

Brunel Missed the Trains— by Three Years!

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To the north and south of the ornamental pond that faces the Administration Building are hollows in the ground, now gradually being filled in, which any newcomer to the area will recognise as the remains of a railway cutting. The line in question was just over two miles long, and linked the market town of Uxbridge with the main line of the Great Western Railway at West Drayton.

The opening of the GWR in 1838 had dealt Uxbridge a severe economic blow, since the townsfolk relied heavily on the busy stagecoach traffic that plied between London and the West. Travellers now turned to the new and faster trains, and within a decade approximately half the stage-coaches were off the roads. Uxbridge people began to press for a rail link for their town.

Several schemes were proposed in the 1840s, including a Great Western and Uxbridge Railway promoted by local tradesmen in 1846. This plan was for a branch line from West Drayton to Uxbridge, but insufficient capital was forthcoming.

Eventually the GWR was persuaded to take over the project, and powers were obtained to commence work in 1853. A single broad-gauge line was constructed, and the first train steamed into the Vine Street terminus on 8th September, 1856.

Much to the relief of local travellers the line was converted to standard gauge in 1871. Prior to this the elderly broad-gauge locomotive had been frequently breaking down. (The broad-gauge track was eventually lifted, and cut into sections to be used as fence posts. Some years ago Brunel staff rescued a length of this track, and it is now kept at the University). The line was doubled in 1880, and a station opened at Cowley in 1904.

A glimpse of late nineteenth century travel on this line is given by Reginald Hancock, an Uxbridge veterinary surgeon, in his autobiography. 'The suburban stock of the GWR,' he wrote, 'consisted of four-wheel coaches whose compartments were upholstered with Spartan severity in the first and second class. Third class passengers sat on bare boards. The carriages were unheated, but on application to a porter a flattened iron cylinder of hot

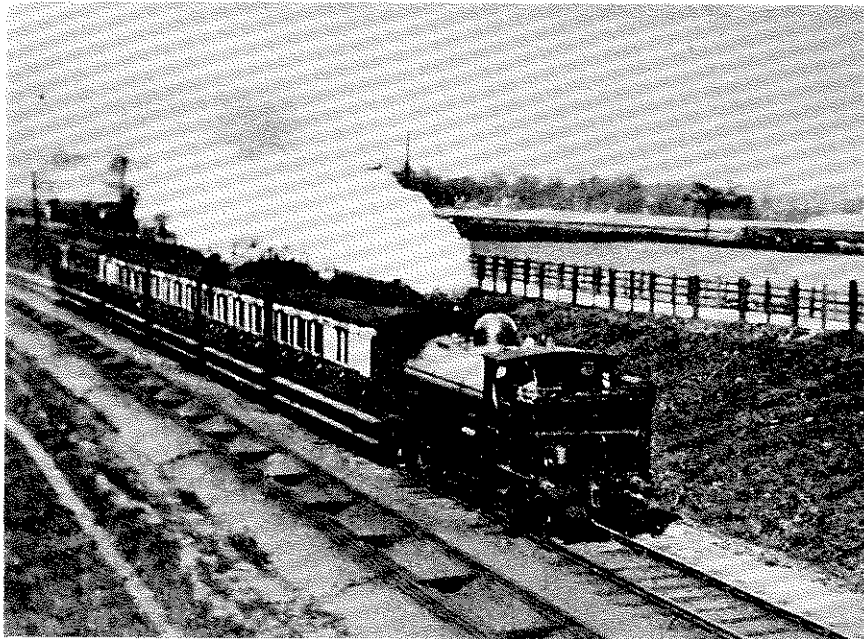


Fig. 1. A saddle-tank of the Great Western Railway hauls five carriages to West Drayton in 1912. In the background are the fields on which Brunel University was built many years later



Fig. 2. An Uxbridge-bound train halting at Cowley Station about 1905

water was provided on which the feet were rested. Most travellers took rugs with them, and overcoats were of a weight and density of fabric that few could support nowadays.'

The line survived into the post-war years, when the 'Beeching Axe' fell. The number of passengers had been steadily declining, and the service had been reduced. The little branch line was eventually closed to passenger traffic in 1962.

Efforts were made to persuade British

Rail to re-open the service, for by this time it was known that the (then) Brunel College of Advanced Technology would be moving to a site alongside the railway line. It was argued that staff and students would make great use of this service.

Representations were in vain. The line closed finally to all traffic in 1964, and by the time the first students of Brunel University arrived on the Uxbridge campus three years later the stations at Uxbridge and Cowley had been demolished and the

track lifted.

Most of the old railway land was acquired by Hillingdon Borough Council, but Brunel University obtained the length adjoining the campus. In 1971 a section in front of the Administration building was filled in, and the ornamental pond constructed.

Acknowledgment

Photographs courtesy of Middlesex County Press.