

Bedfordshire Local History Association Summer Meeting 2013

Forty-six local historians from twelve local history societies around the county assembled at Maulden Village Hall on Saturday 15 June 2013 for the Association's AGM and a day of lectures and a visit on the topic of "Bedfordshire Railways".

David Thomas gave a very interesting illustrated talk focussing on the Bedfordshire branch of the Oxford to Cambridge Line. This began in the county with the London & North Western Railway line's first stretch being built here from Bedford to Bletchley (still in operation) in 1846. In 1851 the Bletchley to Oxford extension was built, and finally, in 1861-2, the Bedford to Cambridge extension. The Oxbridge line's main stations in Bedfordshire were at Ridgmont, Lidlington, Marston, Bedford, Blunham, Sandy and Pottton with additional small halts, bringing the number of stops to 15 within the county.

Because of the importance of the universities at Oxford and Cambridge, this cross-country line was sometimes known as the "Varsity Line" and its trains "brain trains". It had connections with six main lines heading north, west and east from London and therefore gave great flexibility to passengers from Bedfordshire who could travel around the country, by changing at points on the line to other railway companies' services, without having to go into London first (as is the case today!).

Unfortunately, following Dr Beeching's rationalisation and drastic reduction in the railway system from 1967 onwards, the Bedford to Cambridge line was closed, with the Bedford to Cambridge lines lifted, leaving only a service from Bedford to Bletchley, meeting up with the London Midland Region main lines from London to the Midlands and the North West.

David Thomas then traced the more recent developments, including the closure of the old St John's Station in Bedford, with the line being diverted to Bedford Midland Station in 1984 (with a later, new, halt at Bedford St John) and the overall modernisation of signalling and level crossings along the Bedford Bletchley line in 2004. Earlier, in 1961, Marston saw the installation of the second-only automatic continental level crossing barriers in the country. Warning signs, unusually, were in both English and Italian, as there were so many Italian-speaking workers at the local brick works! Recently, it has been confirmed that there are firm plans to reinstate the Bedford to Oxford railway service in the near future.

The second speaker in the morning was Nigel Lutt from the county record office (BLARS) who gave a very informative illustrated talk outlining just some of the many

archive sources for material on railway history in Bedfordshire, not all of them in documents where you would expect to find them.

Attendees to the conference were then treated to a very tasty hot lunch, after which they were able to view the range of interesting displays in the hall relating to railway topics, with displays from the [ADALHS](#) regarding temporary railways in Maulden Woods (operated by the Canadian Foresters during WWI), Warren Wood and Wrest Park. Fergus Milne brought along examples of his railway art and there was an extensive display from BLARS.

For the afternoon session, members moved by cars to Millbrook where David Thomas, who lives in the Station House there, showed his collection of railway memorabilia.

Although less ambitious in its scope and number of speakers than in previous years (& consequently less well attended than, say, 2012, when there were 91 attendees from some 20 Beds societies) the BLHA committee is to be congratulated on putting it on and thanks given to the new Millbrook History Society for organising it. The annual event is an almost unique opportunity for local historians to get together and catch up with each other's researches, activities and publications. BLHA's own umbrella [website](#) is an excellent, one-stop source of contacts for all the many local history societies in Bedfordshire, with links to their websites and, in many cases therefore, to their programme of talks and visits.

BLHA is looking urgently for volunteer societies from its membership to take on responsibility for arranging a conference for 2014 (and also for 2015). Societies which have not yet taken this on, perhaps finding the thought rather daunting, can receive much help from those other societies which have organised conferences in previous years.

To discuss conference possibilities for future years, contact Clive Makin, BLHA Secretary, at 01582 655785 or via email :

secretary@bedfordshire-lha.org.uk

For information on Bedfordshire railway history, see F.G. Cockman *The Railway Age in Bedfordshire* (Revised edition 1994)

Written by Stuart Antrobus

First appeared on the [BHRS website](#) blogspot dated 17th June.