

THE HASLEMERE SOCIETY



Commemoration of the Railway coming to Haslemere in 1859

Plaque at Haslemere Station



Haslemere in the first half of the nineteenth century

It is hard to escape the conclusion that Haslemere by the end of the first half of the Nineteenth Century was a rather sleepy and far from prosperous place: a place to pass through rather than to visit. In 1800 the population was around 500 and it is unlikely to have increased by much in the intervening years. The prosperity of the town had long been based on the rural economy that surrounds it and also its position as a staging post for travellers from London to Chichester and Portsmouth. Frequent elections for its two sitting MPs had also brought a brisk trade to the town's fourteen inns during its consistently corrupt elections: but in 1832, the Great Reform Act had brought an end to its status as a parliamentary constituency.

An incident reported in *The Times* on 5th April 1839 serves to illuminate something of life in and around the town at this time. On 16th March 1839, Edward James Baker, one of a number of substantial landowners in the area who had steadily been increasing the size of their estates, often through the enclosure of common land, was shot at and wounded in the arm shortly after leaving the Portsmouth Road en-route to his home of Frensham Hall which still stands in the Hindhead Road. The subsequent account of a successful investigation to apprehend the perpetrator, one Sparkey White, is revealing in a number of particulars. Firstly Mr White lived in a hut on Hindhead Heath, described as "a wild common, on which several huts are built, chiefly inhabited by poachers and other lawless persons". Secondly application to apprehend the guilty party had to be made to the magistrates at Bow Street in London, but as luck would have it an officer of the magistrate happened already to be in the area investigating another case in which 20 sheep had their throats cut only five days earlier! While it would be wrong to draw the conclusion that the magistrates were regularly in the area, this story does highlight a level of poverty and lawlessness in the area.

Improved communications had proved a mixed blessing. The building of the turnpike road (today the A286) to Milford in the second half of the eighteenth century had increased the flow of traffic to and from Chichester, but by 1850 much of this traffic was using the route through Chiddingfold. Even the semaphore tower, erected in Haste Hill in 1822 as one of a chain of towers from the Admiralty in London to Portsmouth had been made redundant by electric telegraphy and last used in 1847. Furthermore, the introduction of the first phase of the national railway network in the 1830s had also adversely affected the volume of traffic passing through the area, as new, faster routes to the south coast were opened up.

The building of the railway through Haslemere, was to dramatically change the town for ever.

The coming of the railway

Britain's first recognisably modern intercity railway, the Liverpool and Manchester opened in 1830. Despite its early economic success, the 1830s saw the British economy slow down with the result that this was not quickly followed by further investment.

By the mid-1840s, a recovering economy, combined with an increasingly affluent middle-class, falling interest on government bonds and an almost totally laissez-faire system of no regulation of the railways led to a boom of railway construction subsequently known as railway mania. Much of the funding came from private investors who were only required to place a 10% deposit on their shares to participate in what was thought to be a copper bottom investment.

The bubble burst at the end of 1845 and investment stopped virtually overnight, leaving many companies without funding and numerous investors with no prospect of any return on their investment. Many middle-class families lost everything when the speculation collapsed.

As a result, as can be seen from the map, by 1851 the region had an extensive but strategically incoherent railway network. Portsmouth, the country's principal naval port, had two routes from London: Waterloo to Gosport via Basingstoke, and London Bridge to Portsmouth via Brighton. The planned route via Chichester now terminated at Godalming, with no funds to continue. As the forthcoming Crimean War (1853-56) was to prove, a more direct route was critical to the national interest.

Against this background and renewed investor appetite, the Portsmouth Railway was authorised on 8 July 1853 to build from just north of the Godalming terminus to Havant via Witley, Haslemere and Petersfield; it would be 32 miles long and the capital was to be £400,000.

Work got underway fairly quickly, proceeding at a slower than planned rate due to regular funding challenges. By 1855 around 200 "navvies" were lodging in Haslemere, swelling the population by 40 per cent



Map showing the extent of the railway network in 1850

The Railway Navvies

The itinerant construction workers who build our railways were known at the time as navvies, a word derived from “navigators” and first applied to the workers who had constructed the canal network in the eighteenth century.

By 1855 a quarter of a million workers – a force bigger than the Army and Royal Navy put together – had laid down 3,000 miles of railway line across Britain. By the standards of the day they were well paid, but their work was hard and often very dangerous.

They built a reputation for fighting, hard living and hard drinking. ‘Respectable’ Victorians viewed them as degenerate.

The railway navvies soon came to form a distinct group, set apart by the special nature of their work. They were assembled in huge armies of workers, men and women from all parts of the British Isles and even continental Europe. Many had fled famine in Ireland, and some were the ancestors of the travellers who live in Britain today.

Tramping from job to job, navvies and their families lived and worked in appalling conditions, often for years on end, in rough timber and turf huts alongside the bridges, tunnels and cuttings that they built. In the 1850s there was no compensation for death or injury, and railway engineers like Brunel resisted all efforts to provide their workers with adequate housing and sanitation, or safe working conditions.

By the summer of 1855, the image of the navy was undergoing something of a transformation. Regular reports of the construction of the railway line between Balaclava and Sevastopol in the Crimea to support the siege which had commenced in February had built recognition of the heroic and gruelling nature of their work.



Tragedy on the night of 29 July 1855

While, as we shall see, the opening of the railway was to put Haslemere on the map, events on the night of 29 July 1855 drew attention to the town in the national press in a way that had not been the case since the rotten borough elections of the 18th century.

On that night, an affray resulting from an argument between a group of railway navvies who had been drinking heavily, having received their biweekly wages earlier that evening led to the death of the local police inspector, Inspector Donaldson, the first serving police officer in Surrey to die in the course of service. The full story of this night can be found in the leaflet accompanying the society's plaque commemorating the "riot".

Opening of the Railway

The single track railway finally opened on 1 January 1859 ushering in a new era for Haslemere which so defines the town to this day, a place now to come to rather than pass through.



However, owing to disputes with the other railway operators, it was not until 1860 that trains were able to continue beyond Havant to Portsmouth and not until 1876 that the extension to Portsmouth Harbour was completed. Only in 1878 was the line between Godalming and Havant finally increased to a twin track railway, delivering the capacity that has largely remained unchanged until today.

The original terminus station at Godalming, that had been intended to be the transit point to Chichester, remained open until 1897 when it finally closed to passengers.

Impact of the railway on Haslemere

There can be no doubt that the arrival of the railway transformed Haslemere from the sleepy town previously described. Even in the early days the journey time from London was reduced to 1 hour 30 minutes making it eminently possible for a daily commute.

An early migrant to the town was John Wornham Penfold, secretary of the surveyors institution (the Royal Institute of chartered surveyors as it is today) who subsequently wrote up the history of the town. Born into a family with long connections in the town, he was able to return to Haslemere in 1873 while pursuing his career in London.

More significantly Ann Gilchrest, better known by her nom de plume George Eliot spent the summer of 1866 in the town writing her bestselling novel Middlemarch during her stay. Her friend, Alfred Tennyson visited her, lodging in Greatly Stoatley farm, and was so taken by the area that in 1869 he moved to Haslemere, commissioning his mansion Aldsworth on Blackdown Hills.

Tennyson was quickly followed by a literary and intellectual elite who constructed large houses for themselves, most typically in the direction of Hindhead to take advantage of the natural beauty of the local area and air that was reported to be comparable to that of Switzerland.

This intellectual flowering, in turn enriched the cultural life of the town, such that by the late 19th century there was a thriving community supported by the wealth brought to the town by an increasing number of commuters to London. To this day, much of the wealth in the town derives from commuters with the challenge in the 21st-century being to ensure that more of this money is spent within the town in the Internet age.

The opening of the station hub builds on this rich tradition, seeking to attract more visitors to the town and to the surrounding beauties of the Devil's Punchbowl, Hindhead common, Blackdown, and as the gateway to the South Downs National Park.



A steam train at the station in 1896



Waiting to go to Portsmouth: 1893



King Edward VII arrives at the station in 1903 en-route to opening the hospital in Midhurst



The station in 1913



The station in 1911

Photographs in this leaflet have been made available under licence from Haslemere Educational Museum or Middleton Press to both of whom we are most grateful