

RAILWAY MATTERS.—OPENING OF THE BRISTOL AND EXETER RAILWAY ; GENERAL REJOICINGS; THE FIRST TRIP — THE NEW RAILWAY TO EDINGTON.

THE year 1841 marked an important epoch in the history of Bridgwater, inasmuch as the town was connected with Bristol by the Bristol and Exeter Railway. The Company obtained their Act of Parliament in 1836, but it was nearly five years before the railway whistle sounded in the town.

The line was opened on Whit-Tuesday, June 1st, 1841, amid very general rejoicings. It had been intended that the opening should take place on the day previous, but an engine had unfortunately been thrown off the line by colliding with a trolley, and the ceremony had to be postponed. At nine o'clock on Whit-Tuesday morning there was a vast assemblage at Bristol terminus, and the "*Fireball*" engine, with eight carriages (four of each class), steamed slowly from the Station at 14 minutes to 10, amid loud and enthusiastic cheers. The whole town of Bridgwater turned out to welcome the train, and at the Station the Band of the West Somerset Yeomanry waited and hailed the approach of the train with appropriate music. The journey occupied one hour and three quarters, their being no stoppage between. It was stated in a local paper at the time that interested spectators lined the whole route between the two Stations !

Outside Bridgwater Station the present "*Railway Hotel*" was being built, and the "*shell*" was covered in as a tent, and beautifully decorated, and six long tables laid out with a sumptuous repast. Mr. F. Ricketts, Chairman of the Directors, presided, and was supported by the Mayor (Mr. R. Badgehot) and several members of the Corporation, together with many officials of the Company, and a crowd of the general public. Mr. John Browne took the vice-chair as the Bridgwater Director. In a short speech the chairman said they might congratulate themselves on having reached the "*loyal town of Bridgwater.*" In ancient times it was besieged by the troops of Fairfax, and now the Railway had also come to lay siege to the place, but it was one of no hostile nature, it was with the wish and intention of bringing trade and commerce to the town, and prosperity and happiness to its inhabitants — (loud and continued cheering).

The "*Fireball*" left Bridgwater for the return journey at 20 minutes after 2, amid general enthusiasm, and Bristol was again reached just after four o'clock, every

passenger expressing delight at the novelty, and unbounded satisfaction at the success of the undertaking.

About a year later the Railway was carried on to Taunton.

Before the line was cut, there were no houses in the east part of the town outside the "*Queen's Head*" Inn, where the old gate formerly stood; the green fields stretched around, with a gate and path leading to Redgate, and a cricket club held a ground on the spot now occupied by a portion of St. John street. It was at first intended to have the line run through the town, with the station by Binford Place, but that plan was superseded. The Sidcot (a Bristol) charity, vested in the Quakers, owned a great deal of the land in that neighbourhood, and it is related that they gave the ground which was required to build the Station on its present site. They afterwards divided their pasture into building lots, and quickly sold or let the same, thereby greatly increasing the income of the charity. Gradually St. John-street was built, and for some years there were disputes as to the liability to repair, until the street was taken over by the Corporation. The formation of the other streets in that now thriving and thickly populated neighbourhood followed as business increased in the town, and ultimately (as related elsewhere) a church was built for the accommodation of the parishioners. For many years the G.W.R. rented and worked the B. and E. R., and when the latter commenced on their own account, their engines cost between £2,000 and £3,000; in 1864 they possessed 64 engines, 219 passenger carriages, 1,000 goods trucks, 35 ballast trucks, and 20 coke waggons — total 1,274.

The rolling stock was made, altered and repaired at the Company's Carriage Works in the town ; and when the line was handed over to the G.W.R. those Works, in which several hundred hands were employed, were closed, and Eastover (and indeed the town) received a blow from which it did not recover for some years.

While this History is passing through the press, operations are being rapidly pushed forward to connect Bridgwater with the Midland and South Western Railway Companies. An Act of Parliament was obtained in 1882, to allow of the formation of the "*Bridgwater and Edington Railway,*" in spite of the opposition of the Great Western Railway Company, who enjoyed the monopoly. The object of the line, to quote

from the prospectus, was “ to put Bridgwater in connection with the larger systems of the South-Western Railway and the Midland Railway, to which the Somerset and Dorset line forms in the direction of Bath on the one hand and of Templecombe on the other, the great channel of communication.” The capital required was stated to be £135,000, the length of the railway to be seven miles, one furlong, four chains, joining the Somerset and Dorset at Edington.

The first agitation for this railway commenced, about a quarter of a century ago; and in 1866 the inhabitants of Bridgwater promoted a line, but the Bristol and Exeter opposed it and offered a scheme whereby greater facilities were provided for traffic between Highbridge and Bridgwater. Parliament rejected the local scheme and passed the B. and E. R. Bill, putting into it clauses which were then thought sufficient to meet the wants of the case—facility clauses for the transmission of traffic between Highbridge and Bridgwater, over the Somerset and Dorset line, and further an injunction to put narrow-gauge rails on that bit of the Bristol and Exeter line. These “ facility clauses ” proved a dead letter, and in 1875 another local scheme for the new line was brought forward, but greatly to the disappointment of Bridgwater, it did not reach the second House. Another Bill was promoted in 1881, but the estimates not being defensible, it was withdrawn. The next year the promoters were successful in obtaining the Act, although opposition was again offered by the Great Western Railway Company.

As the railway is still in course of construction we cannot give more than a brief outline of what is intended.

The terminus will be in Bridgwater, the Station having been built near the Bristol-road. The main line will cross the “ *Legger* ” at the back of a house occupied by Mr. Hawkins, and belonging to Mr. Symons, and the occupation road will be again crossed at Messrs. Symons’ brickyard. The railway, which will be a gradually ascending one from the Station, will cross the Bristol road by means of a bridge at a point between St. John’s Cemetery and Sydenham Cottage, the main line of the Great Western Railway being crossed by another bridge near Mr. Croad’s level crossing. Thence, by a descending gradient, the railway will keep to the left of the main Bath road until it reaches a point near a house belonging to Mr. Sibly, where it

will be bridged over by a similar structure to that known as Bath bridge ; thence proceeding on to Bradney, where it will pass close to the residence of Mr. Ed. Collins, and on to Bawdrip, where a Station will be provided. There will be a rather deep cutting through the Polden Hills, and the railway will be again bridged over on the main road just beyond the Woolavington turning, proceeding thence on to Cossington, where another Station will be provided to accommodate the inhabitants both of Cossington and Woolavington, a roadway from such station being constructed from the former village. Thence the railway will run through the peat moor upon an embankment, so as to keep it above the flood level, to Edington, where it will be connected with the Station on the Somerset and Dorset line.

The engineers are Messrs. Wells, Owen & Elwes, and the contractors Messrs. Cutbill, Sons & Company, London.

The public of Bridgwater and neighbourhood may be congratulated on their unceasing endeavours to obtain the advantages likely to be conferred by the new line, and we hope that it may be successfully completed and prove of immense advantage and convenience.

Digitised & edited by Tony & Jane Woolrich, 22/01/2020