

THE HISTORY OF THE RAILWAYS AT SALTFORD

by Chris Warren, Salford Station Campaign Leader, for the Salford Festival 2017, 12th June

For generations, centuries even, the small Somerset village of Saltford had changed very little, in the main being an agricultural community with its own Manor House and Norman church. The small population, the majority of whom worked the land, were housed in the main along the High Street and the Shallows, with a few farmers' cottages dotted about. Transport as such was either walking, on horseback or horse and cart.

Life carried on, a bucolic idyll nestling in the Avon Valley between Bristol and Bath.

Due to the topography of the area the Avon Valley with its river had always been a transport corridor with the turnpike following the contours of the valley. As the 19th Century progressed, Saltford was to be caught up in the frenzy of the Industrial Revolution.

In 1833 a group of Bristol Merchants formed The Great Western Railway. The idea originated from the desire to maintain their city as the second port of the country and the chief one for American trade. The increase in the size of ships and the gradual silting of the River Avon had made Liverpool an increasingly attractive port, and with a Liverpool to London rail line under construction in the 1830s Bristol's status was threatened. The answer for Bristol was, with the co-operation of London interests, to build a line of their own; a railway built to unprecedented standards of excellence to out-perform the lines being constructed to the North West of England.

The company was founded at a public meeting in Bristol in 1833 and was incorporated by Act of Parliament in 1835. Isambard Kingdom Brunel, then aged twenty-nine, was appointed engineer.

THE ROUTE IS SURVEYED

The man himself came to Saltford in 1836 and surveyed the entire length of the route between London and Bristol, with the help of many, including his solicitor Jeremiah Osborne of Bristol law firm Osborne Clarke who on one occasion rowed Brunel down the River Avon himself to survey the bank of the river for the route.

Some of you may have seen the engraved stone in the Brass Mill which bears the inscription 'Begun Digging The Railroad June 11 1836'. Can you imagine the impact the news of this enormous technological undertaking must've had on this sleepy little community? I have compared it to having the Apollo programme dropped on Saltford. Just think of the conversations in the Jolly Sailor between boat crews of this new-fangled railway being able to transport people and goods to London in just under three hours when it would have taken days on foot!

As he planned the construction of the Great Western railway line between Bath and Bristol, Brunel had a problem of how to keep the line level as it passed through the village of Saltford. This problem, its solution and Brunel's approach to speculators is described by Adrian Vaughan in his 2003 book (first published in 1994) "Isambard Kingdom Brunel: Engineering Knight Errant" as follows:-

The Great Western was, in Isambard's mind, a proper, gentlemanly investment, not a matter for speculation. He loathed the speculators. There were, in his eyes, a self-serving

interest and an enlightened self-interest. The former was vulgarly commercial and therefore ungentle-manly, the latter sought to earn a living while giving something in return. When the self-seekers got in his way they roused his ire.

[later] On 8 March 1836, he was riding about the village of Saltford - a difficult place for Brunel. The route came from Bath, down the Avon valley on a long curve, almost dead level, and was obliged to go through the village which stood on a hilly spur projecting into the valley. A cutting would have destroyed the house [Saltford House] of Major James, who, believing the GWR to be a money-bag of unplumbable depth, had put a very high price on his property. Isambard hated to feel that someone had the upper hand and rather than buy the house and make a cutting he planned a tunnel which would have to dive deep under the house to avoid harming the foundations. Isambard found this up-and-down kink to his otherwise superbly level track irksome and was looking for a way of dispensing with the tunnel and of maintaining level.

Scouting quietly through the houses, Isambard saw that if he went through the adjoining property ["Saltford Villa" that became "Tunnel House"] he could not only shorten the tunnel but also keep his level and ease the sharpness of the curve through the village. One wonders why he had not noticed it back in 1833. Anyhow, without being recognised, he was able to negotiate with the owner who was quite happy to sell the house and an acre of land for £700. This was an opportunity too good to miss and Isambard shook hands on the deal without first having the Directors' permission to make the expenditure. He then handed over to his local estate agent, Goodridge, to make the formal arrangements.

Royal Assent was given to begin construction of the line on 31st August 1835 and I wonder if Saltford was prepared for the massive influx of rowdy Navvies, horses and construction equipment that would soon follow. Navvies had a fearsome reputation for hard graft and even harder drinking. The local ale houses would have done a roaring trade. Some Navvies were put up in 18 High Street (then a pub and called The Railway Arms) during the line's construction.

In many people's opinion the GWR between Bristol and London is still the finest engineered railway in the world with some superb structures along the route. Saltford has its share with the magnificent cutting and tunnel that passes beneath the junction of High Street and Beech Rd. This short stretch of impressive civil engineering was a huge undertaking, being excavated by hand using picks, shovels and wheelbarrows to shift the earth. It was back breaking work, and combined with the use of dynamite, very dangerous. There must have been casualties, perhaps some navvies are buried in the churchyard?

When I first moved to 6 High St in 1998 the noise of the freight trains pounding through the tunnel below my house on jointed track in the early hours nearly always woke me up, saucepans rattling in the kitchen and draughty box sash windows banging about caused by the familiar clackety clack which sadly is no more as the rails are now continually welded.

Before the line was opened in its entirety Saltford tunnel was used to build the steam locomotives that were to be used to haul trains, of which one was The Fireball. It was

designed by Daniel Gooch and they were brought to site in kit form and were assembled in the tunnel. An area near the eastern portal of the tunnel has always been prone to landslips, as in order to reduce the amount of land that had to be purchased to excavate the cutting, the sides were kept steep.

One such incident occurred not long after the line opened, then again in 1900. This was reported in the local press on 10th March. A landslip, happily unattended by loss of life, took place by Saltford tunnel, on the Great Western line between Bath and Bristol, on the 1st inst. Several thousand tons of earth slipped from the side of a deep cutting and fell across the permanent way. The Salisbury train, due at Bristol at 6.50 p.m., dashed into the fallen earth, partly overturning the engine, and fortunately giving the passengers nothing worse than a rough shaking. It took 150 men all night long to get the coaches off the line and replace the broken telegraph wires. Our photograph shows the workmen clearing away the mass of earth next morning.

The GWR opened between Bristol and Bath on 31st August 1840. The following is a newspaper report from The Western Times

The Western Times 5th September 1840:-

OPENING OF THE GREAT WESTERN RAILWAY BETWEEN BRISTOL AND BATH.
Bristol 31 August 1840.

The portion of the line between this and Bath was opened to the public this morning and the day has been kept as a public holiday in this and the other city. Long before the time fixed for the starting of the first train, eight o'clock, large numbers of persons had congregated in the vicinity of the works; and throughout the course of the railroad every place that could command a view of the trains was crowded with spectators.

The first engine that left was the Fireball made by Jones, Turner and Evans of Newton. The necessity of proceeding with caution, a number of workmen being still employed in finishing the works, preventing the attainment of any great speed, and the performance of the distance, twelve miles, occupied including four minutes lost stopping at Keynsham, thirty six minutes.

The Arrow, the Meridian and the Era also plied during the day; the trains in which more than 300 passengers were accommodated, being full at nearly every trip. In the course of the day the distance was accomplished in about twenty minutes. There were ten trips made each way.

So you can see, the coming of the Railway to Saltford was a really big deal.

SALTFORD STATION

A station was provided for the village and it opened on the same day as the line. The original buildings were made of timber, and were destroyed by fire. It was a very pleasant location for a station, high up on an embankment with commanding views of the Avon Valley, the sweep of the river and the railway itself curving away to the east towards Bath. As was the practice back then a small country station would have had a station Master and a couple of porters. The Station master would have been held with some esteem within the community. He was the Company's representative, kept things ship shape and made sure his staff were fully employed at all times and most importantly stuck to the rules and

regulations. They were normally provided with accommodation by the company, in Saltford's case, the house at the top of Bath Hill, the first one you come to on the right hand side. Even when off duty, he was never far from his work!

There is not a lot of information about the early years of Saltford Station. I have tried to decipher a timetable from 1841 and it appears that Saltford was served by four trains a day in each direction. As we progressed into the Edwardian era, we are able to see photographs taken at the time which give a fascinating look at life back then.

As the railway became more established within the community and through aggressive marketing became busier, facilities were added to the site. In its pre-war heyday, the station consisted of up and down platforms connected by a steel footbridge. A stone built ticket office and waiting room on the south side of the line with a timber shelter on the north side. A siding, a goods yard and shed which were controlled by a brick built signal box. I have spoken to two of Saltford's ex signalmen, who both live in the village. They recall it being very busy in the box, with all the train movements having to be given a clear line in both directions throughout the day and night. It was freezing cold during the winter months, with a small stove in the corner blazing away at all times.

During the Edwardian era, to cope with ever increasing passenger numbers, the stone platforms were lengthened with timber additions which can be clearly seen in various photos taken at the time. A weighbridge was installed in the 1920s for the coal merchant who used the site. It was this weighbridge on 9th October 1941 that a Westland Whirlwind crashed into, after it took off from Charmydown airfield. It clipped wings with another Whirlwind over Bath, Pilot Officer Ormonde Hoskins lost control and it plummeted into the goods yard, sending out a huge fireball and flying debris. The pilot was killed instantly, and his remains are buried in a churchyard in Laverstock near Salisbury.

A NEW KID IN TOWN

On 3rd August 1869 the Midland Railway opened its branch line to a terminus in Bath. A second route into Bath from the North had been suggested back in the 'Railway Mania' days of the 1840's but never came to fruition. However the mighty Midland Railway, managed by the 'Railway King' George Hudson was very expansionist and aggressive in its ambitions so a small branch line 10 miles long was never going to cause any difficulties. Royal Assent was given to the Bill on 21st July 1864 and work started November 1865 with the construction being supervised by the Midland Railway's chief Civil Engineer John Crossley. This is the same John Crossley who oversaw the construction of the 'Seventh Wonder of the Railway World', the Settle to Carlisle line.

Work progressed without incident. The Inigo-Jones family, who owned the Kelston Park estate, were understandably not keen on another Railway being visible and audible from their pile above the river. In order to avoid a lengthy and expensive battle with a formidable opponent, Jones agreed an enhanced payment for his land and a stipulation that the railway ran no closer than 400yds from his home. He was also able to have built his own private station that was capable of stopping express trains on request! There are no records to suggest this ever happened.

May 1866 the navvies working in Saltford were invited to 'The Working Mens Hall' in Saltford, for a fine tea of beef, ham and plum cake. It was provided by the Inigo-Jones

family and a Miss Drury of Saltford. The navvies were asked not to disperse to the local ale houses afterwards but to remain in a fitted out reading room. I wonder how many chose the pub? It must have been the Bird!

The line opened on Wednesday August 4th 1869. Kelston Station as it was known consisted of just two platforms. There was no timetabled service or road access at the time as it was a private station. Eventually the stone built office buildings were added on the down platform and a timber waiting shelter on the up side and a regular service was commenced. The station was built on a curve, and the up platform, on the south side, was reinforced with brick buttresses which can still be seen today. There were only three trains stopping each way throughout the day, tickets could be purchased from the Bird in Hand which displayed a timetable, then it was a short walk via a footpath along the north side of the embankment to the platforms. The path is still in use today to gain access to the Railway Path.

A porter was provided from Weston station and he came in on the first Bristol bound train. It was never very busy, catering mainly for fishermen or the regular race days at Bath Racecourse where the punters still had a three mile hike across the fields and around Kelston Round Hill. Race specials were provided by the railway company but were stopped in 1930. The last timetabled train to call at Kelston was the 7.05 from Bristol on New Year's Eve 1948.

However, it must have been a wonderful spot, with tended gardens, flowers, the backdrop of Kelston Round Hill and in the summer the hum of insects and the river sparkling below. As dusk descended the porter would light the gas lamps, sweep the platforms, busy himself with any paperwork and wait for the final train of the day to take him back to Bath.

The railway itself was always very busy. A signal box was provided at Saltford to reduce the length of the 5 and a half mile block section between Bitton and Weston. The density of pre-war traffic in the 1930s was so great that regularly on Saturdays a train would be held at every down signal between Mangotsfield and Bath. The line provided a link into Bristol as well as the North of England via the triangular junction at Mangotsfield. Although initially a branch line, it was laid double track throughout. There were extensive goods facilities provided at Bath, far more than the GWR provided, as well as a grand terminus building with a beautiful curved cast iron and glass train shed roof which must have been very impressive for the traveller as he or she disembarked the train after a long journey.

There are tales amongst enginemen of 'races' between the MR and GWR crews as the lines ran parallel either side of the river for a couple of miles as they headed into Bath. Whilst the GWR was undoubtedly the better engineered route, the MR was arguably the more scenic. With 5 river crossings, a sweeping path through gorgeous countryside including the Avon Valley and the beautiful Green Park station at the Bath end, it must have been delightful to travel on a stopping train headed by a small tank engine.

The line was to become much more important with the opening of the Bath Extension of the Somerset and Dorset Railway on 20th July 1874 which overnight turned the Midland line into a through route to the south coast, the terminus being in Bournemouth. Excursion

trains from the north of England began to run, and in 1910 a scheduled service twice a day from Birkenhead to Bournemouth commenced. It was renamed 'The Pines Express' on 27th September 1927 and ran right up until 18th Sept 1962 when the last service to run through Salford was hauled by 92220 'Evening Star'. What a sight that must have been seeing locomotives blast through at 70 mph with 10 coaches on board. It's hard to believe now.

The Pines would stop at Green Park where the locomotives would uncouple and using the turntable would then be re attached to be hauled back out on the other line to join the S&D at Bath Junction.

Salford must have been a mecca for train-spotters as you would see Kings and Castles on the GWR and the Jubilees and Patriots on the LMS.

In the 1930's the line was upgraded in order to take heavier, longer locomotive formations, both goods and passengers. All the river crossing bridges that were of lattice construction except the final set entering Green Park were replaced by modern steel spans. This was an expensive undertaking, and would have been an interesting spectacle for local people. It was a major civil engineering project and it demonstrated the importance of the line to the LMS as a strategic trunk route. It is testament to the quality and engineering of these replacement bridges that they are still in excellent condition today. If you wander down beneath the Salford crossing and look up, the structure is still as good as new. All the rails were re-laid with flat bottom rail, which again was needed for heavier trains.

During both wars the Railways were taken over by the war office and saw intensive use. During the build up to D Day the LMS and GWR were in use 24 hours a day 7 days a week. Massive troop trains and goods trains carrying tanks and equipment to the south coast. It must have been a spectacle that was taken for granted at the time. By the end of the Second World War both lines were in a sorry state as they were basically worn out.

Salford continued to have two railways running through the valley for the next twenty odd years. Post-war traffic held up well, although when nationalisation occurred on 1st January 1948, Government policy began to have an effect on the fate of both lines. The railways enjoyed a swansong in the 1950's. The Midland especially as its southern terminus, Bournemouth West station was a destination for thousands of day trippers and holiday makers who wished to visit the seaside. Often on summer Saturdays the line was at capacity, with the ten coach Pines Express hammering through and all the other services trying to fit in around it.

If I could travel back in time I would love to be able to sit alongside Kelston signal box on a hot summer's day, looking up to see a the signalman rushing around, listening to the bell codes, the buzzers, levers being pulled and the distant clang of the signal as 'clear ahead ' was given. The anticipation of The Pines approaching and wondering what locomotive would be pulling it!! Then the noise, smell and the ground shaking as it thunders through at 60mph and disappears into the distance as it rounds the curve heading into Bath. Perhaps there was then a 'namer' coming through Salford over on the GWR, Pendennis Castle or a 'King'. Jump up, hop on the pushbike, struggle up the High Street, no gears

remember, turn left at the Bird then flat out down the other side along the Shallows just in time to chuck the bike down and leg it up the path to the platform to watch another express blast through on its way to Bristol. Then sit down, catching your breath, and look back across the river to see a small pannier tank engine hauling the two coach local 'stopper' along the Midland towards Bitton. Wonderful.

As mentioned earlier, government policy was to have a catastrophic effect on Salford's railways. From 1960 onwards traffic was being cynically diverted away from the S&D in order to undermine its viability. Often the circuitous alternatives that were used would take far longer than the direct means of the S&D. In turn, this had a dramatic effect on the viability of the Midland line and passenger and goods traffic reduced as did takings.

The publication of 'Reshaping of the Railways', or infamously, The Beeching Report in 1963 identified that the entire system of the former Midland routes of Bristol-Mangotsfield-Bath-Yate were to close along with the entire S&D network as they were loss making! Over the weekend of the 6th and 7th March 1966 the final passenger services ran. The Pines Express had been diverted away in 1962. Goods continued on, the track was reduced to a single line just to supply bath Gasworks with coal, and by 1971 the entire line had been lifted. There was very little public protest at the closure. In pre internet times it was much more difficult to mobilise public opinion. In the age of the space programme, motorways and Concorde being on the drawing board, no one would particularly lament the closure of what in effect still was a Victorian railway.

If this wasn't bad enough, Salford Station on the GWR was included for closure too, meaning that by 1970 Salford's population had been completely disenfranchised from the railway. Salford Station saw its last day of service on 5th January 1970.

In my opinion, the drastic reduction and demolition of thousands of miles of railway route miles is one of the most catastrophic policies any Government of any colour has taken, and the effects of this policy is still with us today. Salford is especially vulnerable as we have the busy A4 trunk road passing through the village.

The vision, effort and expense that the Victorians undertook to build all this infrastructure was squandered and destroyed, rendering many lines almost impossible to re instate. The cost of building these things nowadays is phenomenal, look at HS2. It was all there, paid for and built to last by highly skilled and ingenious engineers with the blood sweat and tears of the navvies. A shameful period in recent history and perhaps typical of the short sightedness of those who govern us.

Today, the former Midland/LMS route is now the Bristol to Bath Railway Path (Sustrans) and is a valuable local amenity. As you may know, I am very much involved in the campaign to re-open our station on the GWR.

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12 June 2017

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