

TAKING THE TRAINS TO LIVERPOOL STREET

Read by Wendy Hyde

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In my paper, 'Taking the Trains to Liverpool Street' I propose to cover both the development of the railway line to Liverpool Street and the people who eventually took the trains to travel to work, creating a pattern of social change which still leaves its mark today.

The period covered starts in the 1860s when London was being transformed by some significant civil engineering projects. New sewers were laid, the Victoria Embankment was built and the new meat and poultry market at Smithfield was completed. However, the greatest upheaval and eventual transformation was being caused by the building of railways.

At the beginning of the decade, London was encircled by seven terminal stations. A Royal Commission of 1846 had laid down that no new railway was to come within the heart of the City or the West End. None of the Companies operating south of the river had crossed the Thames but stopped short at London Bridge or Waterloo. Transfer between the lines had to be by road. The situation began to change with the opening of the Metropolitan Railway initially from Paddington to Farringdon Street, running mostly underground. It was eventually extended by stages to form today's Circle Line. The line was extremely successful and demonstrated to the railway companies the opportunities for profit and to the government of London the advantages of taking traffic off the congested roads.

The 1860s therefore saw a boom in proposals for new railway schemes, especially those providing further links across the City but as important were plans to build new terminal stations. The large number of schemes put before Parliament in 1863 & 1864 brought to a head the debate about railway building in London. The City felt that it was under threat as competing schemes threatened to tear it apart. Two parliamentary committees met to discuss railway developments, one in 1863 and one in 1864. The Corporation established a Ward Committee to report to the Court of Common Council on whether any of the schemes were 'likely to affect the interests of the City by the disfigurement of streets, the undue annihilation of buildings, the destruction of trade and the expulsion of inhabitants'.

The Court received representations from the Ward of Bishopsgate, in which Liverpool Street Station was eventually sited, asking that the Court 'adopt such measures as may be deemed advisable to prevent the carrying out of such schemes which will entail ruin on so many of its inhabitants.'

The work of the City's Railways Committee culminated in a Petition to Parliament, praying that Parliament suspend all legislation on the subject of the proposed railway schemes coming into the City. The Corporation had hoped that more time would lead to a better review of the schemes and possibly of the private bill procedure which was considered inadequate to cope with such a flood of proposals. This did not happen although the 1864 Parliamentary Committee Report recognised the disruption being caused and declined a number of the schemes requested. One that did get through was the request by the Great Eastern to penetrate through the boundary laid down in 1846 and establish a terminus at Liverpool Street, closer to the City than its existing one in Shoreditch.

The Parliamentary Bill to approve the scheme was passed in 1864. As well as sanctioning the extension of the railway from Shoreditch to the City & the new terminus, it also permitted the building of certain suburban lines, particularly a new line from Bethnal Green to Edmonton and a branch from Hackney Downs to Walthamstow. Along each of these lines the company was required to run a daily workmen's train at a return fare of 2d. The Great Eastern was not the first company to accept an obligation of this kind, designed to compensate those whose lives had been disrupted by the building works but the extent of its obligation and its long-term repercussions were unique.

After becoming Chairman of the Great Eastern in 1868, Lord Salisbury stated that 'What was done in 1865 was one of the greatest mistakes ever committed in connection with a railway.' His arguments were based on the weak financial position of the Company compared with the cost of the new works. However, the way in which the Company hoped to establish itself was by developing suburban traffic in the London area. The parts of South West Essex, which later became some of the densest London Suburbs, were still lightly populated. The railway hoped to speed up the development which was already beginning by offering reduced fares to suburban housebuilders and residents. However, the Company's existing terminus was not suitable for this purpose as it was too small and inconveniently situated at High Street, Shoreditch, then one of the poorest slums in London. Daily commuters were not likely to be attracted by the comparatively long walk into the City, or deceived by the station having been re-named Bishopsgate in 1846 to make it appear closer to the heart of things.

The Directors moved swiftly to get the scheme underway. Two weeks after the Bill had received Royal assent a special shareholders' meeting authorised the raising of £1,363,000 as the Act permitted and 3 months later the contractors, Lucas Brothers, were appointed. Early in 1865, on the advice of the contractors, it was decided to issue compulsory purchase orders for all the property between Liverpool Street and Hackney which was required for the extension. Unfortunately, in a year when so many other companies were competing to raise capital, the Great Eastern was not considered to offer the most attractive investment. It was clear by December that the money needed to buy the land was not materialising fast enough for the Company to meet its commitments. Those whose property had been subject to compulsory purchase were suffering loss of business & demanding to be paid, in some cases, pressing their claims through the courts. The Directors tried to bridge the gap by borrowing on mortgage but failed to go through the proper procedure for getting the approval of shareholders. When this was discovered, a formal investigation into the state of the Company was commissioned & this further damaged its public reputation.

The Directors might still have been able to extricate the Company from its difficulties had it not been for a financial crash which started in May 1866 as a result of the failure of the bill brokers, Overend, Gurney and Company. They had been heavily involved in railway financing and their failure caused a crisis of confidence among investors. Ten banks collapsed as did the great contracting firm Peto and Best. By July 1867 the Great Eastern was unable to renew debentures worth £70,000 and one of the Debenture holders applied for the appointment of a receiver. The building of the Liverpool Street extension was the main cause of the Company's collapse, and the directors were at fault for committing to land purchases beyond the Company's means as well as substantially underestimating total land costs.

Despite considerable doubts about the project, it was eventually decided that the Great Eastern was so far committed to the scheme that there was no choice but to go forward. In August 1867 Parliament approved a Bill to allow the company to raise a further £3m & new management was appointed under the Chairmanship of Lord Salisbury. Under his direction, the company emerged from receivership in 1869 and work was able to go ahead with some alterations to the original plans, particularly the lowering of the tracks so that connection to the Metropolitan Line was possible. This was seen as important at the time as it would allow a link through to the Great Western Railway but that was never much used. A temporary station opened in February 1874 to serve the suburban traffic which was already growing following the earlier opening of branch lines to Edmonton & Chingford. The new station was fully opened in 1875, eleven years after the Act sanctioning its building, with ten tracks on what is now the west side of the station.

Although payment to property owners had almost destroyed the Company, no attempt was made to compensate tenants of the buildings to be demolished, as had been accepted practice with other railway projects. It was estimated that over 3,000 residents of the parish of St Botolph-without-Bishopsgate were eventually displaced as a result of the building of Liverpool Street Station, and around 7,000 people living in tenements around Shoreditch were evicted to complete the new line towards Liverpool Street. The area chosen for the new station was one which had suffered from overcrowding and insanitary conditions. The building of Broad Street Station on the adjoining site a few years earlier had already caused some displacement of the existing inhabitants. Many, including the City Corporation, had regarded this as an effective means of slum clearance and an encouragement to those displaced to move further afield to a healthier environment, ultimately to the benefit of those concerned. It was also expected to have the happy effect of reducing the amount spent on poor relief. However low paid workers could not afford to do other than walk to work so, far from the desired move to better quality accommodation, overcrowding in adjoining areas was increased. The Medical Officer for Bethnal Green reported in 1864: - 'Owing to the demolition of houses in the neighbouring parishes to make room for railways, a large influx of persons has taken place into our own and has aggravated the greatest evil with which we have to contend and that is overcrowding. The parish - always full is now filled to excess, although a large number of buildings have recently been erected.'

Growing public disquiet about the fate of workers displaced by railway building led to the requirement in the 1864 Act for the Great Eastern to run initially one workmen's train a day from each of Edmonton and Walthamstow. The company accepted this obligation as a better option than paying compensation to displaced tenants which was something that Parliament was beginning to consider requiring. These were special trains which ran early in the morning with an evening return at a maximum fare of 2d for the complete journey. By 1891 there were 5 workmen's trains from Enfield and 6 from Walthamstow. At times under pressure from the Government, the Great Eastern went on to develop a range of low priced fares. These included an all-night service between Liverpool Street and Walthamstow designed for newspaper men and market workers but referred to by station staff as 'the burglars'. In 1899 two special non-stop trains a day from Lower Edmonton at 3d return were introduced. They were designed for genuine workmen only. For these specials passengers had to purchase books containing a 2-week supply of tickets, each of which was overprinted with the day of use, on which no other would be accepted. By the turn of the century half fare tickets were introduced on trains reaching Liverpool Street by 8.30. Known as 'warehouse' tickets they were beyond the means of the workmen who arrived earlier but suited the better paid warehousemen & printers.

On its lines to Walthamstow and Edmonton, the Great Eastern eventually found itself carrying as many passengers on cheap fares as full fare passengers.

Although the development of the suburban business was in some ways a great success, there were disadvantages for the company. Strict segregation by ticket price was observed in the morning but it was impossible to maintain for the return journey. Contemporary comments reveal the social divisions of the time. Working class passengers were described by William Birt, general manager of the Great Eastern, as having a way of 'taking the train over' which was not always to the taste of other passengers. There were complaints of spitting, foul language and young women being bothered. The risk to the company was that other more affluent passengers were deterred from using their services and this affected profitability.

Many who came in on the early trains had time to kill before going to their offices which did not open until 8.30 or 9.00 o'clock. Some retreated to the waiting rooms and cooked red herrings for their breakfast on the waiting room fire. Complaints about cooking smells from other passengers initially led to the waiting rooms being closed to those from the working men's trains. They were eventually reopened for women travellers who, as much as the men, were victims of the Company's refusal to run 2d trains later than 7am. The Rector of All Hallows on the Wall took pity on the women travellers and opened his church for 2 hours every morning for them to rest before going to work. Eventually a short daily service was held, and tents were set up in the church yard to provide refreshments. The arrangements proved so popular that in 1901 the church decided to put up a permanent building in the churchyard for this purpose. This was developed into an educational institute. As a result, the church had one of the largest congregations in the City at a time when many City churches were beginning to seem redundant.

In 1883 the government introduced the Cheap Trains Act which required all the railway companies to run early workmen's trains, if ordered by the Board of Trade to do so. The response to the Act was patchy. When railway companies were surveyed for a Royal Commission on London traffic it was found that of around 250,000 daily rail commuters in 1901 only 27,569 were on 2d workmen's fares and of these, nearly 20,000, 72%, were passengers on the Great Eastern which became known as 'The Workmen's Railway.'

Far from being the white elephant which some people had predicted, within 10 years of its opening Liverpool Street Station was proving inadequate for its greatly increased traffic. It expanded eastwards with the introduction of a further 8 platforms which were opened for service in April 1894. By the turn of the 20th century Liverpool Street had one of the most extensive suburban rail services in London. In 1912 around 200,000 passengers used the station daily on around 1,000 separate trains.

It became increasingly clear that a further increase in capacity at the station was required. The company could not afford electrification, so an alternative scheme was devised which introduced automatic signalling, modifications to the station layout & other efficiency measures to achieve a 50% increase in capacity on peak services at a cost of £80,000, compared with £3m for electrification. Officially called the Intensive Service it became popularly known as the Jazz Service because of the coloured stripes which were painted between the windows and the roof of the carriages, yellow for first class and blue for second class.

As part of the reorganisation of railway companies in 1923, Liverpool Street was merged into the London and North-Eastern Railway and I propose to end my history here. Since the building of Liverpool Street Station, the railway had made a significant contribution to the development of the area which it served.

In 1854, fewer than 10,000 workers arrived in the City by train, around 15,000 by steamboat and at most 20,000 by omnibus. The vast majority of City workers, about 200,000, came on foot. Although by the late 1860s cheaper omnibus fares and the wider availability of cheaper suburban railway services had opened up the opportunity to ride to work to better paid clerks and craftsmen, for ordinary working-class men & women earning perhaps £1 a week, walking was the only realistic option. The need for working people to live close to their work contributed to increasing overcrowding.

Cheap working men's fares, also available on other lines but particularly by the Great Eastern, helped to ease the inner-city housing shortage by enabling people to live further from their work. and contributed to the development of the eastern suburbs as a dormitory for City workers. Places such as Leyton, Walthamstow and Ilford were the boom suburbs of the late 19th century and acquired a working-class character which they retained well into the 20th century.

Today, on leaving school or college, many young people from the Essex towns traditionally served by the Great Eastern still follow in the footsteps of their parents and grandparents and take the trains to Liverpool Street and City employment.