

Sample

# RIGHT AWAY

## The Railways of East Anglia

Douglas Bourn

ISBN 978 1 869831 33 2  
Paperback 162pp  
RRP £9.95





Bridge Publishing is pleased to announce *Right Away: The Railways of East Anglia* by Douglas Bourn.

Railway histories are always popular and the continued regard for heritage railways around the UK highlights the nostalgia the industry evokes. Inevitably many concentrate on the locomotives, lost stations and lines that crisscrossed the region. What has often been missing have been the stories of the individual railway workers and the conditions under which they worked, despite some valuable autobiographies and memoirs of railwaymen who worked in the area. This volume aims to address this gap, bringing to life stories of railway workers within a context of the changing nature of the industry from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day.

Heavily influenced by his personal and family memories, Douglas Bourn draws on available memoirs, alongside other evidence from railway magazines and local and regional newspapers, to provide the reader with an introduction to the fascinating story of railways in the region. The book takes readers on a historical journey starting with the creation of the first railways in East Anglia, via the growth of a network that promoted and served the agricultural, industrial and tourist development of the towns throughout the three eastern counties, and ending with their almost inevitable decline, as transport needs changed in the post Second World War period.

### **About the author**

Douglas Bourn was brought up in a railway family in Suffolk and has a longstanding interest in the history of railways. He has a degree in history and politics and a PhD in education. Alongside his interest in railways, he has had a successful career in the charity sector and is currently Professor of Development Education at University College London.



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## Melton Constable: The Crewe Of East Anglia

Melton Constable, a village in mid-Norfolk has a very special place in my memories of the railways in East Anglia. It is also key to my own family history. My mother's father, George Kinsley, worked at Melton Constable from the early 1920s to the early 1960s. He was a wheeltapper and his job was to inspect every carriage and engine on its arrival at the station. My father moved to the village in 1940 to work in the locomotive sheds as a young cleaner and it was there he met my mother and married her in Melton in 1942. Melton Constable was a place I got to know very well as a child. The family went on holiday there for a week every year, using the railway station to go to the beaches at Sheringham and Cromer and explore the Norfolk countryside. My grandparents were active members of the local community, involved with the local bowls team and visitors to the Railway Institute, the social club for railway workers.

Therefore, I have a very strong affection with the village. Although it was very untypical of Norfolk villages, being more like a Northern mining community with its line of terraced houses and linked social activities. Above all, as this chapter will demonstrate, Melton Constable typified the strong bond workmen had with the railway, for them it was more than a job, it was part of who they were.

### Formation of the Station

Before the advent of railways, Melton Constable was a tiny village of 19 houses and 100



*The author's grandfather, George Kinsley.*

people employed by Lord Hastings on his estate. It was not an ideal place to develop a railway junction with no nearby labour supply, poor soil conditions and marked slope through the proposed gap in which the station would be built.

The site was chosen because Lord Hastings, the local landowner, offered the land in return for shares on the line. He was a Director of the Lynn & Fakenham line and set aside land to the northeast of his Melton estate for the establishment of the station and a new junction. In supporting the development of the railway, Lord Hastings insisted on having his own platform and waiting room with its own private entrance. There was also a belief that there was once an underground passage running under the track to the Refreshment room opposite so the staff could easily provide his Lordship's guests with refreshment when required.

With no habitation of any size in the village, effectively a new community had to be established. Initially 28 houses were built but these were soon seen as insufficient. In 1886 another area of houses was built although this time of poorer quality.

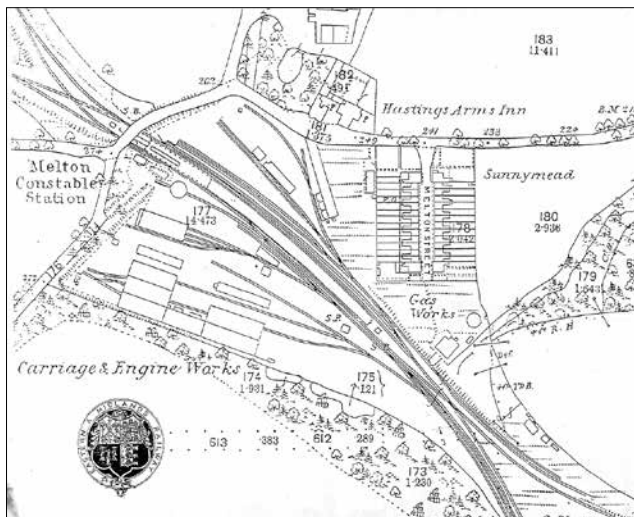
The work on the railway station and adjacent works began in 1881. The line opened in 1882 through to Norwich and the line from North Walsham and Yarmouth, which joined the Norwich line at Melton East Junction, opened in April 1883. Meanwhile a start was made on a line to the west first to Holt and then to Cromer in 1887. During the same period another line going west to Lynn was also opened.



*Passengers waiting at Melton Constable station  
c1957.*

The creation of the station at Melton Constable was of an unusual design with a long island platform with space for more than one train on the platform at a time. A goods yard was also developed, which initially had three lines, later becoming six that served a large goods shed, three cattle pens and coal yard. Alongside the creation of the station, and in response to the need for a headquarters for repairs and offices for engineers, a Locomotive and Carriage Works was founded in 1881. It included an Engineers office, foundry, erecting shop, carriage shop, machine shop and smithy.

At its height, in the early decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Melton station included island platforms for passengers, extensive sidings, turntable, engine shed, foundry, offices and stores, messroom, fitting shop, paint shop, carriage and wagon shop, tender shop and boiler shop. There was always activity and constant



*Melton Constable station layout.*

development.

### **A Railway Village for All**

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Melton resembled a mining village with its streets of terrace houses and, at beginning and end of the day, lines of workmen walking to and from their place of work in the various fitting and repair sheds. This industrial flavour could also be heard from the 'buzzer' summoning men to work. Melton Street, the first of the streets to have these terraced houses was built in 1882 by the railway company for its workers. All houses were supplied with gas from the railway gas works and running water.

The employees' rent and water charges were deducted from their wages, along with 4d a week for membership of the Institute, the local social club. When they left the Company's employ or retired, they had to vacate their houses.



*Melton's turntable in action in the 1950s.*

Melton developed two types of



housing, on one side of the main street and off it were railway houses. On the other side and adjacent roads were private houses. These private houses were larger with bay windows. The population in 1881 was 188 and had trebled in size within a decade. By 1911 the village had grown to 1,157 residents.

As a village, Melton became in the years up to and immediately after the First World War, a thriving community with many local amenities, several shops including Co-op, butchers, chemist, drapers, hairdressers, post offices.

Lord Hastings and his family continued to have an influence on the development of Melton. They paid for building the elementary school which was built in 1896. But his son, on taking over the estate, refused to support further expansion of the station because it would have meant demolishing their private waiting room.

Up to 1914, the station site was in constant development and constant activity. Workers up to the outbreak of World War I had no paid holiday. The works simply closed for a full week in August. During the war, the machine shops also helped make war armaments, including shells, with more than 30,000 being produced.

### **A Busy Railway Junction**

Traffic through Melton Constable was heavy with trains approaching from four directions. Melton was often the place where trains were divided up or combined to longer trains. This combining of trains into one, particularly for going west to the Midlands, continued into the inter-war period and then again up to the 1950s.

In 1882 there were six through trains on a weekday from Kings Lynn through Melton to Norwich or Yarmouth. By 1891 this had increased to eight between Lynn and Melton although the number through to Norwich remained six.

By summer of 1938 there were six trains from South Lynn to Melton but one of these was an express to Yarmouth. Even as late as 1958/9, the timetable showed six services between South Lynn and Melton. These connected with trains to Norwich City.

Although there were many trains passing through the station every day, it was not a busy station in terms of passengers either starting or ending their journeys



*Locomotive at Melton Constable c1957.*



there. It was a small community and the surrounding hinterland was rural. Its importance was more as a junction, a point midway between South Lynn and Yarmouth. Trains passed on their way to places as far afield as Birmingham and Leicester, and I can remember in the 1950s still being excited by seeing an express pass through from the Midlands on the way to the coast with holiday makers.

Although the station and the works became less important after 1945, and into the following decade, it was still a busy place. For example, in the early 1950s, there was an arrival or departure ever 30 minutes or so. The majority of departures were two trains to South Lynn, Norwich and Cromer respectively.

A list of some of the Departures in 1952 gives a flavour of the level of activity and the distance and range of destinations:

6.36	Norwich
7.05	Liverpool Street
7.17	Yarmouth
7.30	Peterborough
7.49	Norwich
8.36	Peterborough
9.34	Yarmouth
9.37	Norwich
10.28	Birmingham
11.45	Peterborough
11.50	Liverpool Street
13.30	Yarmouth
13.32	Norwich
14.20	Peterborough
14.25	Cromer
15.10	Peterborough

Passengers always had the problem as to which was the best route to London—west on the M & G.N. to Peterborough and down to Kings Cross, or east, via Cromer and Norwich to Liverpool Street. The latter, run by the rival Great Eastern, which was much quicker. This meant that by serving both directions, Melton did not effectively service either. Where it was more efficient was in linking the Midlands with the East Coast. By 1900 you could get from Leicester to Melton in 2 hours 45 minutes with another 45 minutes to Norwich.

The summer season was always a busy time for Melton even up to the late

1950s. For example, on Saturday August 1st 1958, a hundred trains were scheduled to pass through or terminate at the station. This of course meant a very hectic period for railwaymen at the station. This does not tell all of the story at such times. A considerable number of these trains split or were joined at the station meaning increased work for drivers, guards and signalmen. In addition, there was also the continuous goods and shunting work that went on at such a busy junction.

It was a station where people either stretched their legs, whilst the train was either coupled or de-coupled, or where you changed trains. This meant the refreshment room was very busy at all hours of the day and night. Reginald Gamble spoke about when his mother was manager in the early 1900s and said how busy it was particularly when the special trains from Kings Cross to Yarmouth required changing engines or coaches at the station.<sup>1</sup>

From the 1900s up to the immediate post-war period, another indication of how busy trade was the presence of a W.H. Smith bookstall at the station. One of the few on the M & G.N. network.

### **Influence of Marriott**

The most important figure in the transformation of Melton was William Marriott who was a qualified engineer. He was born in Switzerland and came to England in 1868 and took articles with Ransome at Ipswich. In 1881, he became assistant engineer on the Lynn & Fakenham line and in 1883 became Locomotive Superintendent of the East and Midlands Railway. At the age of 26, he was possibly the youngest engineer on the railway since Stephenson and Brunel. He developed his role upon the merger to M & G.N. and combined being engineer with traffic manager until his retirement in 1924. He died in 1943 at Sheringham.

He was involved with the M & G.N. from the beginning of the development of Melton, noting in his memoirs, during an early visit to the place and seeing 'the foundations of the shops and parts of the wall' being up.<sup>2</sup> He oversaw the development of the lines around Melton. He notes in his memoirs that 'we opened up in Melton Constable in 1883 and I had to work very hard to be ready'. Marriott played a major role in improving the quality of the track in the line. Conscious of the need to set an example and to understand the views of the workforce, he decided in 1885 to move to Melton. His memoirs state:

I felt if success was to be assured I must go to live among the men. Melton had at that time a very bad reputation. A new staff had been collected from all sorts of places and contained a certain proportion of men who had been failures elsewhere. Mr. Read, the managing director, told me

that if I had settled to live in such an outlandish and forsaken place, at any rate the company would not charge me any rent...<sup>3</sup>

This sense of isolation and the challenges of getting a good workforce at Melton was a major priority for Marriott. He was instrumental in ensuring the construction of new houses with proper facilities.

Marriott's success in developing Melton and ensuring the workforce were well paid and had good houses to live in is reflected in comments in his memoirs that by the 1920s, 'we have developed a very good staff' ... with men saying, "we have gentleman's lives compared to what we use to have"<sup>4</sup>.

During the First World War, Melton Constable's importance can be seen by the extent to which it became the home for many soldiers.

Marriott was very influential in the development of prefabricated concrete items and the design of several locomotives, but his biggest challenge was keeping the line running on a shoestring. He remained popular and respected by workmen despite having a rather stern and traditional Christian approach.

### **From M & G.N. to LNER and Inevitable Decline**

During much of its existence it was known as *Muddle and Get Nowhere* line—but these days, people say it should be called *Missed and Greatly Needed* line. Many of the men employed as navvies were ex-farm labourers attracted by the 50% increase over their normal agricultural wages.

The M & G.N. developed a reputation as a smartly run operation. The staff at Melton for example wore dark green corduroy uniforms. Engineering staff particularly were known to be well trained.

Although Melton and the M & G.N. came under London and North Eastern Railway (LNER) in 1936, it still retained up to nationalisation a distinctive identity. However, this strong pride in the company hid underlying problems in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. The poor state of the track was, for example, given as the main reason for the accident at Hindolveston in 1937, just outside Melton, when a three-coach passenger train got derailed on a curve. What became clear was that the pebble base of the track had been badly maintained. The engineering works closed in 1936 and this had a major impact upon the village.

The war provided temporary relief with the need for stores and repair workshops. It was during the war that my father first came to work at Melton as a cleaner. The job he had was hard and dangerous and during his time there he was badly crushed by buffers from an engine. He was fortunate to survive and spent several months in hospital recovering.

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order online: [www.bitternbooks.co.uk](http://www.bitternbooks.co.uk)

published by:

Bridge Publishing  
38 Oulton Street  
Oulton  
Lowestoft NR32 3BB  
tel: 01502 370515  
email: [publisher@bridgepublishing.co.uk](mailto:publisher@bridgepublishing.co.uk)