

THE MARKET HARBOROUGH STATIONS THAT NEVER WERE

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Whilst attempting to obtain information on land ownership in the parish of Great Easton, an examination of deposited railway plans and reference books in the Leicestershire Record Office revealed that during the 'Railway Mania' of 1845 there were a number of schemes projected which involved lines running along or across the Welland Valley, most of which passed near to Market Harborough.

One of them, the Rugby and Huntingdon Junction Railway, was projected from the then London and Birmingham Railway (later LNWR) at Rugby station to a junction with the London and York Railway (later the Great Northern Railway) at Great Stukely, about a mile and a half north of Huntingdon. This particular railway was to have taken a route south of Harborough, *via* Welford, Husbands Bosworth, Sulby, Naseby, Clipston, Kelmars, Arthingworth, Harrington, Thorpe Underwood, Rothwell, Thorpe Malsor, Cransley and Broughton. There would, however, have been a branch to Stamford, which would have circled Harborough to the north. The junction was in the parish of Clipston, and the line would then have run through Thorpe Langton, Weston, Medbourne, Drayton, Bringhurst, Great Easton and thence down the valley to Stamford. Market Harborough obviously had an interest in this railway as one of the solicitors was James Ley Douglass of that town.

The Rugby and Stamford Railway was intended to run from the London and Birmingham Railway near Rugby station to a junction with the Syston and Peterborough Railway west of Stamford. This railway was to run through the southern outskirts of Market Harborough. It was engineered by Robert Stephenson and Charles Liddell, notable railway engineers. It took a line almost identical to that later followed by the LNWR sponsored Rugby and Stamford line. The latter railway built a station for Harborough on the eastern

edge of the town, near the church of St Mary-in-Arden. It was later to become a joint station when the Midland Counties Railway (by that time the Midland Railway) extended its line southwards from Leicester.

One ambitious line, though it invaded the Welland Valley, ignored Harborough completely. This was the Northampton, Lincoln and Hull Railway, for which the surveyor was J U Raistrick. The line left Northampton by means of a tunnel at Abington and headed north-east for Kettering by way of Sywell and Broughton. It then turned northwards through Weekley, Geddington and Great Oakley, reaching the Welland Valley through a long tunnel which came out at Cottingham. It then ran through Great Easton and Caldecott to Seaton. Here the line turned northwards and followed, roughly, the course of the later Kettering to Nottingham line of the Midland Railway as far as Oakham. It then headed north-east for Grantham and Lincoln. This was the only projected railway planned to pass through the parish of Great Easton, which did not take more or less the same line as the 1850 Rugby and Stamford Railway as built. It is an interesting project for a Great Easton historian, because it reveals the names of the local Surveyors of the Highways in 1845.

Another railway with ambitions was the Boston, Stamford and Birmingham Railway. Strangely enough Boston was reached by a branch line. The main line was actually intended to run from a junction with the Midland Railway (later the Midland Counties Railway) at Wigston to Wisbech, *via* Great Glen, Kibworth, Church Langton, Ashley, Medbourne, Brighthurst, Caldecott, Seaton, Ketton, Stamford, Barnack, Helpston, Eye and Thorney. The Boston branch left the main line at Peakirk and followed almost exactly the later Great Northern branch from Werrington Junction. The engineer was the distinguished railway pioneer Charles Vignoles.

The Boston, Stamford and Birmingham did, however, make provision for a Market Harborough branch. This left the main line at Church Langton, trailing away in a southerly direction, then running north of the river Welland. It ran south of St Mary-in-Arden, swung north of St Mary's Road and terminated north-east of St Dionysius' Church. The station would have been roughly on the site now bounded by High Street, Church Square and Roman Way. In those days it was an area of small yards, Burgess's, Miller's (or Stiles, Platford's or Elliott's) and Eland's. It was a mixture of industrial and domestic property. Thomas Scott owned much of the land on which the station would have been built.

It would have been more convenient for the inhabitants of Market Harborough to have a station in the centre of the town and the Fenland produce would

have been welcome. In due course, no doubt, the Boston, Stamford and Birmingham or the Midland would have run through-trains to Leicester. The number of Harborians who wished to travel to Boston or Wisbech, however, must have been minimal, especially as the journey involved a change of trains at Langton.

The scheme apparently never got further than the submission of plans. The terminus would probably have been a small one with two platforms and an overall roof. It would have opened up the area of small courts, as the Company would have wanted an open space in front of the building. It would most likely have been either Railway Italianate or Railway Gothic.

There was one other 1845 scheme affecting Market Harborough. This was the resurrection of a railway projected nine years earlier, in 1836. The main line of the South Midland Counties Railway, which was engineered by Francis Giles, would have left the London and Birmingham Railway at Courteenhall, near Road, where the present Northampton line diverges, then passed through Northampton, Kelmash, Market Harborough and Kibworth, to a junction with the Midland Counties near Leicester. There would have been a branch to the Leicester and Swannington Railway and another to Stamford. The Bill had a first reading in the Commons but the whole scheme collapsed for lack of financial support. There was, incidentally, another proposal in 1836 for a cross-county railway from Harborough. This was the Cambridge Transverse Railway, which reached Cambridge *via* Kettering, Huntingdon and St Ives. This railway too never materialized.

The 1845 revival of the South Midland Counties Railway seemed to be destined to succeed. It followed the course of the earlier scheme, it had the backing of both the London and Birmingham and the Midland Railways and, finally, it had the great George Hudson as its chairman. Clearly he was keen to extend his Midland Railway empire. The scheme included a branch to Bedford, Hudson's first move towards London. The latter project probably temporarily sealed its fate, as it was rejected by the Commons Committee.

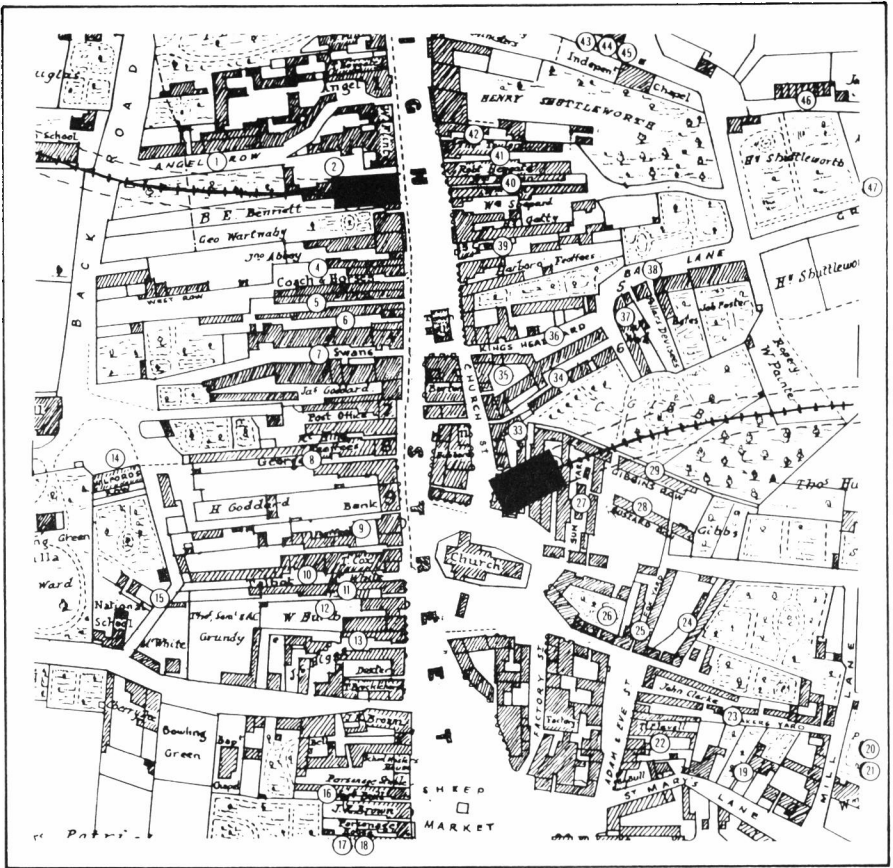
It is interesting to note the subsequent history of the scheme. It was taken over by the Midland Railway and the main line was then projected to run from Leicester to Hitchin *via* Bedford, with the Northampton line merely a branch. Another branch ran from Pytchley to Huntingdon. This scheme also failed to get through Parliament. It was not until 1853 that the Midland Railway reached Hitchin and another ten years before the Bedford to St Pancras line was opened.

The proposed line of the South Midland Counties Railway more or less followed the course of the subsequent Northampton to Market Harborough line but swung away to the west as it approached Harborough and went through the parishes of Arthingworth, Great and Little Oxendon, Little and Great Bowden, Lubenham, Foxton, both Kibworths, Burton Overy, Great Glen, Newton Harcourt and Wigston. There was a branch from Lubenham which went down the valley to Stamford passing, incidentally, much closer to the village of Great Easton than the line built in 1850. The important thing is that the inhabitants of Market Harborough were not expected to walk to Lubenham to catch a train; provision was made for a short branch to a terminus in the town. The branch actually left the main line by a trailing junction convenient for passengers from Leicester but involving a change for travellers to the south. Presumably there would have been a station at the junction, which was in line with a continuation of Gardiner Street, on the other side of the canal from The Woodlands. The line then curved round and headed straight for the High Street, terminating in Angel and Dairy Yards. The station would, again, probably have been a two-platform affair with a short train shed.

If things had turned out differently, therefore, Harborough might never have been on a main line railway reached from a station on the outskirts of the town. It could have had two small termini, useful for travelling to Leicester and not much else. In any event, both would probably have been closed in the Beeching cuts of the 1960s and the station sites re-developed.

Sources:

Deposited Plans and Reference Books at Leicestershire Record Office, QS 73/	
South Midland Counties Railway	/16
Northampton, Lincoln and Hull Railway	/70
Rugby and Huntingdon Junction Railway	/76
Stamford, Market Harborough and Rugby Railway	/78
Boston, Stamford and Birmingham Railway	/82 & 83
Rugby and Stamford Railway	/100



The sites of the two Market Harborough stations projected in 1845, the South Midland Counties Railway High Street station and the Boston, Stamford and Birmingham Railway Church Street station; drawn on the town plan in *Hidden Harborough* which locates the yards and rows