

A BRIEF(ISH) HISTORY OF THE RAILWAY AT CHESHAM

The 8th of July 1889 saw the opening, to the public, of the Chesham branch of the Metropolitan Railway. If it were not for the forces of fate, however, the town would either have had its' station forty years earlier, or might even have had a second railway. There are, on record, at least 4 other railway schemes involving Chesham. The first would have occurred in the heyday of railway expansion in the 1840s. By that time metropolitan London was already becoming a bottleneck for the railways, and many schemes to bypass the capital were suggested. One such was the Tring - Reigate Railway (1845) which proposed to connect the two named towns, and on the way include Chesham. The route of this multi-track line from Tring to Chesham would, for the major part of it's length, be the same as that to be proposed later, and would enter Chesham, from Tring, by way of The Vale. However the line would leave Chesham to go to the West of Amersham, and on to Beaconsfield. In 1862 two schemes were proposed. One which was promoted jointly by the Watford & Rickmansworth Railway Co. and by the Uxbridge & Rickmansworth Railway Co. was to be called the Chesham, Amersham & Rickmansworth Railway (although the subsequent Act of Parliament had the town names in reverse order). This failed because of lack of inertia by the Watford & Rickmansworth, and it's major backer the LNWR. The second proposed railway at that time never appears to have got beyond a proposal in the Buckinghamshire Advertiser, but from remaining correspondence appears to have caused consternation at the Uxbridge & Rickmansworth Railway offices.

The final railway was in fact to be a Tramway: The Chesham, Boxmoor & Hemel Hempstead Steam Tramway. In the Act of 1888 this was to have been built to a gauge two inches under standard, but subsequently it was amended to be standard gauge. Agreements were signed with the London & North Western Railway (LNWR) to build interchange sidings at Boxmoor station, and for the Tramway to transport LNWR wagons to Chesham NewTown, with passenger carriages continuing along the main road into Chesham centre. This light railway was proposed at the same time that the Metropolitan was in the process of extending to Chesham. All these schemes had quiet deaths, and today the remains can be inspected in the Public Record Office!

The arrival of the Metropolitan was due to the last of the great "Railway Barons"; Edward Watkin. This gentleman had vast railway interests, including Chairmanships of the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway (MS&L), and the South Eastern Railway. As well as being Chairman of the Metropolitan Railway he was also on the board of the Channel Tunnel Company. He is reported to have had a vision of being able to travel, by rail, from Manchester to Paris, but any such notions he may have had in this respect only surfaced late in his life after it was pointed out to him that extending the Metropolitan northwards would facilitate the southern expansion of the MS&L.

It was under the Chairmanship of Watkin that the Metropolitan extended to the country, although Chesham did not originally fit his plans. His main aim was to extend the railway to Aylesbury where the MS&L would extend south to meet it. The authorisation to extend from Rickmansworth to Aylesbury was given in the Metropolitan Railway Act (1881). At the same time it was realised that interchange with the London and North Western Railway would be desirable to increase revenue. The only other town of any importance between Rickmansworth and Aylesbury, at that time, was Chesham with its', relatively, large population of over 6000, and several industries. A branch from Chalfont Road, via Chesham, to Tring was proposed in 1884. This would allow exchange sidings between the LNWR and Metropolitan, and Watkin was prepared to allow the LNWR rights to operate over the line to Rickmansworth. To this end land along The Vale was purchased in 1889. Negotiations with the LNWR proceeded. but failed to progress, possibly because the LNWR already had ideas of reaching Chesham via the Tramway as indicated earlier. However a single line branch was authorised to be built from Chalfont Road to Chesham Moor by the Metropolitan Railway Act (1885), although enough land to allow for double-tracking if necessary was obtained. Local pressure, and money, resulted in the terminus of the line

being moved closer to the centre of the town, to its' present site (this 71 chain extension requiring an act of Parliament in 1889 to authorise it, and this only received Royal assent 3 days before the branch opened for revenue earning traffic).

Work started on the extension in 1887, the consulting engineer being Charles Liddell and the contractor being Joseph Firbank (who between them were responsible for the Metropolitan's entire drive from Rickmansworth to Aylesbury). The townsfolk of Chesham managed to strike a good relationship with the contractors, and on occasions entertained the navvies at Chesham. The most notable of these was in January 1889 when the town supplied a Christmas/New Year party and entertainment for the navvies and their families.

The first, official, train to operate on the branch was the inspection train of May 15th 1889. The actual public service started on 8th July 1889. There is a well known photograph of the first train from Chesham made up of some of the original "extension line" wooden bodied straight door stock, pulled by a contractors locomotive. This picture is, in fact, of the inspection train of May 15th, and not as often stated the first train of July 8th. The events of May 15th started with local dignitaries being transported to Rickmansworth by a train pulled by two of the contractors locomotives, both of which were adorned with flags and bunting. At Rickmansworth the townsfolk transferred to the official train, also pulled by a contractors locomotive, which travelled to Chesham. The official opening was performed by Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild, the local MP., standing in for Sir Harry Verney who was ill. The guests then had a grand meal in the goods shed, which was transformed to a banqueting hall for the occasion, after which the guests returned to Rickmansworth, where they either continued to Baker Street or returned to Chesham. Although there were no official celebrations on May 15th, at the request of the Metropolitan, who wanted all celebrations to be held on the actual opening of the line to the public, the townsfolk made it an unofficial celebration, with the schools having the day off, and almost the whole populous lining the railway embankment. Eventually when July 8th arrived there was practically no official celebration, the only bunting being that supplied by the railway at the station and some in the High Street having been put up by local people. The branch was finally approved by the railway inspectorate on July 1st, after which it was formally handed over by the contractors to the Metropolitan, and it was announced that services would begin the following Monday. The first service train to use the station was a goods train which departed Chesham at 6.55am on the 8th July. During that first day it is known that A class locomotive number 7 operated on the branch, but not any of the others, although they must have been of the same A or B classes. During the first week of operation special trains were run to a Temperance Meeting at Crystal Palace. Over 1500 passengers passed through the station on the first day of operation.

For the first few years the locomotives used on the branch were the original A or B class locomotives having a 4-4-0 wheel arrangement. At this time many of these locomotives, which were originally designed for operation in the Metropolitan's underground lines, ran with no form of protection for the footplate crews. Cabs were only added to the locomotives from 1885 onwards, and, indeed by 1914 not all the locomotives had received them. After 1891 new C class 0-4-4 tank locomotives began to appear on the branch. These were to be seen until about 1918. In 1894 the Metropolitan obtained six 2-4-0 tank locomotives (D class). Two were specifically obtained for working the Aylesbury-Verney Junction section, but the others, being of low power, were not suitable for main-line work, and were relegated to goods duties, with the occasional appearance on the Chesham Shuttle.

These shuttle trains were originally composed of Oldbury built 4-wheel stock these being replaced by "Jubilee" stock. These coaches, so called because they were built around the Jubilee year of

Queen Victoria's reign (1887) were 8 wheeled coaches which were very similar in appearance to the later "Ashbury" coaches, but unlike the later coaches they were not bogie coaches. Also used on the branch were several even older, 8 wheel, coaches that had been rebodied.

From about 1912 the locomotives used on the shuttle were of the E class 0-4-4 tanks. In 1927, after complaints about the stock used on the branch, the carriages were replaced with two, or three, coach sets of Dreadnought carriages (as used on through trains until the 1960s), and these lasted until 1940.

The "main line" from Chalfont to Aylesbury was opened in 1892, and from September 2nd of that year Chesham was relegated from being the northern terminus of the Metropolitan to the station at the end of the branch. The MS&L completed its' push southwards to join the Metropolitan at Quainton Road, although in honour of extending southwards it changed its name to Great Central Railway (GCR).

The Metropolitan operated the railway alone until 1906, when after various differences the Metropolitan and Great Central Railways Joint Committee was set up, operating all the lines north of Harrow, including the Chesham branch. Each of the two railways acted as operators of the system for 5 year alternating periods. The Metropolitan, however, provided the vast majority of passenger stock to operate on the branch, and operated all the goods services until the late 1930s when the LNER took over passenger train locomotive operations north of Rickmansworth, including those on the branch. The larger of the Metropolitan's locomotives (G,H and K classes) were transferred to the LNER, and for several years were still a common sight on the Metropolitan system. However more ex-GCR locomotives were brought in, including F1 and N5 classes, both of which were seen on the branch. During the early years, from 1906, the Great Central, and its successors, operated its own through trains to Marylebone from Chesham, but this service gradually subsided, and in the 1960s was finally down to a single early morning train, which was withdrawn in 1967.

For many years Chesham and Verney Junction were the termini of the London services. Various train formations were seen, including, from 1910 to the outbreak of World War 2, daily Pullman services to the City.

Other locomotive types known to have worked the branch, at this time, include the Metropolitan G class 0-6-4T, H class 4-4-4T and K class 2-6-4T locos, and LNER (ex-GCR) A5 class 4-6-2 tanks. During the early years of London Transport the lines north of Rickmansworth were seen as an anachronism on a system set-up to provide fast urban passenger transport, and LT tried to divest itself of the operations to the LNER, who were not interested in taking them over completely. To save the expense involved in operating the branch the idea of using diesel railcars was actively pursued, with one of the GWR "Flying Banana" railcars being tried on the branch in March 1936. This was relatively successful, although the number of seats was thought to be too few, and designs using an ex-Hammersmith line electric coach unit mounted on a GWR railcar-type underframe were drawn-up. These plans, however, came to nothing when, in late 1936, the decision to include Chesham in the electrification scheme that had been announced in 1935 was taken. This "New Works" scheme was abandoned with the outbreak of the second world war. The idea of using diesel operated trains to provide the branch shuttle was revived again in 1952, when a 3 car set of ACV 4 wheel units was tried on the branch between October the 11th and 25th. This set, however, was not considered to be a success.

In 1940 London Transport adapted two 3 car sets of Ashbury coaches, built at the turn of the century, for use on the branch. These coaches had originally been built as steamhailed stock, but with the arrival of the "Dreadnought" coaches, and the advance of electrification, had been converted to electric multiple unit sets, only to-revert to steam hauled coaches to serve out their revenue earning lives. The arrival of these sets, which were adapted for push-pull working, simplified operation at the Chalfont end of the branch, where previously the branch train had to back out of the station to allow the locomotive to run round the train. Their arrival did, however, mean

that locomotives adapted for push-pull working had to be used, and this effectively ended the use of Metropolitan locos for this duty. The LNER brought back to the London area 3 ex-GCR 4-42T C13 class locos specifically for working the shuttle, and these remained until the late 1950s when Marylebone came under the BR(M) umbrella, and ex-LMS 2-6-2Ts replaced them. In the early hours of 12th September 1960 one of these locomotives, 41284, worked the last Chesham steam shuttle, to be replaced later that day by electric multiple units. A 3 coach set of T stock, then a 4 coach set of P stock and finally the A60/62 stock in use at present. During the period from the electrification to the end of steam hauled operations on the "main line" there were two through City trains each rush hour. These were hauled by the electric Bo-Bo locomotives, and were the only occasions these venerable early electrics were seen on the branch.

One of the main attractions of bringing the railway to Chesham was the freight revenue that the Metropolitan would earn, and for many years this was true. The town was a centre for the production of watercress, and this commodity alone could provide enough freight to fill several vans. Also shipped from Chesham were boots and woodware. Goods traffic taken to Chesham included groceries, and the early morning paper train! Coal was an important commodity taken to Chesham. As well as several domestic coal merchants, some of whom, like Holts, had their own wagons, there were deliveries to the brewery, the gasworks and the Chesham Electric Light and Power Works.

Freight traffic declined after 1925 when the Electric company folded, and traffic started moving to road carriage, but even so prior to the second world war freight tonnage was in excess of 4000 tons per month. After the war the freight traffic dropped to such uneconomic amounts that the goods yards of all the stations on the Metropolitan were deemed to be uneconomic and "Beechingised" in July 1966

The last steam locomotive to operate into Chesham was on the 26th September 1967, when an LT pannier tank locomotive hauled a works train in connection with the removal of the goods yard trackwork and run-round loop.

The Metropolitan built its' stations in batches, and Chesham was built as part of a batch with Chalfont Road and Chorleywood. Station design appears to have been left to the company engineer, within a few guidelines. Various similarities can be seen if the 3 stations are compared. The style of awnings and columns are identical. The station is, however, unique because of its' location. All the other stations are built as 2-platform through stations, with the main building built along the up platform (the one where the trains head towards London). The other 2 stations in the batch have their platforms linked by a subway. The style of the station at Chesham is was adopted to suit its' narrow location and single platform face.

It is worth comparing the design of the three stations built as part of the "Chesham batch" with those built in the next batch (Amersham, Gt. Missenden, Wendover and Stoke Mandeville). These are also built to a common batch design, with standardised buildings, canopies and columns of a different design to those of the Chesham type, and all have their platforms connected by foot-bridge rather than subway.

The signal boxes for the Metropolitan were of two basic designs, originally they were to the design of the Saxby Signal Co., but those built on the extension line were to the Metropolitan's own adaptation of that design. Three of these boxes still survive, at Chesham, Chorleywood and Gt. Missenden, although, at the time of writing, only the latter is still operational, but under threat of demolition. The box at Chesham, is however unique because it is built-up on a brick base (to save the expense of digging out the bank behind it, or to give increased vision round the bend?), and it is fitted with blinds - possibly because of the location. The signals, until changed to electric light type in the 1960s, were lower-quadrant Saxby & Farmer type. The water towers at all stations on the extension line were

of a similar basic design. As well as the one remaining at Chesham, there is still one to be seen at Rickmansworth. A standard design Metropolitan goods shed was built at the end of the goods yard. This type of structure was found at all goods yards north of Harrow. Until recently this was still in reasonable condition, but in the last year has been demolished to make way for a supermarket. The old goods shed at Harrow still stands, but has been considerably altered to become a builders merchant warehouse.

The station area originally had a cattle dock to the north of the station, with a coal road and 3 sidings, in addition to the main station line and the two loops supplying the goods shed and cattle dock. This number was increased to 4 in 1898-1900. When built there was a small engine shed, and a turntable. A portable 5 ton crane was also on site, which was later replaced with a fixed 8 ton crane. The 1895 edition of the Ordnance Survey map managed to indicate that the goods shed was an engine shed, which only goes to prove that even the O.S. can get things wrong!

In the early 1980s when major repairs to the two bridges carrying the line from the Moor to the station became necessary, and Buckinghamshire County Council refused to contribute towards the cost, the possibility that the branch closing became a possibility. However with the imminent demise of the GLC money from that source was made available, and the bridges were replaced. It is interesting to note that one suggestion that arose at that time was to rebuild the station at a new site on the Moor - exactly as the original Metropolitan plans had envisaged in 1887!

It was not until the 1960s that Chesham station began to alter in any really noticeable way, although in 1936 the ticket hall was rebuilt. With the coming of the electric shuttle, a bay platform was installed by removing the station gardens and extending the platform. Together with the removal of the goods yard, these were the first major changes since the station opened. Later the storage road, between the platform road and the signal box, was removed, and then the bay road was also removed. With the end of steam working the GWR-type water tower which was installed by the relief road was removed and sent to the Dart Valley Railway. More recently the station building has been altered to allow automatic ticket machines to be installed, and the platform road shortened, again because of the alterations to the old goods yard in readiness for the supermarket. The final indignation recently came with the repainting of the station to a "toy-town" blue and yellow colour scheme!