

Sandbach History Society  
Report on April 2022 meeting  
Jeremy Nicholls: Nantwich and the Railway

“Nantwich and the Railway” was the subject of a recent talk by Jeremy Nicholls to Sandbach History Society.

Mr Nicholls said that in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Nantwich was the pre-eminent town in south Cheshire. But when, in 1833, the Grand Junction railway (GJR) was authorised to construct a line between the London and Birmingham Railway and the Liverpool and Manchester Railway at Warrington it was decided that it would pass through the hamlet of Monks Coppenhall and not Nantwich. He said that the reasons were probably to do with the opposition of local landowners and the higher value of land around Nantwich.

Four years later the first passenger trains were travelling from Birmingham to Warrington with a through route to Liverpool and Manchester. Crewe quickly emerged as an important railway junction and the opening of the GJR's locomotive works at Crewe confirmed its status as an important railway town.

Nantwich was brought onto the railway map in 1853 when an Act of Parliament authorised a line from Crewe to Shrewsbury to be built by the London and North Western Railway (LNWR). It finally opened in 1858 – delayed by protracted discussions about the safety of the approach into Shrewsbury. The opening of the line was of strategic significance, said Mr Nicholls. Rail traffic from South Wales to the north west of England had to be routed through Gloucester and Birmingham. The opening of the Severn railway tunnel in 1886 and the Crewe to Shrewsbury line meant that traffic from South Wales, Bristol and the south west could take a direct route to the north.

The other railway from Nantwich was the Nantwich and Market Drayton Railway. It opened in 1863 as a single track line but there was a bigger story behind the scenes, said Mr Nicholls. The Great Western Railway (GWR) dominated the west of England, the south west, most of Wales and the west midlands. When the Wellington and Drayton Railway opened shortly afterwards, GWR saw an opportunity to create a through route to Manchester. Theoretically, the Wellington and Drayton was an independent company but it was operated, from its opening, by GWR and by 1867 GWR through-carriages were running from Birmingham to Manchester via Market Drayton and Nantwich.

During all this time Monks Coppenhall had become Crewe and was expanding rapidly. Crewe, a new town of 5,000 people in 1851 had risen to 43,000 by 1901. Nantwich, with a population of 5,500 in 1851 had only risen to 8,000 in the same period.

Mr Nicholls showed a photograph of Nantwich Station in about 1900 with the station master, in frock coat, and two other members of the station staff. A contemporary account described the station as “a small, neat structure but affording every convenience and need for the purpose intended.” He said that the railway was a labour-intensive industry and Nantwich station would have had several staff. Hours were long but the railway created large numbers of local job opportunities. The station master had a wide range of duties. His main task was to ensure that trains were despatched on time but he also had responsibility for “all forms of company property, the security of all valuables, the maintenance of records, the

appearance and efficiency of staff” and it was necessary for him “to be able and ready to answer questions in regard to agricultural and industrial conditions, municipal matters, political affairs, the temperance situation, prominent personalities and employees, the businesses of new enterprises in the community, etc.”

In 1910 there were eleven trains per day, each way, from Nantwich, mainly locals between Crewe and Shrewsbury but the Liverpool–Cardiff sleeper stopped in Nantwich just after midnight and various mail trains stopped as well. On certain days there were extra trains from Crewe to the cattle market at Wrenbury. The arrival of the railway, said Mr Nicholls, meant that it was possible to travel to more distant places of work like Crewe, Chester, Stoke, etc.

All the town’s traders were reliant on the railway for a supply of materials. The goods yard was extensive with a goods shed built over one of the sidings with a raised platform and cranes for the loading and unloading of waggons. There was also a short siding with a ramp to facilitate the unloading of cattle. Nantwich was a major centre for bringing in domestic coal and local coal merchants had their bases at the station. There was a dry store for corn and seed merchants – in fact everything for the agricultural market – and fertiliser would arrive in sacks from East Anglia. The railway was a common carrier and was obliged to carry any goods they were offered. They became involved in all sorts of services including house removals. A common sight in the 1950s was the Scammel Scarab, the “mechanical horse” – a three-wheeled tractor, pulling trailers around the town, making deliveries.

A different source of traffic to Nantwich Station was personnel from the local RAF station at nearby Hack Green. During WW2 it had been a radar station but during the Cold War it was a regional government headquarters nuclear bunker, now a museum known as the Secret Bunker.

The Beeching Report, calling for the closure of rural branch lines, was published in 1963 but the decision to withdraw passenger services over the Market Drayton line had already been made and the closure took place in September of that year. Beeching’s report recommended the closure of all stations between Crewe and Shrewsbury but appeals lodged against the closure were successful and the stations survived. The line ceased to be a main line and the goods yard closed in 1972, not having sufficient volume of goods.

But the phoenix arises, said Mr Nicholls. Passenger numbers at Nantwich have risen from 47,000 in 2004 to 240,334 in 2018/19 – a remarkable achievement. The original station building still stands but is now an Indian restaurant. The station is very well maintained, and has attractive floral displays, all looked after by a group of local volunteers. The current operator of the line is Transport for Wales. With significant population growth in the town, traffic congestion when travelling to work and environmental concerns – not to mention the possible benefits of HS2 – the future for the station looks bright, said Mr Nicholls.

“Nantwich Railways” by Jeremy Nicholls is available from Nantwich Museum price £3.95

John Higgins