

Proposed Railways West of Staines 1844-1883

By Mick Hutson (August 1973)

It could be said that, in the British Isles, for every mile of railway that was built at least four or five miles were proposed and rejected, or were not built for other various reasons. This is certainly true of the area between Staines and Reading, where schemes came thick and fast in the 19th Century, and especially in 1845. In describing their history it is best to ignore, as far as possible, those lines which actually came to operational fruition.

Two factors influenced the planning and construction of these lines, the first being local transport requirements, the second being the attempts to provide narrow-gauge (4ft 8¹/₂ inches) rail connections to the lines running to London and Reading from the Midlands to those lines running to the South Coast. These latter were effectively attempts to 'by-pass' London; it is noticeable that while the attempts at providing local service lines were largely successful, those from North to South were marked by their high failure rate.

In October 1844 Joseph Locke, the engineer of the London & South Western Railway threw the first dice by suggesting that his company build a line from Woking or Weybridge, on the L&SWR main line, to Staines; the L&SWR board wanted to go on to Colnbrook, to join a line that they suggested the London and Birmingham Railway could build from Watford. The L&B were not interested in this, however, so the L&SWR confined its surveys to between Weybridge and Windsor. Fishing for support, the company stressed the travel advantages that such a line would bring to the Queen. These efforts bore fruit when on 16th July 1846 an Act for a branch from Weybridge to an Egham terminus near Staines Bridge, via Chertsey, was passed. This somewhat modified route was altered still further by the time it opened, for the line was only built as far as a 'temporary' terminus at Chertsey, opening on the 14th February 1848; Chertsey remained the terminus until 1866. This was due to the advent of the Windsor Staines & South Western Railway. This Company had obtained an Act, on 25th June 1847 (Number Two Act, Capital \$300,000; Number One Act was for the Richmond-Windsor line) for a line from Staines through Egham to Pirbright, which it was hoped would ease traffic pressure on the L&SWR main line. A branch to Chertsey was included, but the L&SWR were compelled to abandon their line to Egham under the Act. The WS&SWR had hoped to go on to Wokingham as well, but the Commons Committee rejected this. The post-Mania depression claimed the scheme and powers lapsed.

In 1845 'Railway Mania' had hit the area with a vengeance. Schemes flooded in, and resulted in plans that would have sent railways in literally all directions, if they had come to fruition; only one did so. The schemes can be divided into total failures, partial failures and a solitary success.

Firstly, the total failures. The Northern and Southern Connecting Railway proposed to honour its name by connecting Welwyn, on the Great Northern Railway main line, with Redhill on the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway. It proposed to do this by way of Watford, Uxbridge, Staines, Chertsey and Dorking; spurs would link it to Slough, and the Great Western Railway, from Colnbrook and Weybridge, and the L&SWR from Addlestone (this was before the L&SWR's Chertsey branch had been authorised). It got no further than the proposal stage.

The Royal Grand Junction Railway, despite its awe-inspiring title, was a more modest affair, which proposed to link Slough and Dorking via Staines and Weybridge. It went the same way as the N&SCR. Two more companies followed in November 1845. The first was the Tring and Reigate Railway running from Tring to Redhill via Chesham, Slough, Chertsey, Weybridge and Leatherhead. It would

have been connected to the L&SWR at Weybridge, but it failed to marshal enough support to do more than propose. The other one was the Tring, Reading and Basingstoke, running via Princes Risborough, Henley and Mortimer, it got no further than any of those above.

We now move on to firmer ground. During the year the Reading and Reigate Atmospheric Railway had issued its prospectus. It proposed to run from Reading, then North of Wokingham to turn Southwards, through Easthampstead to Farnborough, Dorking, Reigate and Redhill. It had engaged and acting engineer with the splendid name of Sandiforth F. Griffin, and required capital of £800,000. The R&RAR was also notable, not only for its proposed use of atmospheric traction, but also for the chameleon like properties that its name possessed. It had started its prospectus life as the somewhat grandiose Devonport, Bristol and Dover Railway and then scrapped Dover to become the Reading and Reigate Junction Railway, before adopting its final title. In the autumn of 1845 the direct London & Portsmouth Railway, offered a mutual exchange of running powers over their proposed lines, the DL&PR to Redhill, the R&RAR to Godalming. This was agreed to, and to cement it two DL&PR directors joined the Reading line board.

However events now changed. During 1845 another Company, the Reading, Guildford and Reigate Railway had been proposed. Surveyed by Francis Giles (late of the L&SWR) and Samuel Hughes, it linked Reading to Farnborough, Ash, Guildford and Dorking and Redhill, following closely the route of the R&RAR, and utilising L&SWR metals for part of the way. It obviously had so much in common with the R&RAR that the latter agreed to amalgamate in February 1846; atmospheric traction was dropped, and it was agreed to lease to the South Eastern Railway on completion. The War Office provided valuable support, and the RG&R was incorporated in 1846; it survived the mania crash, and opened throughout on the 20th August 1849, The SER purchased it in 1852.

On the 16th July 1846 the L&SWR's Hampton Court branch obtained its Act so Locke suggested extending it to Windsor, joining the line from Weybridge at Staines, and with a new branch from Chertsey to Ascot Racecourse. This all depended on the Windsor, Staines and South Western Railway's Bill failing, and construction of the Hampton Court line was postponed while the W&SW bill was under consideration; in 1847 the WS&SW Number One Act (for Windsor) succeeded, so the L&SW forgot its proposal and started work on the Hampton Court Branch.

The Railway Mania slump effectively quietened things down for the next five years, since people were unwilling to invest what little was available in new construction. Existing proposals, however, were sometimes completed; in 1848 the WS&SW reached Windsor via Staines and this encouraged local initiative to take over where the major companies had failed.

In October 1852 the Staines, Wokingham and Woking Railway was incorporated, a product of local frustration at the failure of the WS&SW to come to fruition. It proposed a main line from Staines to Ascot and Wokingham, with running powers over the RG&R into Reading, as well as a five mile branch to Woking Junction from Virginia Water via Cobham. The whole line was authorised on 8th July 1853, but the Woking branch was never built despite the pleas of local residents. The SWWJR had designs on Oxford, and the access available to the North from that town. They proposed to go there in 1853, but failed, however events changed in 1854 when the GWR laid mixed gauge from Basingstoke to Oxford as part of an agreement with the L&SWR. The SWWJR main line opened throughout on 9th July 1856, the L&SWR worked it from the start on a lease and in 1878 the companies amalgamated. The problem at Reading was that the SWWJ was on the opposite side of the town to the mixed line, so in 1855 they proposed to build a junction line. The SER didn't want to participate, but agreed not to oppose it; the GWR naturally opposed it. To cut a long story short, the

bill was rejected, but in 1857 a joint Reading Junction railway was sponsored by all three companies, and this opened in 1859.

In 1862 the West Drayton, Staines and Woking Junction Railway appeared on the scene, with a plan for a line from West Drayton to Staines (on the L&SW) and Longcross (on the SWWJ west of Virginia Water) to Woking. It wanted running powers from Staines to Longcross (near the site of the present halt) and from West Drayton to Uxbridge by mixing the gauge of the existing GW branch, to join end on with the Watford and Rickmansworth Railway projected in 1861. Following that company's line to near Watford; from where running powers could be obtained over the London & North Western Railway to Watford. The WDS&WJR got no further than its own prospectus, but the W&RR managed to get its Act before collapsing, the powers expiring in 1870.

The rest of the 19th Century saw three belated, and unsuccessful, attempts to provide North-South communication across the no-mans land between the GWR in the North and the SWWJ in the South. They failed partly because the major companies were disinterested, not wanting to be forced into territorial wars with each other over these lines, and because other adequate routes existed elsewhere (at Reading, Acton and Addison Road). At the same time the LSW completed the modern rail network with two predominantly local lines.

In 1866 the L&SW belatedly provided the Chertsey - Virginia Water link, a line that was to become important as a freight route in years to come; it opened on the 1st October. This was followed, in 1871, by the first of the abortive North-South proposals. It set a precedent by proposing to terminate in the North at a junction with the GWR Windsor branch at Windsor. This was the Windsor and Aldershot Railway, which proposed to join the GWR with a triangular junction, then run South to Ascot, to follow the course of the present Ascot-Ash Vale line (see below) to Sturt Lane Junction with the LSW main line with a connection to the RG&R at Blackwater. This project came to nothing however.

By the time that the next proposal appeared in 1881, the LSW had plugged the final gap in the present rail network when, in 1878, the Ascot -Sturt Lane Junction branch was opened. The proposal in question was the somewhat optimistic Windsor, Aldershot and Portsmouth Railway. Leaving Windsor (GW) this would have run in a south-westerly direction to turn South to cross the SW&WJ between Bracknell and Wokingham (no junction was proposed) before running to Crowthorne, utilising RG&R tracks as far as Aldershot, where a junction would be made with the LSW, before turning South to follow the Meon Valley to the South Coast; nothing came of it.

Finally, to end this generally sorry tale, came the Windsor, Ascot and Aldershot Railway in 1883. Very similar to the route of the W&AR of 1871, it would have run from Windsor to utilise the newly opened L&SWR from Ascot to its own terminus at Aldershot. Connections were proposed to the L&SW from Frimley to near Deepcut, and to the R&GR near North camp. It, likewise, failed to muster sufficient support.

Most of the proposals which failed did so because they were too speculative and far fetched; local proposals stood a far better chance of success, and often did succeed; the collapse of the mania in 1846 destroyed many schemes which might have come to fruition, and tended to discourage investment in those projects put forward by small companies to a far greater extent than those put forward by the major companies; hence the success of the L&SW's post 1860 schemes and the concurrent failure of the 1862/71/81/83 proposals. This story is not unique; it was repeated all over the country.