



## CHESTERFIELD & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY HISTORY BITES

*Chesterfield and District Local History Society's 'History Bites' are an occasional series of website published articles about Chesterfield and district's history.*

### **Chesterfield railway days in the 1940s and 1950s**

**David McPhie**

As a child, I travelled the length and breadth of the northern half of the extensive railway system of the time in my pursuit of engine numbers (a pastime frequently known quite derisively as trainspotting).

However, my more mundane everyday outings were reserved for Chesterfield itself, either from one of the three stations (usually the Midland – the only one of three stations in or near Chesterfield town centre still open) or on the 'Forty steps' footbridge on Lordsmill Street. This small wooden pedestrian bridge passed over the Great Central loop line and the River Hipper, adjacent to the Horns Bridge three level 'complex' of (lower-level) Great Central, (mid-level) Midland Main Line, and the (upper level) LD&ECR (Lancashire, Derbyshire and East Coast Railway). Horns Bridge was a very imposing and impressive structure, and a sight to behold, particularly when one was lucky enough to see a train on each of the three levels simultaneously.

The Midland station was by far the busier of the three stations, a happy hunting ground for the different types of London Midland and Scottish Railway passenger steam engines that frequented the line, including 'Jubilees', 'Black Fives' and 'Compounds'. Most of the passenger trains stopped at the station, but not the Thames -Clyde Express (London St. Pancras to Glasgow), one each way per day. This was the highlight of the day as it thundered through with the identification headboard proclaiming its river-to-river credentials. "Stand back from the platform " was the request from the station staff, and good advice it was too, as the Jubilee or Black Five, very rarely anything else, although occasionally double-headed when in charge of the maximum load of coaching stock, powered past at 80mph plus; a stirring sight and sound in anyone's estimation.

The Jubilees were slightly more powerful than the ubiquitous but nonetheless impressive Black Fives, but neither were as powerful as the Patriots or Royal Scots which were however rarely seen on this route, and a real treat for the 'spotters' when they 'strayed' from the West Coast main line. The Jubilees carried the names of British Sea Captains and battles (Hawkins, Trafalgar, Nelson, etc.), far flung corners of the British Empire (Bechuanaland, Barbados, Gilbert and Ellis Islands, Jamaica, etc.), names also reminiscent of another evocative boyhood pastime, stamp collecting. The names of mythical gods also featured (Bellerophon,

Polyphemus, Mars and Achilles). These steam engines were compactly, rather than spectacularly, designed. They were, in their time, variously liveried in red, green or black; but were handsome engines in whatever colour they were turned out.



*Today's Midland Station is a far cry from the rather sombre 1870s building of my youth. Freight traffic has considerably diminished, but passenger traffic has undoubtedly increased, though the sights and sounds of the gas lamps and steam engines of yesteryear are gone. (P Cousins).*

The Midland station had two main platforms, north and south, and a 'bay' for local stopping trains, and, behind the southbound platform, a dual track north and south goods only line which enabled the almost constant flow of freight traffic to bypass the main passenger lines. The sheer volume of freight that used this facility was staggering. It consisted of almost end to end, toe to toe, strings of wagons throughout the working day, many of course carrying coal, pulled by the ubiquitous 8Fs, 4Fs and Beyer Garratts from the Midland's roster of goods engines. To the north most of these would come from 'the old road,' the former Midland Main Line, which branched off the present main line to Sheffield and beyond at Tapton Junction. This bypassed and then re-joined the main line north of Sheffield and Rotherham.

The salutary lessons to be learned from the 1940s and 1950s levels of freight traffic in comparison to today's sparse usage pertain to two issues really. The fact that such a large proportion of our manufacturing capability has just vanished without trace in a mere fifty-year period, and that what little there is left actually goes onto our overcrowded roads. In order to illustrate this, I went and sat on the Midland station southbound platform for an hour in the middle of the day recently, and didn't see one freight working whilst I was there.

Chesterfield Central Station was the venue for the loop line that left the Great Central Main Line at Heath, and regained it to the north at Staveley. It was, for its lifespan, an ever diminishing and underused facility, as in a way was also the whole of the Great Central Railway system itself. This was a great shame as it was an expertly engineered and efficiently operated artery from London Marylebone to Sheffield Victoria, and on over the Woodhead Pass to Manchester. The Central station entrance was at road level near to the current Chesterfield Technical College, and the trains themselves were reached via a descending staircase to platform level. The trains from the south would burst into the station from a tunnel, the southern entrance of which entered from under Hollis Lane.



*An Edwardian  
Nadin postcard of  
the Chesterfield  
Central Station at  
platform level.  
(CADLHS  
collection).*

To the north the rails followed the present route of the A61 bypass road almost as far as the current Casa/Tesco roundabout and thence onto the old Sheepbridge (and Brimington) Station (situated at the bottom of Wheeldon Mill, Brimington). Next stop was Staveley Works for Barrow Hill (where the present Hollingwood Hub is), then to Staveley Central, there to rejoin the Great Central main line. One of the most prominent buildings adjacent to the station was the Trebor Sweets factory, from which always emanated a sickly-sweet aroma, and the large goods shed; both now long since demolished, and which is now the site of a soon to be developed leisure and residential facility, incorporating the existing canal basin.

The passenger engines most commonly seen at this station were the 'B1s' (the Eastern's equivalent of the Midland's Black Fives), the old 'Directors', the powerful 'V2s' and an occasional 'red letter' 'A3 Pacific', of which the most famous of course was "Flying Scotsman." It was only worthwhile visiting the Great Central Station when you knew that a train was actually due, as the intervals in between were far too long. It wasn't the most pleasant station to while away one's time on either, positioned as it was at the mouth of a foreboding tunnel; thus my experience of this station was relatively limited. It closed in 1963.

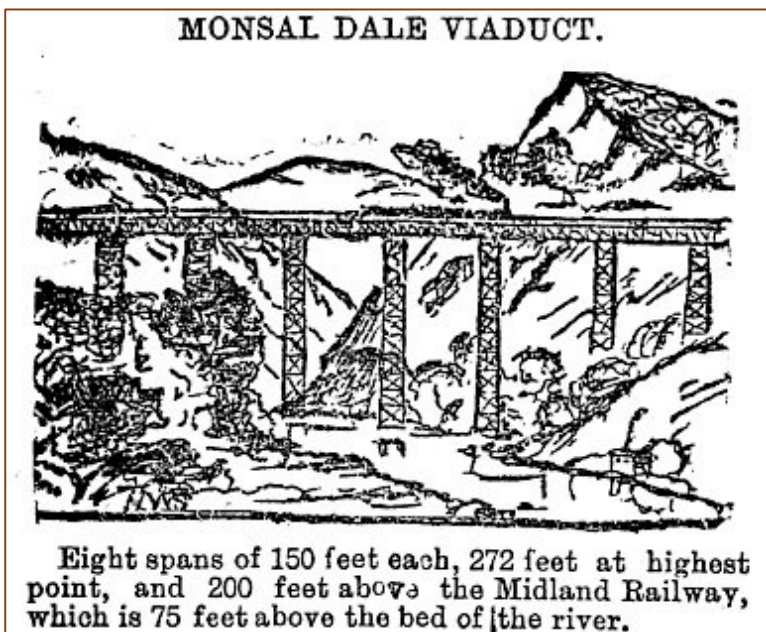
Even more infrequent were my sorties to the LD&ECR's Market Place Station, despite it being only a 'stone's throw' away from my home, as the activity there was even less riveting than that at the Great Central. The line itself was a 'white elephant' of an operation if ever there was one, its intention to connect the east coast with the west coast stopping short of Lincoln to the east and Chesterfield to the west. The motive power was almost exclusively medium sized tank engines. The realisation that the engineering works required to propel the project through the Peak District hills to reach the Cheshire Plain came too late for it to achieve its expansion plans and it 'folded' in 1957, the station having closed in 1951.



*Chesterfield Market Place Station of the Lancashire, Derbyshire and East Coast Railway, pictured before its demolition in the mid-1970s. To the left can just be seen a part of the Portland Hotel. (Courtesy AR Kaye).*

It's main achievement during its existence were the number of branch line extensions to collieries in both Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire that it opened up, and these, not the meagre passenger revenues, were its primary source of income. The station itself was by far the most architecturally impressive of Chesterfield's three stations, and became the headquarters and offices of the railway company. The station was next to where the Portland Hotel now stands, and in 1948 the George Stephenson Centenary Exhibition was held in the station complex with a variety of steam engines on display.

There's a fly-through of the LD&ECR's proposed, but never built extension to Lancashire on YouTube - <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=dViX-xH7qVo&feature=youtu.be> (the rights for which now belong to Zoe Elizabeth Hunter).



*The unbuilt LD&ECR's extension to the west would probably have been declared a non-starter today. It included a second viaduct at Monsal Head, an impression of which is given here from an article in the Derbyshire Times of 11 June 1892. Contrary to popular belief it would not have crossed the existing Midland Railway viaduct.*





Front cover the George Stephenson centenary railway exhibition programme. The exhibition was held over four days, in August 1948, at Chesterfield Market Place Station. This was just one of a series of events planned in Chesterfield to mark the centenary of Stephenson's death, but was undoubtedly the best remembered. (Collection P Cousins).

For a basic history of Chesterfield's railway stations visit the Derbyshire Victoria County History Trust's blog here <https://derbyshirevch.org/2022/11/chesterfields-railway-stations-a-short-history/>



There's a series of articles on the 1948 George Stephenson centenary exhibitions in Chesterfield, including that at the LD&ECR's Market Place Station. To download a special publication including the articles on these successful events visit the page here - <https://brimingtonandtaponhistory.org.uk/history-of-the-area/downloads/> and look for the 'George Stephenson and Tapton House publication'. You'll then be able to download this as a pdf by clicking on the 'download' button. The centenary articles are from pages 16 – 28, the railway exhibition review, including photographs of the event, starts from page 24.

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