

When the railway came To Stratford

The death earlier this year of Paul Morgan was a loss to those who knew him. Those interested in the history of Stratford will always be in his debt, not least for the generous provision he made that his vast collection of papers and printed material should come to the Records Office, including innumerable items we did not already have.



An engraving from 1873 of an engine and carriages from railway poster

Among these are two relating to early railways in Stratford during the nineteenth century, when access to the town by public transport was far greater than now. I use the term 'public' in the sense of available, rather than publicly-owned, for of course all such businesses were designed to be profit-making for both owners and shareholders.



A flyer from 1836 advertising the sale of Tramway shares

The first rail link reached the town in 1826 when the Stratford to Moreton-in-Marsh tramway opened, with the intention of transporting goods from the Midlands to London. Complaints from local landowners during construction, meant that the initial plan to use steam locomotives was abandoned in favour of horse-drawn carriages, provided by the local carriers who used the line. Shares in the enterprise were a good investment, however, and in 1836 twenty of them were sold by auction at the Red Horse Inn, Bridge Street. The flyer advertising the sale describes the tramway as 'that improving undertaking'. Sadly we don't know who bought them or for how much.

Within a few years, however, railway mania was to have a severe impact on the tramway, hampered as it was by the restriction on steam engines on a six-mile stretch from Stratford. A horse-drawn passenger service to link with the main-line Oxford Worcester and Wolverhampton Railway. at Moreton opened in 1853, but ran at a heavy loss and the route's effective operating life came to an end in 1869, just four years before the date of our second railway document.

Steam trains first reached Stratford in 1859, with the opening of a branch to Honeybourne, built by the OWWR. The following year the Stratford-upon-Avon Railway to Hatton opened, and a station on the present site was built to connect the two lines in 1861. Then, In 1864, the East and West Junction Railway (later Stratford and Midland Junction Railway) was authorised to build a line from Towcester to Stratford and beyond. It chose to build its own station on land, formerly part of Church Farm in Old Town. Some readers may remember the old station, which closed in the 1960s: the old track bed was later used to carry the Southern Relief Road. The line reached Kineton in 1871, but it was not until 1 July 1873 that trains first ran from Stratford to Blisworth, which they continued to do until 1952. The opening of this service was advertised by a large (90 x 60 cm) poster, a copy of which was among Paul Morgan's papers. Its most striking feature is the marvellously detailed engraving of a train printed across the top. At the front is the engine, belching out black smoke, and providing no cover for the driver; behind this is the coal wagon manned by the stoker, followed by an elaborate carriage for passengers, some of them wearing top hats, partially wreathed in smoke from the engine. Were it not for the lack of horses, this could be mistaken for a stagecoach, as a 'driver' sits aloft at the front, and all luggage is strapped on the roof. Bringing up the rear is the goods wagon, piled high and partially covered by a tarpaulin. All in all it's a fascinating snapshot of early rail travel.

PS. Readers may be interested to know that in 1873 it took just over two and three-quarter hours to get to London Victoria, changing at Blisworth, and that there were four trains a day in each direction.

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