lines' and 'slow lines' by 1880; this is one of the very earliest instances of the use of this terminology.) When the line was widened, the additional tracks were added on the up side except for the short section through Kettering station itself. So two additional platforms had to be built to serve the new fast lines, on the down side. The ironwork for the canopies on these new platforms was clearly made to replicate that already in place on the existing platforms (one of which was turned into an island). We can be sure of this because it is the same as the original ironwork at Wellingborough (as confirmed by a set of 1858 drawings in the Public Record Office). At the time the Board of Trade's inspecting officer commented on some unsatisfactory features of the old work



5. And this view of Kettering shows how the ironwork on three of the four platforms is identical to that on Wellingborough's northbound platform. Also to be seen is the quite different new work on the extreme right-hand side (the architect for this being Charles Trubshaw, who was also responsible for Leicester London Road station). (author's collection)

that had been retained, including the very low original platform. When this part of the station was rebuilt some twenty years later, there was no respect for what was already there. Charles Trubshaw, the company architect (who was also responsible for Leicester station), built in his typical red brick and *terra cotta* style and used a completely different style of canopy. An interesting survival at Kettering, probably from the 1870s rebuilding, is the very narrow subway connecting the outer platforms with the main building – now supplemented (autumn 2000) by a new footbridge.

The Wellingborough buildings present us with the reverse case. The station itself is an excellent survival of one of the larger Leicester & Hitchin stations, as the 1858 drawings show. Since the buildings were on the down side, they were not affected by the widening, and there has been no cause to replace them since. However, in this case there was change on the up side. Construction of the Higham Ferrers branch meant that the goods lines between Irchester and Wellingborough had to be made passenger lines and had to be provided with platforms in Wellingborough station. The work was done in 1893–4, shortly before the new main buildings at Kettering went up, and it shows as little sympathy for what was already there. The up platform was converted into an island, and the footbridge was extended. But look at the different style of canopy and look at the different architecture on that island platform. The present rather intrusive footbridge is a product of much more recent times.

Kettering and Wellingborough have another apparently puzzling feature in common. In both places the railway curves, considerably and seemingly unnecessarily. The reasons go right back to the promotion of the railway south from Leicester towards Bedford. In the Railway Mania of the mid-1840s there were basically two competing schemes, the Leicester & Bedford Railway, and the South Midland Railway. South of Market Harborough the Leicester & Bedford was planned to take a straight line from Braybrooke

to Pytchley, just south of Kettering, passing that town quite well to the west. The South Midland route was from Braybrooke via Desborough and then past Kettering on the eastern side and on to Pytchley. Although the Midland Railway obtained an Act for a Leicester & Hitchin line in 1847, nothing was done. The scheme was resurrected at the start of the 1850s, and in 1852 the engineer Charles Liddell examined the plans again for the company. He tells us explicitly that he looked at the 1845 and 1846 plans and that in general he preferred those of the South Midland, including the Harborough to Kettering section, even though there was a distance penalty. However, he proposed to modify the line to pass to the west of Kettering instead of the east. It is this decision to change the route in Kettering, coupled with the need to minimise costs during construction, that has given the string of curves that we see today.

The explanation of the severe curve through Wellingborough also goes back to the competing schemes. Anyone walking from the station to the town-centre knows that Wellingborough cannot boast a well-located station – the fine church you see up on the hill near the station is not the old town-centre church but rather one built to serve the built-up area that spread towards the station. (The town's other station, on the Northampton & Peterborough line, was no better located.) The observer can also see how, although the railway goes through a great curve at this point and through quite a major cutting, a nearly-straight alignment across the fields is still available – over which a better-routed railway with lighter earthworks could have been built. Had this been done, today's fast trains would be passing Wellingborough today at 110 m/h rather than slowing to a miserable 65. The *Railway Chronicle* in September 1846 tells us that there was a meeting in Wellingborough to drum up support for the South Midland scheme. George Hudson, chairman of the Midland (and known as the 'Railway King') had met a deputation from the town to talk about the site for a station. He now said he could bring the station at least 600 yards closer in than the members of the deputation had been requesting. This would cost an additional £30,000 to £40,000, said he, but it was not his policy to save in the first instance and sacrifice in the end the best interests of the company and the public. This crude purchase of support has meant that main-line passengers have been paying in the form of extra journey-time and the railway has been paying in terms of additional fuel-costs ever since. Hudson would have brought the station even closer in than it is. But costs were cut in the 1853 scheme, with an outcome that is not really satisfactory to anyone.

The collection of plans already referred to also shews design-details for smaller stations on the Leicester & Hitchin line. Unfortunately, not many of these survive, but what there is repays observation. Wigston was rebuilt at the turn of the century, when the level crossing was abolished, and it has now vanished. The main buildings of Great Glen and Kibworth survive, as do those of Desborough and Glendon, and a number of others. The most interesting aspect is that although the designs are the same, the materials are different. The stations were mainly executed in brick (which would have been made locally), but Desborough and Glendon are both in stone, and in different stones at that. Each uses the material excavated nearby when the line was being built, so Desborough is in the local ironstone, but Glendon, only a few miles to the south, is in the local limestone.

When the Leicester & Hitchin line was built, it was just a branch line. However, within a relatively short time the London & Bedford line was built and this branch became part of the Midland's route from London to the north. The visual evidence remained clear at Bedford until the end of the 1970s: the station stood at an angle to the main line, and trains calling at Bedford seemed to make a detour to reach it. The

explanation is that the sharp curve created where the London & Bedford line turned away from the Leicester & Hitchin line became a major nuisance, and in the 1890s it was eliminated by new construction. However, platforms were not provided on the new Bedford Curve and trains calling had to negotiate their way over the old lines – a problem not remedied in the rebuilding of the early 1980s and only solved (in the northbound direction only) in 1999.

There is another sharp curve at the northern end of the Leicester & Hitchin line, at Wigston, because, of course, the original main line ran straight ahead to Rugby at this point. The Hitchin line was a branch, and high speeds were not envisaged. The Wigston curve came about not just from the standard considerations of the time but also from one more of those cost-saving decisions of 1852. The Leicester & Bedford plans envisaged a railway that would have run on past Wigston and across the Midland line at the Aylestone Road cutting in order to continue to the Leicester & Swannington line, and there would have been a connection just before crossing the Midland down into that line. Liddell looked at the question of keeping the junction at Wigston, as in the South Midland plans and the 1847 plans, or going on to Knighton, which would have given a better alignment and shortened the distance by about half a mile. Unfortunately, he opted for Wigston, because the saving in distance by going to Knighton would have been offset by much heavier and more costly earthworks. Older passengers will remember the low speed around the Wigston curve. A generation ago British Railways undertook a major re-alignment, for which the keen-eyed observer can still see evidence on the ground.

There are also interesting curves at Glendon, at Manton, and at Melton (to take just those in this area). The early 1870s saw considerable competition between the Midland, the Great Northern, and the Manchester, Sheffield & Lincolnshire companies for powers to build railways in East Leicestershire, and both the Great Northern and the Midland obtained construction powers. The Midland's were for lines from Glendon to Manton and from Melton to Nottingham – together forming an alternative route between Kettering and the south and Nottinghamshire and the north. This alternative route was at first planned principally for coal and goods traffic, and the sharp curves at the junctions did not pose any real problems for such traffic. But by 1880 the Midland had decided to use it for a new express service between London and Bradford, and the curves mattered. That at Glendon was improved on re-laying in October 1894. The Manton curve was dealt with much more drastically as early as April 1886, when the line south to Kettering was made the main line through the layout at the expense of the line towards Peterborough. Later the same year the Melton Junction curve received attention, though not on quite such a scale, in the form of a £1,500 re-alignment. Eight years later the board agreed to go to parliament for powers for a new curve at this point, but this was never done. At Nottingham there was no need to act – the severe curve there was so close to the station that the low speeds were of very little consequence.

The above survey draws attention to a number of features in one area where looking at the railway seems to raise questions that a study of the records can then illuminate – and where looking at the railway makes it much easier to understand things that are hard to grasp from the handwriting of the minute-books or the reports of the Board of Trade's inspectors. 'The object throughout has been to look at railways as a physical fact and to see how they have come to assume their present form,' said Jack Simmons. What he wrote forty years ago seems to me to remain excellent advice for a rewarding and absorbing study.

*The work by Jack Simmons referred to at the beginning and end is: *The Railways of Britain, An Historical Introduction*, second edition, Macmillan, London 1968 (see page 186). This paper is based very largely on records of the Midland Railway Company which are now held at the Public Record Office in the class RAIL 491. It also draws on an essay on the history of Leicester's principal station for which the reference is: John Gough, 'Leicester (London Road) Station' in Daniel Williams (ed), *The Adaptation of Change*, Leicestershire Museums Publications No. 18, 1980, pages 93–113.*

Personal details

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