

LAST TRAIN TO BARNHAM!

(THE BURY AND THETFORD RAILWAY COMPANY)



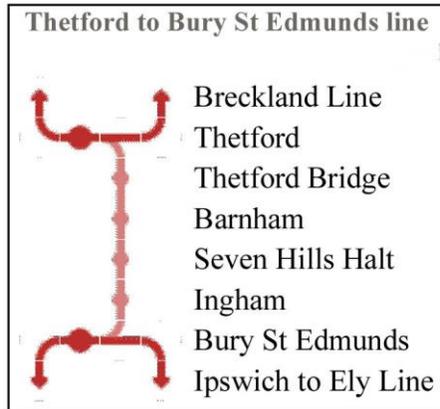
In my article concerning the historical 'goings on' at Barnham Camp in the last issue of the Newsletter, I mentioned the part that was played by the railway in supporting the establishment. This aroused much discussion about the long-defunct rail line so I thought that this could form the basis of another feature - so I started digging! The story that follows is based on research on the Internet, the study of various books and a bit of detective work in looking around the local area.

To begin at the beginning....

In the first half of the 18th Century, the main sea-port for Bury St Edmunds trade was Kings Lynn, reached by boat via the River Ouse and Lark Navigations. The building of the Great Eastern Railway, (GER), line between Bury and Ipswich in 1846 would provide an alternative sea-port at reduced costs but would also put the GER in a monopoly position for Bury trade. The years between 1863 and 1866 became the time of 'Railway Mania' when every town or village wanted their own railway. Edward and John Greene, brewers in Bury, believed the town needed an alternative outlet to reduce the dependence upon the GER so they applied for, and obtained, an Act of Parliament for the building of a new railway. (As an aside here, and to answer a question that will be on a lot of people's minds, another Bury brewer, Frederick King, was finding it difficult to compete with Greene so he agreed to an amalgamation in 1877 to form Greene, King and Sons the forerunner of today's brewery in the town.)

So it was that in 1865, Edward Greene and Robert Boby, (Ironmonger and Engineer in the town), set up the Bury and Thetford Railway Company along with two further Directors Peter

Huddleston, (Greene's banking partner), and Hunter Rodwell, (barrister of Ampton Court). Others were less enthusiastic and it took another 9 years to raise the required £100,000.



Between the main stations at Bury and Thetford, the plan included intermediate stations at Ingham, Seven Hills Halt, Barnham and Thetford Bridge, (in the east of the town). Trains to Kings Lynn would then proceed for a short distance via the Breckland Line and thence via the Thetford and Watton Railway, (T&WR), through Swaffham and onward to Kings Lynn. As both the B&TR and W&TR entered Thetford station from the east, through trains would have to 'reverse' in order to continue north. This would obviously cause operational problems so the plans were amended so that 'through' trains proceeded via an

additional link line which avoided the main Thetford station entirely and only stopped at the B&TR Thetford Bridge station. An agreement was reached whereby the B&TR would, in effect, be operated by the T&WR and predominantly use their locomotives and rolling stock on the new line.

The railway finally opened on 1st March 1876 to much fanfare with the Town Bands and various activities at each of the stations providing a holiday atmosphere. However the 11 year delay between planning and opening of the line was to have a serious and detrimental effect on its prosperity. In 1875, a year before the opening, an agricultural depression hit the country and would last throughout the 1880's and 1890's with the Breckland around Thetford being one of the worst hit areas. Only two years after the opening, the new Railway Company and its line were sold to the Great Eastern Railway for only half of what it had cost to build.

Let us take a ride along the line, taking a moment here and there to see what happened over the years at the various places through which the line passed and relate the route to the geography of today.



Leaving Bury St Edmunds station on the GER line and heading east, after 300yds and on the southern edge of what is now Tesco's car park, the line split into three. The main line continued towards Ipswich, the southern branch headed towards Sudbury whilst the Bury and Thetford Railway, (B&TR), branch line swung north around the south-eastern corner of what is now the 'Sugar Beet' roundabout. The main British Sugar office complex, which

can be seen from the roundabout, is built on the old trackbed and part of the route of the line is now submerged under one of the factory sludge lagoons!

The long sweeping curve of the 'new' A143, Compiègne Way, crosses the old line about 350 yds before the A143/A134 roundabout. The line continued north through a cutting and crossed Barton Hill via an underpass just west of what is now Oak Grove.

From this point until leaving Ingham, the route of the line is much more discernible today. It crossed the route of the new A134 dual carriageway, Fornham St Martin bypass, very close to

the new overbridge which carries 'The Drift' – formerly, 'Farm Drift'. Continuing north via a series of cuttings and embankments, it next passed under the B1106, Barton Bottom – this humpbacked bridge for road traffic is still there as I am sure you know! The line then paralleled the A134 with an overbridge at Timworth – whilst the bridge span here is long gone, the brick abutments remain.

During the First World War there were several military camping sites in the area and one such was just to the south of Ingham.

Following the eastern edge of Ingham village, the line passed under the Ampton / Great Livermere road and immediately entered Ingham Station.

The photograph below shows a detachment of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders awaiting a train at Ingham to take them to Masham for exercises in 1917. Ingham station building still exists behind the Woodside Business Park industrial estate and can just be seen from the by-road but is private property.



Continuing on its way, the line again crossed the A134 adjacent to what is now the entrance to Cardy's quarry – at this point there was a sharp 'S' bend in the road to enable it to pass under the railway bridge but following closure of the line the bridge was demolished and the road straightened. The route from here has now been mostly returned to agriculture but, 1¼ miles north and 500yds along the track next to 'The Parsonage', there remains some evidence of the

location of Seven Hills Halt and sidings which was presumably intended for agricultural goods traffic. (Passengers wishing to alight here had to travel in a specific carriage as the platform was very short and it was a long drop to the ground if you were in the wrong one!)

From Seven Hills Halt, the route headed in a NNW direction passing between Culford Heath and the wood known as Ash Covert and thence west of Culford Lodge. (In 1916 there was a secret tank-testing site on 25 square miles of the Elveden Estate and additional sidings were laid in this area for the loading and unloading of tanks – but this is a story for another time!)

From here, and now due west of the junction between the A134 and Green Lane, (for Rymer Court and Honington), the line is more discernible again today as it then veered round into an NNE direction when 150 yds west of New Zealand Cottages. The track was now virtually

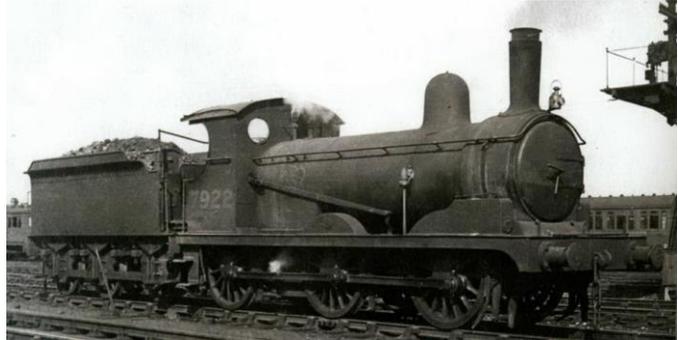


straight until it arrived at Barnham Station and sidings which were on the south side of Station.

The photograph at left was taken in 1910 and shows the rear of the station building with a waiting horse and carriage. None of the original structures here appear to have survived.

A level crossing enabled the line to cross Station Road and the line cut across the corner of what was to become Barnham Camp where many more sidings were later installed for military purposes. (Please look at the Easter edition of this Newsletter for more information about the 'goings-on' here!).

The locomotive shown, right, is a GER Y14 / LNER J15 and one of three that was fitted with a spark-arrestor on the chimney for working in the Barnham bomb storage area. This class of locomotive was the workhorse of rural East Anglian rail lines. Production of these engines started in July 1883 and a total of 259 were built in 27 batches up



until 1913 with all but 19 being built in the GER Stratford works in east London. (During WW1, 43 were loaned to the Government for use in France.) As they aged, they were gradually withdrawn from service and scrapped with the first withdrawal in 1922 and the scrapping program continued after the GER was absorbed by the London and North Eastern Railway, (LNER), following the grouping in 1923. However 127 survived into nationalisation and the formation of British Railways in 1948 with the last example being withdrawn in September 1962. One example survived into preservation and can be seen at the North Norfolk Railway.

Crossing the A134 for the final time at a point 300yds south of today's entrance to Barnham Camp, the line passed along the eastern edge of what is now the Nunnery Lakes Nature Reserve – part of the old trackbed on this section is now an access track to the lakes.

Now at the eastern edge of Thetford, and on a line now forming the eastern boundary of the homes on Arlington Way, the line reached the penultimate station at Thetford Bridge. Here, in addition to the station building, there were considerable facilities with a number of sidings along with a goods shed and yard. Whilst the station building itself did find use as a club house for a while after closure, once again there appears to be no surviving evidence of the railway today – indeed, much of the site is now buried beneath the A1066 / A1088 / Castle Street roundabout. The photograph here shows the station building soon after closure. The track was still in situ but is evidently becoming overgrown with weeds. From here, the line began a long sweeping curve to the west and it would appear that the trackbed forms the foundation for the A1066, Hurth Way. Where Norwich road now enters the A1066 / A1075 roundabout, the line forked.



The 'left' fork continued on the westerly curve, probably along what is now Glebe Close, (parallel with the A1066, Mundford Road), before joining with the Great Eastern Railway line at a junction a few yards east of Croxton Road. From here, it was only about 350yds to Thetford station on the main GER line between Ely and Norwich.

Backing up a bit to where the B&TR line forked just after Thetford Bridge station, the 'right' fork curved quite sharply to a junction just east of the today's Drake Infant School and Nursery where the B&TR line met the same GER line – but heading in the opposite direction to the other fork. This link was the section of line that was added to the original plans in order for trains using the Thetford and Watton Railway to get to Swaffham and Kings Lynn without the need to reverse direction at Thetford. Trains for this route would continue along the GER line for some 3 ½ miles to the junction at Roudham Heath where the T&WR diverged northwards from the GER main line. However it would appear that this additional link line was removed by the GER shortly after they took over the B&TR - which seems a bit odd!

Apart from the surges in rail traffic during the two world Wars and the traffic generated by the atomic weapons storage facility at Barnham Camp in the early 1950's, the railway was little more than a sleepy rural line with probably no more than 4 passenger and 1 goods train in each direction daily - except weekends, it would appear. The timetable shown here is dated 1947.

Table 34		BURY ST. EDMUNDS and THETFORD									
		Week Days only					Week Days only				
Miles		a.m.	a.m.	a.m.	p.m.	Miles		a.m.	a.m.	p.m.	p.m.
32	London (Lpool) to Stades	5:50	10:35	1:0		1	Thetford..... dep	8:35	11:43	3:10	6:35
	Bury St. Edmunds..... dep	7:2	10:40	1:40	4:23	1	Thetford Bridge.....	8:25	11:47	3:14	6:29
34	Ingham.....	7:11	10:29	1:49	4:32	34	Barnham.....	8:45	11:53	3:20	6:45
64	Seven Hills Halt.....	7:16	10:54	1:54	4:39	7	Seven Hills Halt.....	8:52	12:0	3:27	6:52
94	Barnham.....	7:22	11:0	2:0	4:45	9	Ingham.....	8:57	12:5	3:32	6:57
114	Thetford Bridge.....	7:28	11:6	2:6	4:51	124	Bury St. Edmunds. arr	9:5	12:13	3:40	7:5
124	Thetford..... arr	7:33	11:12	2:11	4:58	95	32 London (Lpool) to Stades arr	12:17	5:37	7:11	11:19

A Via Can bridge. F Via Long Melford and Mark's Tey L Arr. 6.51 p.m. on Fridays. 7 Arr 3.30 p.m. on Sats.
 Tickets from Seven Hills Halt, Barnham and Thetford Bridge are issued on train.
 Passengers from or to Seven Hills Halt must travel in special car provided.

With the improvement in the road network and the increase in car ownership, together with competition from bus services, use of the line declined rapidly after the Second World War so that on 8th June 1953 the last passenger train travelled the route - (OK - there was one more but I will get to that shortly!).

In honour of this last scheduled passenger train, the local amateur dramatic societies were in Victorian costume for the 'funeral' - complete with a coffin! Bands played at Bury and Thetford and the civic dignitaries were in attendance.

Freight services also declined and were soon operated 'as required' and to a very leisurely and flexible schedule - it would appear that it was not unusual for the crew of these goods trains to leave their charge in Ingham station yard whilst they had a 'couple of pints' with their lunch in the Cadogan!

Final closure was scheduled for 27th June 1960 but on Saturday 11th June, the Railway Society organised a charter to make a final trip over the line. A motley selection of 3 LMS and 2 LNER guards vans for the 'passengers' were hauled by a remarkably clean J15 locomotive, n^o. 65469. This particular engine, one of the last of the type still in service, was a bit of a 'celebrity' being spruced up by the Norwich Shedmaster and given red siderods, a cream cab interior(!) and a different chimney for use on such special occasions. The photograph at the beginning of this feature shows the train standing at Barnham station whilst the one following shows it in Thetford yard before the train was re-marshalled for the return trip to Bury St. Edmunds.



It was a sad day as the last goods train worked the line from Bury to Thetford a couple of weeks later. Only one man turned up at the station for the send-off. He was Mr William F White, the Borough Treasurer of Bury St Edmunds, who was also an amateur rail enthusiast. A local reporter was tasked to record the event and together they managed to hitch a ride on this last train to Thetford where the 'reception committee' was a solitary 14 year old trainspotter. (One final note; the Bury St. Edmunds and Thetford Railway was NOT a victim of the Beeching cuts - it didn't last long enough for that!)