

Some English Railway Might-Have-Beens

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The 50th Anniversary Journal, published in May 2004, contained the extracts dealing with Wales, the Border Counties and Scotland from Klapper's paper 'Some Railway Might-Have-Beens', which had been presented to a meeting of the Society on 18 January 1964 and published in the Journal of September–November 1964. Below is the remainder of the paper. Some minor rearrangement of the order and slight editing has been necessary, and sub-headings have been added.

Having spent much time in the quite unprofitable but extremely fascinating occupation of examining the possible effects of endings to historical episodes different from those that took place in fact, I have been persuaded by the programme secretary to place some of those in relation to railway history before you. Many of them raise questions that could perhaps justify further research by those with time or the inclination to pursue such lines; some raise matters directly connected with problems of today. For example, had Gladstone's machinery of railway nationalisation under his 1844 Act been put into operation, should we have had a logically planned railway system that would not have needed drastic pruning as we plunge further into the motoring-for-all era of the latter part of the 20th century? Moreover, if George Hudson had had a little better fortune and had been able to secure his grand scheme of amalgamation would we have arrived at a similar result?

Speculation on the whole course of electric traction in Southern England — and perhaps throughout the country — can be based on the alleged offer of the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway to operate certain of the South Eastern & Chatham suburban routes by its 25-cycle 6,600 volt single-phase alternating current electric traction system. Did this rumoured proposal ever take any definite shape and was it concerned mainly with former London Chatham & Dover routes? If it was made it was in the pre-1914 period when the South Eastern & Chatham board was enthused by the prospects of cultivating long-distance commuter business and was disenchanted with suburban operations. Had the Brighton been able to encompass its own main-line electrification before the 1914 war the whole of Kent and Sussex might have had the benefit of an electric service long before it did simply because the Brighton AC system, although not perfect, was well adapted to economic long-distance wide-headway operation, whereas until many years later DC traction as

employed on the London & South Western required manned substations at frequent intervals, and thus was suited only to short-range intensive exploitation.

Another electric traction possibility which also would have had a marked effect on present-day finances is the consequences one might have anticipated from implementation of the Weir report. Had the railways taken a bold line and sought to raise new capital, and observed the partisan warnings of their coal-owning friends rather less, we should have had much electric traction at 1,500 volts DC and might now, 35 years later, have had a complete electric railway system far less vulnerable to road and air competition. On the other hand one suspects that the process would have been rather like electrifying the windlass and failing to observe the better means of emptying the well by an electric pump; it is only in extremely recent times that thought has been given to the prospects of rethinking the entire complex railway system provided by simultaneous application of electric traction and resignalling.

Unfulfilled schemes

Omitting consideration of the possible results from completion of early tramroad schemes such as the southward projection of the Surrey Iron as a route via Reigate to, of all unlikely destinations, Portsmouth, as a means of combatting Napoleon, or the major proposals of William James, the so-called father of railways, one may sample some of the grandiose projects of the Railway Mania, the aftermath of which, to quote Lewin, was making itself felt half a century later; then there were many branch and connecting line schemes on a smaller scale which sometimes held considerable importance; London schemes have a savour of their own; finally I propose to deal with a few light railway projects out of the scores authorised which would have had interesting influences on the national network had they been

implemented.

Taking first the Railway Mania group it is apparent that there were several areas of the country which attracted successive schemes designed to accomplish similar objects; it would be interesting to discover how far this persistence was due to geographical considerations providing a natural railway route, to the same groups of persons or their business descendants pressing projects which had previously failed to impress either at Westminster or in Throgmorton Street, or to a reflection merely of 19th century loathing for railway monopoly. The latter possibly accounts for various proposals to break into the territory of the North Eastern Railway and for endeavours to interest the Midland and the Great Western Railways, through minor companies, in traffic to the port of Southampton, where the London & South Western reigned arbitrary and undisturbed. The Blackpool interests of the London & North Western and Lancashire & Yorkshire were obvious targets for attack and Irish shipping routes and the GWR interest in London and South Wales traffic were others, the latter linked with the wedge of attractive country between the LNWR and GWR main lines west of London.

One can admire the old-time railway project planner for his intrepidity in thinking of a feasible route, raising some money, getting powers, and hoping for traffic. A typical prospectus of a rural line in Southern England claimed revenue on the same scale per mile as the average for 1895 of all the railways south of the Thames and then modestly reduced it by 33% because it had no London terminal, no London district traffic, no Continental steamboat traffic and a fewer number of populated country towns. This piece of market unresearch was propounded by the Portsmouth, Basingstoke & Godalming promoters just half a century after the mania.

The north of England

Manchester, from early in the 19th century, had the urge for communication with the sea developed to a high degree. The Liverpool & Manchester Railway was a happy result and, later, the Ship Canal became a hallmark of Victorian achievement. Some other ventures ended queerly, however. The Railway Mania produced schemes for connecting Manchester with Poole Harbour, Southampton Water, Milford Haven and with the Tyne, none of which came off and none of which had any great intention of starting on their own tracks in Manchester. The Manchester

& Southampton was a George Hudson project, for a line from the Birmingham & Gloucester at Cheltenham roughly over the route followed nearly forty years later by the Midland & South Western Junction, taking the narrow gauge from north to south across broad gauge territory. It had a great tussle of 46 days before a Commons Committee and came to terms with the hostile LSWR. The GWR renewed its opposition in the Lords and got away with providing a narrow gauge Oxford–Basingstoke link. The Manchester & Southampton had another try in 1847, but was thrown out owing to a surveying error and then lost heart.

The Hudson-sponsored Liverpool, Manchester & Newcastle-upon-Tyne Junction Railway (LM&NJR) obtained its powers in 1846, upon adopting the route of a similar scheme known as the Lancashire & North Yorkshire Railway (L&NYR). The main line was to comprise only the 54 miles from Elslack just west of Skipton and a favourite taking off place for this type of project, through Grassington and Wharfedale to the Richmond branch of the York, Newcastle & Berwick Railway (later altered to a junction with the YN&BR main line at Cowtan). There was to have been a branch to Hawes (9 miles) and a junction line at Burnley. No construction was carried out by the LM&NJR, but some of the earthworks of the Skipton & Colne line near Elslack may actually have been thrown up by the L&NYR. The company was sick of its idea and thought its prospects dim by 1847; an abandonment Act then prepared was thrown out by Parliament in the following year. So the directors paid back 10s a share to the shareholders in the end of 1848, 1s a little later and another 2s.4d in 1850. As £2.10s had been paid on each £20 share, the shareholders still lost some money by venturing into this moorland undertaking. The Skipton and Grassington section of the Yorkshire Dales Railway — itself intended to make a Lancashire–Durham link 30 miles shorter than existing routes — in 1902 replaced an 8¾ mile section of it, under an Act of 1897.

Another moorland railway, authorised over the same ground as the LM&NJR between Aysgarth and Bedale, so that that section would have become, by agreement, joint property, was the Northern Counties Union Railway (NCUR). This was to cross the Pennines in X formation, from Tebay via Kirkby Stephen to Bishop Auckland and from Clifton (Penrith) via Kirkby Stephen and through Wensleydale to Bedale and Thirsk, with a branch from Bedale to Wath (now Melmerby) en route to Ripon. This scheme of 1846 would have done for the railway system what the

A66 road from Scotch Corner on A1, the Great North Road, to Penrith on A6 does for road transport. Indeed, it incorporated a previous scheme to go across Stainmoor by such a route rather than Wensleydale. A portion was constructed between Melmerby and Burneston. The greater part of this was sold to the Leeds & Thirsk (later Leeds Northern) but an abandoned piece of cutting exists from the junction point south of the existing Sinderby Station towards Burneston, parallel with the Great North Road. The Masham–Thirsk road, B6267, appears to represent the northern limit of construction. A photograph of this — taken with one eye on a fine specimen of a bull which was taking his ease further down the cutting — shows it in April 1955. Some £131,000 was spent to provide the 2¼ miles of completed railway that was later used!

Clause 26 of the NCUR Act was the cause of its downfall; it required both parts of the undertaking to be carried out equally, an impossibility in a time of depression. So none was finished and Great Northern hopes in 1851 of getting a through service to Glasgow by the G&SWR (in any event not very palatable to the LNWR which controlled the Penrith–Carlisle link) faded with great rapidity under LNWR hostility. It would to-day have provided a route of about 410 miles from London to Glasgow suited to high-speed electric traction and with gradients not steeper than 1 in 100 in England.

A peculiar relic of George Hudson still stands at Tadcaster in the shape of a £35,000 viaduct built under the York & North Midland Railway Bill of 26 June 1846 for a line from Copmanthorpe to Tadcaster and Garforth, making a York–Leeds short cut. Work was stopped by order of the Y&NMR investigation committee in 1849.

The Lancashire, Derbyshire & East Coast Act of 1891 provided for 170 miles of lines, but its proposals for linking Warrington, Macclesfield and the Lincolnshire Coast are well-known. The most striking feature was the 272ft high viaduct across Monsal Dale; it is worth looking down from Monsal Head to try to visualise the scene in the Dale had it been carried out.

Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Hampshire

The ‘drang nach Southampton’ upon the Mancunian mind seems to have persisted and to have been reflected in the Midland & South Western Junction (M&SWJR) and the Didcot Newbury & Southampton (DN&SR). The former was begun in the 1870s

and completed in the following decade; early through coach workings coupled Southampton with Birmingham and Sheffield, later Manchester was served. It linked Andover on the LSWR and Andoversford on the GWR, a basic Southampton–Cheltenham service being operated. Independent extension southwards was attempted by the South Hampshire Railway & Pier Company of 1886.

There is a delightful confusion of embankments around Andoversford, a fair puzzle for an archaeologist of centuries hence, some belonging to the East Gloucestershire Railway and some to ideas of the Midland & South Western Junction, which about 1895 proposed to avoid its approach to Cheltenham over the GWR and to go direct to Ashchurch on the Midland. A prospectus map of 1898 shows an even more fundamental design: that of reaching Stratford-on-Avon and entering Birmingham by the metals of the Birmingham & North Warwickshire Railway (B&NWR). Before the last-mentioned company definitely threw in its lot with the GWR, it had planned its Moor Street terminus, and the Great Central was persuaded it ought to go to Birmingham via Woodford Halse, the East & West Junction and the B&NWR. But the Great Central had no money to spare for such a venture, whereas for the Great Western, it formed a good start for its short cut to Cheltenham. Needless to say, the through route from the M&SWJR did not prosper.

The M&SWJR at one time hoped to connect Cirencester with the Witney–Fairford line of the East Gloucestershire Railway (EGR), rump of a project of 1861 connecting Cheltenham to Farringdon and the GWR main line at Uffington and various modifications thereafter. The more interesting part of the EGR story centres on proposals by the Midland to build and work it; simultaneously, the Midland was trying to extend its influence from Nailsworth to Malmesbury and Salisbury. Some work is reported to have been done at Malmesbury on an authorised scheme and some tunnelling in the Cotswolds for the EGR. Successive schemes are reputed to have involved a steam tramway on the roadside, a steam bus, and a railway from Cirencester to Fairford.

Another grandiose scheme of the 1880s was the Didcot, Newbury & Southampton Railway (DN&SR) which constituted yet a further threat to the integrity of Great Western territory — to protect which it laid mixed gauge in 1856 from Oxford to Basingstoke — and yet another to the LSWR monopoly of Southampton port traffic. Its first Act was passed in 1873, to build a line from Didcot to Micheldever.

An Act to reach Southampton and reclaim foreshore there was obtained nine years later.

To obtain a mental picture of what Southampton would have been like had its southern end been completed south of Winchester under its Act of 1882, stand north of Central Station and think that the Clock Tower affair on top of the station building was set up by the LSWR to cause the maximum trouble to the DN&SR, the viaduct of which had been partially built exactly on that alignment across what was then Southampton West. The foundations of the arches came to light when a row of houses subsequently built on the site was demolished. There are also earthworks in Southampton football ground, at a point where the Bournemouth and Poole branch — note the old Manchester–Poole scheme rearing its head — would have bifurcated under an 1883 Bill which aroused the ire of friends of the New Forest.

The LSWR had hoped to divert DN&SR traffic at Whitchurch via its Hurstbourne–Fullerton Junction line (opened on 1 June 1885) but the DN&SR refused to complete its loop at that point. It reached Winchester Cheesehill on 1 May 1885 and connected with the LSWR at Shawford on 1 October 1891. It was not until 1 October 1910 that GWR through workings to Southampton began by agreement with the LSWR. In the meantime the Great Central had been sustaining the DN&SR traffic office in Southampton and had even prompted talks on the prospects of a DN&SR connection from Didcot to the GCR at Quainton Road. Needless to say the prospect of the GCR lifting Southampton traffic by such a route to Manchester in its own trains was never implemented.

Kent and Sussex

Two schemes in the South have been of some interest to me at various times in the past. Both originated in the early 1860s and both have left their spoor, although construction was never started on one of them. This paradox is explained by the fact that it caused a railway then planned to be diverted. This was the Mid Kent Railway, which turned east at New Beckenham to run to Beckenham Junction. The directors were so enthusiastic for a scheme to link their line to Brighton that the direct alignment southward from New Beckenham to Park Langley was reserved for the Brighton project and in its own Act for an Addiscombe extension, obtained on 17 July 1862, a sharp reverse curve to the west was inserted before Clock House station to strike off south-westward to the neighbourhood of Croydon.

The earliest proposal of which I know of the Mid Kent connection to the South Coast was that of the Beckenham, Lewes & Brighton Railway, which was, however, not issued until 1863. It provided for a line from New Beckenham, with a spur from Kent House on the LC&DR, via Park Langley, Biggin Hill, Limpsfield, East Grinstead, Newick and Lewes to a terminus at Kemp Town. The LB&SCR promptly obtained powers for a Brighton and Kemp Town branch in 1864 so as to protect its flank, and this blocking line was opened on 2 August 1869. This scheme was estimated to cost £2,250,000, and Cannon Street to Brighton was claimed to have been 56 miles; the prospectus contained a somewhat specious table of distances.

In 1841 the population of Brighton was 38,000; with the coming of the railway the figure rose in twenty years to 87,000, and during the next two decades to 110,000. It is not surprising, therefore, that although the Beckenham, Lewes & Brighton, despite LC&DR support, did not obtain its Act — the House of Commons committee sat for 25 days — it made another endeavour, this time with branches to Westerham and Eastbourne added to the plans. But in 1864 the Bill was negatived without a division.

It was not long before another scheme was tabled. This time, marvellous to relate, it was presented as a joint South Eastern and Chatham & Dover venture, and furthermore, it obtained its Act. On 6 August 1866 the London, Lewes & Brighton Act was passed, and authorised the South Eastern and the London Chatham & Dover to construct a line from Beckenham to Lewes and Brighton and to work the same without cost until the shareholders in the new company received a dividend of 6%. The Chatham & Dover board promptly announced that it did not recognise the scheme and the South Eastern stated that it would not be able to entertain it until the latter part of 1867. The financial crisis of 1866 made the prospect of raising £2,250,000 of capital and £750,000 loans very doubtful. The mileage authorised was 55, including junctions, and the route was generally similar to that of the Beckenham, Lewes & Brighton. This scheme, left unsupported by the SER and LC&DR, duly faded out, but was succeeded by an attempt to associate the Metropolitan Railway with London by the Sea.

The Metropolitan & Brighton Railway was thought of in 1876, when the SER and Metropolitan directorates had a common chairman in Sir Edward Watkin, and sought to operate from Moorgate Street via

Blackfriars and the LC&DR or via the connection to the South Eastern at Metropolitan Junction (authorised in 1872 and opened in 1878) to Kent House or New Beckenham respectively and thence by new line to Beckenham High Street, West Wickham, Warlingham, Caterham, Godstone, Blindley Heath, East Grinstead, West Hoathly, Lindfield, Haywards Heath, Hurstpierpoint, Newtimber and Patcham to a Pavilion station at Brighton, approached by viaduct. This also came to nothing and the area south of Hayes down to the old SE main line is still not penetrated by rail except for the Westerham branch and the Croydon and Oxted Joint Line. It is, indeed, very difficult country, rising to the escarpment of the North Downs, which is 880ft high at Botley Hill, and broken by steep-sided combs. The only recent proposal for serving it has been Colonel Stephens' Southern Heights Light Railway of 1925 from Sanderstead to Orpington, over which Mid Kent Line electric trains were to have run.

The other south country scheme to which I referred earlier was the LB&SCR Ouse Valley Line, authorised on 23 June 1864, to run 20 miles from just south of the Ouse Valley viaduct on the Brighton main line to Uckfield, where it would have run through the station on the Lewes–Eridge line in the London direction, taking off again across country to Hailsham. It was intended to give an improved approach to Eastbourne. In 1865 the St Leonards undertaking was authorised to build an 18 mile railway from St Leonards to the Ouse Valley and the Tunbridge Wells and Eastbourne, two triangular junctions being formed north and south of Hellingly Station. In 1866 both lines were modified. By 1868 formal abandonment powers were obtained.

The financial crisis of 1866, plus the insistence of Brighton shareholders that the capital account should be closed, combined to kill these schemes, which in any event, do not look very valuable as traffic producers or short cuts when set out on the map. Signs of the work carried out are still visible south of the Ouse viaduct where bridge 109 across the Haywards Heath – Balcombe road has alongside it the abutments of the Ouse Valley line bridge. Across the Haywards Heath – Horsted Keynes branch is a wood concealing the completed embankment. There are bridge abutments on the road past Copyhold Farm and on the lane from Haywards Heath to Ardingly; at Kenwards Farm the embankment has become a cutting in which at the time of my visit, 25 years or so ago, the farm duckpond was fairly established.

London

Many abortive schemes have been associated with the London area. There was a Lord Ebury who was a most fertile planner of railways from Rickmansworth to Amersham, Rickmansworth to Uxbridge and so on, and although the first was eventually covered by the Metropolitan, the second was never implemented. The GWR branch to Uxbridge High Street in part represented it. That branch in itself was intended to join the branch from West Drayton, whereafter Vine Street could have been closed, but the scheme gradually became less attractive to the GWR, although at one time girders for the bridge were erected across the High Street. In the same area the Metropolitan & GCR Watford branch was cut off short of Cassiobury Park but the Metropolitan always hankered for a High Street address and there followed the erection of a typical Metropolitan station building complete with pavement canopy used as a restaurant and later as a furniture shop, which made a handy poster site for Metropolitan posters advertising buses between Watford (Met) and the High Street.

Several papers could be read on inter-railway junctions, especially the Northern Junction Railway scheme that last came up before the war of 1914 for a Brentford–Tottenham connection between all the main lines crossed. Powerful opposition arose against one Bill because it would have cut through Hampstead Garden Suburb and there were great scenes of rejoicing upon its rejection.

The underground system has provided many abortive projects. The City & Brixton intended to use the City & South London's abandoned King William Street terminus and tunnels under the River Thames. The North East London was killed by the Great Eastern, but drove that company into the Decapod experiments; the Central London Railway (CLR) proposal to go to Chertsey excited the LSWR intensely and caused production of that company's electrification scheme, with electric traction to Shepperton high on the list of objectives. Later CLR schemes were to run under Goldhawk Road to Gunnersbury, thence over the LSWR to Richmond — that got on to an underground map — and then in 1920 to use the abandoned Addison Road – The Grove line for a similar purpose.

In the same part of London, the never-completed Latimer Road and Acton Railway of 1882 left some traces — a bridge over the West London and another over the North & South West Junction were visible for many years. The alignment was close to that of

Western Avenue.

Piccadilly trains between Barons Court and South Kensington use the tunnels of the Deep Level District Railway (DLDR), which was to proceed with stations only at Victoria and Charing Cross to the Mansion House. Electric traction on the District itself rendered this unnecessary, but the powers came in useful to get the Great Northern & Strand and Brompton & Piccadilly Circus combined schemes to an outlet westward and to their original car shed at Lillie Bridge. At South Kensington, the flying junction was laid out for the DLDR and one of the otherwise useless platforms was built, to be used for some years as the venue of the Underground school of signalling.

The most extraordinary story of London schemes was that of the Watford & Edgware, authorised as an independent project in 1897 and carefully nurtured by the Underground group over a period of years. Land was bought, bridges were made over the cutting site, cables were diverted and under the 1935 plan it was intended that the Northern Line should go on from Edgware to Bushey Heath, as would the ex-GNR Edgware branch, with a car shed near the terminus. After the Second World War all the effort of half a century proved vain, as it was declared to be Green Belt territory. The car shed is nevertheless industrialising the area as the London Transport Aldenham bus overhaul works.

From South Wales to London

The Metropolitan District Railway (MDR) was to some extent hooked up in a scheme for invasion of Great Western territory apparently hatched by the Barry. In November 1895 the London & South Wales proposals came out for a line from Cogan Junction and Cardiff to an Aust crossing of the Severn, Cricklade, Oxford and Great Missenden, with access to the Metropolis by the Metropolitan & Great Central Joint. As an alternative a branch from Bledlow via High Wycombe and Denham to the Midland at Hendon was proposed; the MDR proposed to revive its favourite Pelham Place terminus scheme at South Kensington (previously deployed for the Guildford, Kingston & London Railway) and to build a line via the Ealing & South Harrow to Uxbridge, High Wycombe and the London & South Wales route. The Barry proposed connection westward by the Vale of Glamorgan Company to Neath and by the Rhondda & Swansea Bay into Swansea. Then the LSWR dropped its Bledlow–Hendon connection and compounded with the Great Western which arranged

to build the Badminton line to South Wales, to give shorter Cardiff times. Subsequently the GWR filled the gap in High Wycombe communications by building the direct Birmingham line from Old Oak through Bicester to Aynho — another unnecessary railway by today's standards.

A remaining influence on District thought was that it ought to have coal yards at suitable suburban stations, fed either via the abortive spur from the Great Central at Sudbury Hill or via the South Acton junction. Some sites were, I believe, examined on the South Harrow line and Hounslow Town was also allocated to the purpose. Then Albert Stanley obtained control of the London General Omnibus Company and it was decided to dismantle the Hounslow Town station spur so as to build a bus garage on the spot.

Light railway schemes

One of the most interesting light railway schemes under the 1896 Act was that of the Mid Suffolk, authorised in 1900 to connect Haughley with Halesworth, with a branch from Kenton to Debenham and Ipswich. The main line was opened from Haughley to Laxfield in 1904 for freight and 1908 for passengers. The line actually ran for a mile beyond Laxfield Station in the direction of Halesworth to Cratfield, and the Debenham branch was completed from Kenton to the village before money ran out; the earthworks are prominent just north of Debenham. A receiver was appointed as early as 1907. In 1914 the Halesworth Light Railway was approved to build the Cratfield–Halesworth link.

Two electric light railway schemes of some note were the Southern Heights from Sanderstead to Orpington, to be electrically operated by the Southern Railway, and the Kearney tube from North to South Shields. The latter secured a provisional order in 1927 but Parliament did not confirm it in 1928.

Lest one should imagine that the wars of construction between the SER and the LC&DR left Kent with too many railways, the Light Railway Commissioners in their wisdom decided otherwise. Apart from any others, there were lines authorised from Pevensey to Robertsbridge (in East Sussex), the Headcorn & Maidstone Junction, with its 1 in 47 bank up the escarpment of the hills by Sutton Valence, and the Maidstone & Sittingbourne. With the Kent & East Sussex as link between Robertsbridge and Headcorn a through service from Pevensey to Sittingbourne would thus have become possible. Whoever would want to go from one to the other is another matter.