

The Wheelock Rail Trail. A Historical Perspective.

A proposal to create "The North Staffordshire Railway Company" was formulated in 1845. In April of that year an agreement was arranged to take over the Trent and Mersey Canal Company and to promote a railway line to Liverpool. This line would run from Stoke-on-Trent via Harecastle, Lawton, Hassall Green, Malkins Bank, Wheelock, Ettiley Heath, Sandbach, Middlewich and Northwich. (ie. to approximate the course of the canal.)

On November 25th 1845 the NSR absorbed the Derby-and-Crewe Railway. *Consequently as part of the deal, the proposed line to Liverpool was abandoned. All that survived of the original plan was an intended branch line to join the London North Western Railway (LNWR) at Sandbach.* (The merger had now given Stoke an access to Liverpool through Crewe). In the meantime, (1845/7), headquarters were established by the NSR at its newly built Station in the centre of Stoke-on-Trent City, and with the North Stafford Hotel and the Directors Houses opposite, the imposing features of Winton Square were introduced.

The Parliamentary Acts which authorised the construction of this and other main NSR routes are dated June 26th 1846. The work thereafter progressed in stages and a dense network of rail links was organised. Goods-services were set up on the Sandbach Branch in January 1852, but only as far as Ettiley Heath Goods Station where the line terminated at this time. A spur was included to serve the Wheelock Forge and Salt Works. This line joined the main branch between Hind Heath Farm and Little Hind Heath Farm and extended southwards to cross Hind Heath Road (unmanned) and down to the canal-side factories. This route and the workshops are shown clearly on the 1897 and 1900 ordnance maps of Wheelock. (Hence today's Forge Fields, Anvil Close and Smithy Walk). It is not known whether the rail-spur was owned by the Forge or by the NSR. Its location can still be traced on Wheelock street maps where the back gardens lie off houses along Marriott Road, Barton Way and Anvil Close. It would be interesting to know if any residents have found traces of the track.

Work on the extension into Sandbach Station pressed ahead and was completed by 1866. This stage included Elton Crossing and its signal box, the gate-keepers' cottage, the twin-track Up-and-Down lines beyond the level-crossing, and the 78-yard-long sidings to the Co-op. coal-wharf. The final agreement with Sandbach Co-operative Society was dated as late as April 15th 1903 and included maintenance at "fixed cost to Trader". Co-op. coal was delivered to households from a horse-drawn cart which was loaded with 1cwt sacks filled previously at the sidings. During the 1940s/50s, a Mr. Whittaker was the ostler and delivery man.

In 1888 the demand for sidings rising up to Elworth Foundry and John Prings Wire Works was fulfilled. Elworth Foundry was by this time under the ownership of Edwin Foden and Son. There was an unmanned rail crossing at this point breaching Station Road into Pring's rail yard. A contemporary sketch illustrates this (complete with a Stephenson-type locomotive) and a later picture of Foden's experimental railcar power-unit was photographed on this crossing. An architect's plan shows that fourteen rail-trucks could be accommodated on the siding. As the Foundry expanded along Station Road and new workshops were pressed into production, these sidings fell into disuse. Ettiley Heath Goods Station provided a more convenient alternative.

As well as its contribution to the surrounding community, Ettiley Heath Goods Station served at least two local industries during its working life. The first output from Palmer Mann's Sifta Salt factory at Elton (c1923) was transported from Ettiley Heath, and vast amounts of coal were brought in here to boil the brine. But after a long period of prior negotiations with the LNWR, the company was eventually connected to a private siding on the Crewe-Manchester line. Considerable road transportation was also adopted.

Large quantities of scrap iron, steel and other metals were loaded from the Foden Works. Day by day there were several deliveries to the Station carried by a specially consigned D6 lorry which travelled to-and-fro along Elworth Road. The scrap was then transferred by rail for recycling at Stoke's Shelton Iron and Steel Works.

The Goods Station was used as a convenient stopover by Winston Churchill during his 1945 post-war election campaign. His personal train was shunted into the siding for an overnight sojourn before he embarked on a series of local public meetings (including Sandbach). He was accompanied by his wife and members of his staff.

Use of the Station for goods facilities came to a halt in the 1960s.

Passenger amenities were introduced in July 1893 and a Station was opened at Wheelock which became the terminus for this daily service. The station boards were clearly headed "Wheelock and Sandbach". Extra trains were provided on Sandbach market days (Thurs) and Saturdays. In later years the passenger service ran only on market days and Saturdays and even this was cut altogether on July 28th 1930.

Wheelock Station operated on two ground levels with a ticket office, waiting room and road bridge overlooking a deep cutting which housed two platforms with the Up and Down rail-lines between. A signal box was located at the southern end of the 'down' platform which was reached by a ramp from the ticket office. A footbridge across the tracks gave the 'up' platform access to the buildings above. The rail crossover between the tracks lay to the NW beyond the road bridge. The twin lines extended SW as far as Malkins Bank.

An interesting feature just south of the Station can easily be missed. The trail here is built on a high embankment traversing the valley which carries the mill-stream down from the Sandbach Mill on Mill Hill Lane to meet the River Wheelock near Cotton Lane. The feature in question is the bridge that carries the Trail over the mill-stream, and which is in fact two bridges in one! At the rail level it seems to be quite ordinary but below, between the support walls there is a broad, level platform for the footpath over the stream. Such are the dimensions of the platform that it resembles a ballroom floor. Legend has it that dances were held here, and locally it became known as "The Dancing Bridge".

Unfortunately, there is no access from the Trail above, but the footpath from the mill alongside the stream crosses the 'ballroom' and continues through into Wheelock.

With the cessation of passenger traffic the signal box and crossover at Wheelock Station were no longer needed and were removed. Nonetheless, the roadside buildings and road bridge, the down platform and part of the ramp are still in place.

The 1852 Hutchinson large-scale map of the area shows that there was a direct and continuous thoroughfare from Booth Lane Head to Wheelock. The map records no name for this road. The construction of Ettiley Heath Goods Station and the Station Masters House interrupted this route and a short diversion around these buildings was laid out on the western side. This created two separate roads, namely Hind Heath Road and Garden City.

Hind Heath Road ended at a junction with Elton Road which now required a bridge over the rail line in order to rejoin Garden City at its intersection with Abbey Road. (Garden City was renamed Elworth Road in the 1950s, but its Royal Mail post-box retained the name). The Station Master's house and some of the Goods Station buildings remain with no alteration to the adjacent Hind Heath Road diversion.

The Wheelock Rail Trail runs between access points at the Ettiley Heath Goods Station site and the canal bridge at Malkins Bank. There is further access from the Wheelock Station bridge and also from Hind Heath Lane.

However the route of the line can still be followed to the northwest from Ettiley Heath. The Elton Road Bridge has been replaced by a roundabout and a road has been built over the old track bed foundation. Known as 'Salt Line Way' this new road passes the Elton Crossing Keepers Cottage, and onward to join Moss Lane and Station Road just south of Sandbach Station.

Elton Crossings Road is now a cul-de-sac.

(Do not confuse 'Salt line Way' with 'Salt Line' at Hassall Green and Borrow Pit Meadows).

To the southwest of the Malkins Bank access, the Golf Course now occupies the site of the 'soda-ash' Solvay works which was opened in 1873 by Richards, Kearne and Gasquoine. Solvay was not a salt making process but made use of natural brine and re-cycled ammonia to manufacture sodium bicarbonate and sodium carbonate from calcium

carbonate. Messrs Brunner Mond & Co. had already obtained the rights to the Solvay process and took over the firm in 1878. An area was selected to allow for sidings with ready access to the NSR branch for the import of coal and limestone and for the distribution of the finished products. In 1926 Brunner Mond merged with several other chemical companies to form Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI). The Malkins Bank factory was demolished in 1932 following a decrease in production two years earlier.

Under the British Railways banner the original Harecastle to Sandbach NSR line stayed in use until 1971. It was not shut down as a result of Dr. Beeching's propositions. On the contrary and less well publicised, in his first (1963) Report he suggested a recommendation that freight-line services should be kept open for commodities such as minerals and coal. The Harecastle branch was exactly one-such.

When the LNWR line from Sandbach Station to Northwich was opened in 1867* a direct route became available from the North Staffordshire coalfields to the salt-based industries at Middlewich and Northwich. But one hundred years later the gradual decline of the North Staffordshire coal industry contributed to the reduction in need for associated rail transport and the Sandbach NSR branch was closed by British Rail in 1971. In its final days the route had been in use by oil-tanker traffic from the Merseyside refineries to Stoke and the Midlands. For all of its 119 years of existence the Harecastle-Sandbach branch-line remained under control from its original Stoke headquarters.

Footnotes.

*** The rail link between Sandbach Station (LNWR) and Northwich (Cheshire Lines Committee) was eventually authorised by Parliament 1863 and was opened to goods traffic in 1867. This authorisation was granted to the London North Western Railway (LNWR, founded 1846) and NOT to the London North Eastern Railway (LNER) as suggested by Sandbach Nub News. The LNER did not exist until named as such in the Railways Act of 1921**. The process was known as "The Grouping" and came into force on Jan 1st 1923. The Great Western Railway (GWR) kept its name, the London Midland and Scottish Railway (LMS), the Southern Railway (SR) and the LNER were created**

under the act, when all the individual small companies and the larger LNWR, were bracketed under regional or territorial umbrellas.

The LNWR and the NSR were vested into the LMS.

Later Nationalisation by The Transport Act, Jan.1st 1948, absorbed *all* into British Railways (BR).

****I think the confusion over Northwich LNWR and the LNER stems from the time of the 1921 Act when the Cheshire Lines Committee (CLC which included Northwich), was taken over in the Grouping exercise. Although the route mileage was small, the CLC had been jointly owned by the GNR (Great Northern Rly), the GCR (Great Central Rly) and the MR (Midland Rly). Of these, only the MR was consigned to the LMS region. As a result, the LMS held a one third share of the old CLC routes, and the LNER had the two thirds share, creating an imbalance of administration.**

Even though nominally covered by the LMS, the town's economy relied heavily on the influence of the LNER's eastern traffic.

The overlap was at Godley Junction (ex GCR).

Godley had already seen interchange between CLC and GCR traffic in the pre-1921 days.

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References:

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side by side maps nls.

OS maps: 1 inch 1885-1900 and API.

Hutchinson map 1852

NSR route diagram 1922.

National Coal Board pr1982.