

# THE COMING OF THE RAILWAY

Chris Brickwood, Steventon History Society

“In 1832, a group of businessmen formed a committee to promote a Bristol to London railway. Brunel was appointed engineer on 7 March 1833 and it's probable that it was Brunel who christened the new line the "Great Western Railway" — the name appears in his diary in August 1833. The Parliament Bill authorising its construction was passed on 31 August 1835”: [IKBrunel.org.uk](http://IKBrunel.org.uk)

There was some debate about the line of the GWR, but it eventually came through Maidenhead, Reading, passing through Didcot in 1839 (although a station wasn't opened there until 1844) - with Steventon station opening in June 1840 with a great fanfare in the presence of Brunel and other Directors.

**A transcription of a contemporary newspaper article follows:**

**“GREAT WESTERN RAILWAY TO STEVENTON.**

**Jackson's Oxford Journal, Saturday, June 6th, 1840**

“This stupendous national work having been completed on Saturday last to this station, the place exhibited the greatest scene of animation and bustle; and, from the intention of the Directors to visit it preparatory to its being opened for public accommodation on Monday having got currency in this town and neighbourhood, a considerable concourse of persons flocked to witness the novel mode of locomotive conveyance.

At half-past twelve o'clock the Directors and a large party of ladies, amongst whom we observed Lady Barrington, arrived at the station in a first class train of carriages, which were preceded by a splendid new engine, the Charon. Amongst the Directors we noticed Charles Russell, Esq. late M.P. for Reading, the Chairman of the Board of Directors, the Viscount Barrington, M.P. and Henry Symonds, Riversdale Grenfell, and F. Gower, Esqrs.; Mr. Brunel, the engineer, Mr. Saunders, the secretary, &c. &c.

The Directors having inspected the works, with which they appeared highly satisfied, retired with their friends to the station house, where they partook of a cold collation, prepared for the occasion; after which they returned by the same train to their respective places of destination. The journey from London to Steventon was performed in the almost incredible short period of one hour and 10 minutes.

-Sunday being remarkably fine, a great number of persons were attracted to the line, who, as well as the men employed on the works, we were gratified to observe, demeaned themselves with the most becoming decorum and propriety.

-Monday, the day announced for opening the line as far as Steventon for public traffic, a vast number of stage coaches, omnibuses, and every other description of vehicle, were to be seen from an early hour of the morning until night wending their way in all directions to and from the scene of attraction, where, about the middle of the day, thousands of spectators had congregated to gratify their curiosity. The day was most propitious; and never before was witnessed in the quiet village of Steventon so animated a picture; the whole, from the number of booths and the vast mass of persons collected together, having the appearance of an extensive fair: as a matter of course, there was a goodly sprinkling of that mysterious class of persons denominated *gypsies*, busily engaged in their customary vocations. At about half past ten in the forenoon the first train arrived, conveyed by the elegant and unique engine, The Leopard, containing a large number of passengers from the metropolis and elsewhere, having performed the journey from the former place in little more than two hours. During that and the succeeding days ten trains arrived at and departed from the station, laden with passengers, &c. many of whom were induced, through curiosity alone, to take a trip to the great metropolis and back again to dinner the same day, without any impediment or accident of any consequence happening; although, from the immense number of persons and carriages of every grade collected on this occasion, accidents might-reasonably have been expected to occur, yet we are gratified to state that we have not heard of a single one taking place.”

The engines mentioned in the article were in the GWR 'Fire Fly' class of locomotives: "a class of 61 locomotives designed by Daniel Gooch for passenger services on the Great Western Railway. It was built by Jones, Turner and Evans of Newton-le-Willows; introduced into service in 1840 and withdrawn in 1870". **Didcot Railway Centre**



'Fire Fly': A broad gauge replica loco, completed at Didcot Railway Centre

"The Firefly class handled the principal trains from London to Bristol when they were new and were capable of hauling trains weighing 80 tons at speeds up to 60 miles per hour; one of the class hauled the first royal train, taking Queen Victoria from Slough to London, in 1842. The wheel arrangement is 2-2-2, the single driving wheel being 7 feet diameter, and the weight 24 tons 4 cwt". **Didcot Railway Centre**

Until 1844, and the opening of the Didcot to Oxford (Grandpont) branch, passengers for Oxford had to alight at Steventon to get a coach for the rest of the way: this didn't always work well. **From The Times 21<sup>st</sup> October 1841**

### *THE GREAT WESTERN RAILWAY.*

#### *TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES.*

Sir,—I left town on Monday evening by the 5 o'clock train for **Steventon**, the people at the booking-office assuring me that I should immediately find a conveyance to Oxford. Arrived at **Steventon** at 5 minutes before 7, I found some difficulty in obtaining my luggage, and when it was delivered to me, there was no porter to take it across the rail to one of Waddeil's coaches. A couple of minutes having been lost in seeking a porter, I crossed the rail to the coach, and already found it occupied by 11 outside and four inside passengers. The coach was, moreover, top-heavy and unsafe from the quantity of luggage and merchandise—such as fish, &c., which had been stowed upon it. On demanding a place, the coachman told me there was none for me, but on my being more peremptory, he told me there was a second coach, into which I got, with two other passengers. In this coach we remained exactly one hour and a half. Having pressing business at Oxford, I got out to remonstrate with the coachman, but he was not to be found. I asked for a chaise, but a porter told me there was none. Entering the railway station I remonstrated with the clerk, who expressed regret that the circumstance had not previously been brought under his notice. I told him it occurred within his hearing and under his nose, and that he, at least, could not affect not to be aware of it at the moment I was speaking. "No, certainly not," said he, "and I will remedy it." He then conferred with another clerk, and when I asked for the proffered remedy his reply was, "You must wait for the arrival of the Bristol train, which is due more than an hour and a half." At this moment a superior clerk or inspector entered the office, to whom I repeated my complaints. This person sent for the coachman and ordered him to drive off immediately to Oxford, where I arrived at a quarter to 10 instead of half-past 8 o'clock.

Now, I ask, is this bearable? Surely the directors should have coaches in sufficient number for the conveyance of their passengers and a van for merchandise; and some distinction should be made between first-class and second-class passengers. I believe I was the only first-class passenger for Oxford, and yet I was the only one who failed in obtaining a conveyance.

The real fact, however, is, that coaching in Oxford is, and always has been, a monopoly, and the directors of the Great Western do all in their power to foster this monopoly. No coaches are allowed into the station at **Steventon** but Waddeil's, and because this coachmaster chooses to provide insufficient accommodation, the public are to suffer.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,  
**A BAGMAN,**



Photograph: Steventon station, early 1900s (from eBay):

Unfortunately, the only remnant of the station furniture that I've found is not in Steventon but in Abingdon's Albert Park (author photographs, April 2022):



As of Autumn 2023 Steventon History Society member Steve Lucas has initiated a campaign to return the bench to Steventon.

## THE STEVENTON STATION BENCH

As a young teenager, Tony Chappell was a keen railway enthusiast. He and his school friends would often travel the line from Steventon Station to Swindon and back. On hearing of Dr Beeching's plan to close down more than 2,300 railway stations in 1963-64, Tony began to collect 'railwayana' from several stations destined for the axe. He persuaded his father to purchase a bench from the platform at Steventon Station. The bench carried the insignia of the Great Western Railway in cast iron scrolls on the legs. He recalls the sum of £2 10s was paid for the purchase.

The fine bench became a handsome fixture in the Chappell's back garden at Victoria Road in Abingdon. Tony eventually moved away from Abingdon, leaving the bench in situ at his parent's home. Many years later, in 1986, Tony's father, Antony Chappell Sr., presented the bench to Christ's Hospital, suggesting that it might be placed in Albert Park, in part so that he might have somewhere to sit down at his end of the park after taking a stroll. There it has remained ever since.

The bench currently sits at the South West corner of Albert Park, in an area of mature overhanging trees. This results in the bench becoming bombarded with bird droppings (as too, anyone that risks sitting upon it).

The Steventon History Society believe this bench to be a significant part of the social history of Steventon. It is likely that the bench is around 100 years old and we think it deserves better care and attention than it receives at its current location.

We propose the bench should be released back to the village of Steventon in order for it to be refurbished and maintained in a condition where it can be enjoyed by all. The Steventon History Society would like to see it feature as part of a village History Trail where it will be positioned to commemorate the site of Steventon Station.