

The Railway through Elsenham

The railway historian's view

In 1821 William James, with the backing of the Earl of Hardwicke, surveyed an Engine Railroad from the head of the Stort Navigation at Bishop's Stortford to the River Cam near Cambridge as an alternative to the canal. Extensions were also planned to Norwich, Kings Lynn and Lincoln but the schemes were too ambitious and costly for the period, and like the canal fell into oblivion.

The idea to link London with the northern coal and industrial centre via Cambridge was revived in 1825 by the Northern Railroad Company and surveyed by John and George Rennie. Their route to Cambridge was via the Lea Valley and Barkway and included an extension to the proposed High Peak Railway in Derbyshire. The national depression of the period somewhat curtailed further surveys until in 1833 and 1834 Nicholas Cundy surveyed a route for the Great Northern and Eastern Railway via Bishop's Stortford. The following year Joseph Gibbs surveyed a route further to the east via Epping, Dunmow and Saffron Walden as part of the Great Northern Railway route from London to York. Both of these schemes proposed branches to Norwich.

Cundy's scheme was losing favour to the Great Northern Railway route when Handley, a Lincolnshire MP, saved it from oblivion. With Cundy's concurrence he financed the resurveying of the route via Bishop's Stortford by James Walker, the engineer of the recently completed Leeds and Selby Railway.

This followed the gradual rise of the Lea and Stort valleys to Bishop's Stortford, then over the watershed at Elsenham to Newport, Great Chesterford and Cambridge and emerged as the Northern and Eastern Railway Company.

The Northern and Eastern was incorporated on July 4th 1836, but depression delayed the raising of the capital and construction did not commence until 1839. Costing over £25,000 per mile, the N & E was opened from Stratford to Broxbourne on September 15th 1840 and on to Harlow on August 9th 1841. Spellbrook was reached on November 22nd 1841 and Bishop's Stortford on May 16th 1842. In 1843 the company secured an act to build on to Newport, 10 miles to the north via Elsenham, but in an agreement dated December 23rd 1843 the N & E was taken over by the Eastern Counties Railway on a 999 years lease, with effect from January 1st 1844.

The line was subsequently extended through Elsenham and Newport and on to Cambridge and Brandon, to join up with the Norfolk Railway line from Norwich on July 30th 1845. The Illustrated London News for August 2nd 1845 reported "on Tuesday last, at ten minutes before nine o'clock, a train of double carriages, with an open carriage, in which were the band of the Coldstream Guards, conveyed the worthy Chairmen of the Eastern Counties Railway, the Directors and their friends, a host of men of science, engineers and others, the Earl of Roden, and Lord Braybrook, the Bishop of Norwich, and members of the House of Commons, from the London terminus at Shoreditch, to Cambridge and Ely". Another train left Norwich with lesser dignitaries and the whole company attended a banquet laid on by the Directors. The ILN also provided its readers with a brief description of the route. The

journey to Bishop's Stortford took an hour and a quarter including a stop of ten minutes at Broxbourne. Beyond Bishop's Stortford the "newly laid down rails" commenced and "highly to the credit it is of the engineer, Mr Robert Stephenson, and his contractors, that the work has been executed in so admirable manner. During the whole transit of the train, no jolting, no undulating motion was perceptible, the engine and carriages ran as smoothly as balls on a billiard table, and not an oscillation was felt."

Unfortunately Elsenham receives scant mention but an illustration of the station, then located at Fuller's End level crossing, was included, and is reproduced within this volume. The station was built of the local dark red brick, with white brick offsets, and had small-paned windows in keeping with the company Tudor style. The original location of Elsenham station was perhaps one of the failings of the railway for it was sited on a 1 in 107 gradient, falling for southbound trains but a difficult curving climb for northbound services starting away from the platform, especially in adverse weather. It was of no surprise that after complaints from engine crews, the station was

re-sited to its present position a quarter of a mile further north and on an easier 1 in 2346 gradient adjacent to the minor lane linking Elsenham and Henham. In 1849 three trains called at Elsenham in each direction, with two on Sundays.

The Eastern Counties Railway Illustrated Guide for 1851 mentioned that between Bishop's Stortford and Newport the line "passes over a pleasant tract of country", whilst explaining that construction costs from Bishop's Stortford to Elsenham, a distance of 4 miles was "only £32,962 and from Elsenham to Newport, five miles, £35,981". The only other mention of Elsenham was the fact that the steepest inclines on the line were encountered on each side of the station which was "itself situated on the highest point of the railway." Beyond Elsenham station and on to Newport was described as "cheerful country". Over the years the station developed to handle the traffic generated by the rural community and in June 1858 a small weighing machine was provided for parcels traffic. In August of the same year repairs were made to the platform and foot crossing. Two years later in August 1860 Mr Barnard, malster and corn merchant at Newport, requested the ECR to provide a granary adjacent to the railway and asked on what conditions it could be provided. In November he was advised the land belonged to Mr Coote, but after some negotiations Barnard agreed to rent the land for £20 per annum, which included the hire of some old cattle pens at the station which he used as a salt store. In 1862 the ECR was merged with other East Anglian railway companies to form Great Eastern Railway.

By the early 1870s the Cambridge to London main line was seeing a considerable increase in the number of coal trains wending their way from Peterborough to the various depots in London. The heavy and slow trains lumbering up the grade from Great Chesterford often delayed passenger services and the GER authorities sanctioned the provision of sidings with locomotive water supplies at Elsenham in March 1873, at a cost £888, so that the coal trains could be shunted for the faster services to pass. In the following year a cottage for the signalman was authorised but it was June 1875 before the building was completed at a cost of £390. At the same time the company agreed to provide a footbridge, as a replacement for a footpath crossing north of the station, after several cases of near accidents to pedestrians crossing the railway, whilst the provision of a waiting shelter on the platform, at a cost of £90 was also agreed.

The number of trains passing through Elsenham in each direction was steadily increasing but to date the company had made no provision to conform to Board of Trade regulations on the safe working of trains. The first step came in June 1875 when the signalling firm of Saxby and Farmer Limited were awarded the contract for the provision of block signalling and the interlocking of signals and points at the station at a cost of £636 16s 0d, which included the erection of a new signalbox.

In July 1875 the contract for ironwork for the footbridge was awarded to Oswald Gardner at £166 and although the interlocking was installed, the level crossing gates remained hand operated by a crossing keeper, and a hut costing £25 was provided for his protection in the spring of 1876. Whilst sidings had been provided for up coal trains, no such facilities had been provided for down freight trains, empty wagons back to the collieries, and once again these slower services were delaying passenger trains as they laboured up the incline from Bishop's Stortford. To obviate the problem the provision of a down side refuge siding was approved in November 1877 at a cost of £175. By the early 1880s the freight traffic was still growing and it became necessary in 1881 to provide locomotive inspection pits in the up side sidings so that drivers could inspect their engines whilst waiting for the clearance to continue their journey. Two years later authority was given to increase the water from the existing 18,000 gallons and a larger water storage tank holding 80,000 gallons was provided in 1884 at a cost of £125, whilst in 1885 improvements costing £200 were made to the station buildings. The 1882 timetable showed a service of six trains in each direction calling at Elsenham, with two each way on Sundays.

Further changes came in the last decade of the nineteenth century when additional accommodation was authorised in September 1893 at a cost of £265, the roadway over the level crossing was widened at a cost of £100 in 1896 whilst a weighbridge was provided in the goods yard for £160 in 1898. After the turn of the century additional facilities included the provision of a horse loading dock at a cost of £82 in September 1901 and the completion of the up side waiting room and awning over the platform by J. Glasscock in October 1902 at a cost of £649. The side refuge sidings north of the station were extended to accommodate longer freight trains in April 1903 whilst a second refuge siding was provided on the down side, three years later for £530. The facilities provided at the station had almost reached completion and by 1905 nine trains in each direction were serving Elsenham on weekdays, with two each way on Sundays.

A guidebook issued by the GER in 1911 stated "from Elsenham to Shelford, a distance of seventeen miles, the railway crosses the eastern end of the Chiltern Hills, which are here cut by the valley of the Cam." It further quoted "Around Elsenham, the highest of these villages, the chief natural features are the richly wooded heights and the fine undulating country through which the roads meander." The guide emphasised the attractions of the bracing air and delightful country and whilst there was a fair amount of land available for building at Newport and Shelford, "it is only occasionally that a plot of land" could be obtained for residential development at Elsenham.

In the meantime the Light Railways Act of 1896 had been promoted to alleviate the distress of the agricultural depression by allowing inexpensive railways to be constructed in rural areas. Anticipating the outcome of the bill, then in parliament, Sir Walter Gilbey held a meeting with other interested landowners in the area proposing a light railway linking Elsenham to Thaxted and on to Finchingfield. He engaged an eminent light railway engineer who later advised the building of a narrow gauge line to save costs and after meetings with the GER and the Treasury an application was

made to the Light Railway Commissioners on November 18th 1896 for the construction of the Elsenham and Bardfield Light Railway, costing an estimated £30,565. The matter dragged on for some years, however, until in 1906 the scheme was abandoned in favour of a more modest standard gauge line linking Elsenham with Thaxted. The Light Railway Order was duly granted on April 19th 1911, with three years allowed for the compulsory purchase of land and five years for completion of works. The Land Commission of the Treasury provided a free grant of £15,000 for the line, whilst the GER, who were to supervise construction and work the railway, provided £15,750 of the remaining capital. HV Smith of 20 Victoria Street, London SW was contracted to build the line after tendering at £4167 with the proviso he completed the work by April 19th 1913, whilst William Bell and Sons of Cambridge built the stations and other buildings, tendering at £1537. Anticipating an increase in goods traffic from the Thaxted line, authority was given on July 18th 1912 for the provision of a new goods shed in Elsenham goods yard at an estimated cost of £550. The work was completed by J. Glasscock the following November at a much reduced cost of £365.

The new light railway was officially opened on March 31st 1913, Sir Walter Gilbey, by then aged 82, travelling by car from Brighton to perform the ceremony, accompanied by his daughter Mrs Hine. A train carrying officials of the GER and press representatives ran from Liverpool Street to Elsenham, before reversing to run to Thaxted, Sir Walter and his daughter joining the train at Elsenham. The line was opened to the public the following day. The branch was always self contained, no through tickets were issued and the guard collected fares on the train. The service on the branch varied between three and five trains in each direction on weekdays only. Elsenham station, situated 35 miles from Liverpool Street, and a junction for the Thaxted line was now at its zenith, the main lines being served by the down platform north of, and up platform south of, the level crossing to Station Road. A down reception siding south of the level crossing and a loop line north of the platform were balanced by three goods sidings on the up side and north of the crossing. Signals and points on the main line were controlled from the signalbox located at the back of the down platform and containing a 45 lever frame. The Thaxted line made an almost triangular junction with the main line, but the only physical connection was via a spur leading to the goods yard north of the station. The other spur, complete with a run round loop and short siding, served the passenger bay at the back of the 423 feet long up main line platform. Although so nearly adjoining the main line, the track, on passing the 200 feet long and one foot high branch platform, terminated at buffer stops at the London end of the station. The junction between the spur from the goods yard and the platform line was controlled by a ground frame.

In 1923 the GER became part of the London and North Eastern Railway but few changes were made at Elsenham by the new management, save the conversion of the two up sidings nearest the main line into loop sidings which eased the operation of freight trains needing to be shunted clear of the main line. The train service in 1923 had increased to ten each way on weekdays and two on Sundays. Similar numbers called on weekdays in 1939 but the Sunday services had increased to three in each direction.

The nationalisation of the railways in 1948 had little effect on the day-to-day running of the small wayside station but changes were soon to be made by the new management. Investigations into cost cutting revealed that many branch lines were un-remunerative, including the Elsenham to Thaxted branch, which had seen a steady deterioration in the number of passengers using the line. Thus on September

15th 1952, the passenger service was withdrawn, to be followed by freight services and complete closure from June 1953. In the latter days the goods train only ran three days a week. The 1956 timetable showed a service of eleven trains in each direction calling at Elsenham on weekdays and five each way on Sundays. As the use of motor vehicles increased, many farmers and traders who had used the railway facilities transferred their custom to the motor lorry for door to door collections and delivery, thus obviating the loading and unloading into and out of railway wagons. The tonnages forwarded and received from Elsenham goods yard dwindled to but a shadow of its former figures and British Railways withdrew goods facilities from the station on April 18th 1966, although in fact only coal traffic was handled from January 31st of that year.

The route between Bishop's Stortford and Liverpool Street had been electrified in November 1960 and commuter traffic increased as a result of the improved services. Elsenham was then served by a two hourly service of diesel railcars operated from Bishop's Stortford to Cambridge supplemented by an increasing number of diesel hauled main line trains at peak periods, to cater for the growing commuter traffic as the population increased in the area. The signalbox was abolished on December 11th 1983 when colour light signalling controlled by Cambridge power box replaced the semaphore signalling. British Railways Eastern Region ceded control to Network South East on June 10th 1986 and January 19th of the following year the route to Cambridge gained the benefit of electric train services when the timetable, after an initial hiccup, vastly improved. To cater for eight coach trains the station platforms were lengthened.

In recent years the patrons of Elsenham station have enjoyed a service unknown to their predecessors, enhanced by the introduction of sliding door class 317 electric multiple units operated under driver only conditions from July 1991. For this CCTV cameras and monitors were provided on both up and down side platforms, whilst the tall radio aerial by the level crossing ensures the driver and signalman have direct contact at all times. Under privatisation the route through Elsenham is now operated by West Anglia Great Northern Railway (WAGN) which took over the franchise on January 6th 1997, whilst the East Anglian sector of Railtrack PLC are responsible for the infrastructure. The 1998 summer service showed twenty-five down and twenty-four up services serving Elsenham on Mondays to Fridays and twenty-one and eighteen respectively on Saturdays. Strangely no trains call on Sundays - perhaps emphasising the preference of local inhabitants for the motor car against public transport. The moral must be "use it or lose it".

Peter Paye

It should be borne in mind that this account was written by Peter Paye in 1999 for inclusion in Elsenham Parish Council's Publication "A History of Elsenham The First 1,000 Years"

We are grateful to the Parish Council for permission to reproduce this material.

A study of the census documents from 1851 onwards records the appearance of railway related employment many of these employees living locally.

In 2020 Our Operator was Greater Anglia and the Class 317s were still with us supplemented by Class 379 which entered service in 2011 with the next generation Class 755 stock being seen increasingly running through Elsenham in early 2020.