

BY PULLMAN TO HEATH PARK

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MARVELS AT THE CENTENARY OF
THE MIDLAND RAILWAY HEMEL HEMPSTEAD BRANCH

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THE Hemel Hempstead Railway has always been charmingly eccentric. Its promoters, for example, having projected a line from Boxmoor, Hertfordshire, to Hemel Hempstead, proceeded to construct one in the opposite direction. Unabashed, they then completed the original section: even more oddly, this was never fully used. The eventual passenger terminus of the line emerged at Heath Park Halt, Boxmoor, and was possibly the smallest in Britain. For some years, moreover, conducted Pullman Car transport was provided at third-class fares. Finally, most of the line has survived in operational form to contrive the most improbable railway centenary of 1977.

This least known of London area branch lines was promoted independently in 1863, when the Hemel Hempstead Railway Company was floated to link Boxmoor (now Hemel Hempstead) Station on the London & North Western main line from Euston with the centre of the borough 13 miles away. Events soon overtook this modest plan, for the arrival in Hertfordshire of the Midland Railway London extension caused the promoters to look over their shoulders for a line connecting Hemel Hempstead with Luton, Bedfordshire.

The scheme involved eight miles of new route, which was duly built in the 'seventies, diverging south-west from the Midland main line south of Chiltern Green, and striking over the undulating Chiltern Hills to the town of its title. The plan also included a steeply-graded spur to the nearby Great Northern Railway Welwyn and Luton branch; an ill-considered union which fortunately came to nothing.

The only intermediate station on the way to Hemel Hempstead was provided at Redbourn, where the line crossed over the ancient Watling Street. From there it continued its switchback course to its summit of 470 ft. above sea level at Godwin's Depot. The final descent of one mile was on a fearsome gradient of 1 in 39 to the very platform end of the passenger terminus of that time at Midland Road, Hemel Hempstead.

The task of operating passenger and freight trains over such a route was beyond the resources of the local line, and the Midland Railway agreed to work the branch on a rental basis. Passenger services to Luton started on July 16, 1877, with free first-day rides for all. The MR used, almost from the start, one or more of a set of three George England 2-4-0 tender engines acquired from the Somerset & Dorset Railway and renumbered 1397-99, while later years brought Kirtley and Johnson tanks. There were initially four passenger trains each way between the two towns.

In the meantime the local railway enterprise had completed the originally promoted line from Hemel Hempstead to Boxmoor Station, and the 1885 Ordnance map shows the intended junction with the LNWR at the latter point. No traffic passed, however, until 1886, when the whole of the Hemel Hempstead Railway was acquired by the Midland, and the new parent company began to run coal

trains over the extension as far as the Boxmoor Gas works, alongside the North Western main line. Unfortunately the MR and the LNWR failed to agree on sharing receipts from through traffic, with the result that no Midland passenger or freight trains ever entered Boxmoor Station.

The branch signals there and the last quarter-mile of track were finally removed about 1916.

Shortly after the energetic Midland took over, work began on the new Harpenden South Curve, which was opened on July 2, 1888, reconnecting the branch in a south-facing direction at Harpenden Junction. The trains ran onward to Harpenden Station, where a small bay beside the down fast platform accommodated branch departures. A fairly intensive service of nine weekday passenger trains was introduced, giving a journey time from Hemel Hempstead to St. Pancras of a little over one hour for the 323 miles. At different periods there were through coaches to St. Albans or St. Pancras, but a Saturday midnight London to Hemel Hempstead through connection remained the only Sunday service.

Unfortunately the s.w. to n.e. axis of the line meant that it served nowhere very quickly, but freight was attracted by the Midland's more direct route to Nottingham, Derby and Sheffield, and its speedy transshipment system to all parts. Coal flowed, of course, especially to the Boxmoor Gas Works. The branch was operated on the one engine in steam principle, a metal staff with Annett's key being issued at the junction box.

There was a general speed limit of 30 m.p.h. and a special limit of 200 tons for freight trains.

The twentieth century brought motor vehicles in a swelling tide, and as early as 1905 a lady driver was killed on Watling Street, near Redbourn, while attempting to overtake a motor lorry. In the same year Herts. County Council began erecting warning signs for motorists on the local roads. The writing was literally on the wall, but on August 9, 1905, the Midland opened additional halts at Beaumont's and Godwin's between Redbourn and Hemel Hempstead, and at Heath Park near Boxmoor.

Entering into the spirit of the thing, the *Hemel Hempstead Gazette* suggested four further sites for halts within the borough, including one under the nose of the LNWR at the unused end of the Boxmoor line. Even the enterprising Midland evidently thought this was going a bit too far.

Heath Park Halt, a penny fare from Hemel Hempstead, consisted of a short, elevated platform served by twin staircases. Its nodal but constricted site was between two bridges spanning converging roads beside the local cricket ground, where the arrival of the branch train pleasantly punctuated the Saturday afternoon match. The locomotive could, if required, run-around the train in the adjacent Cotterells coal sidings, but passengers for Boxmoor were decanted more than half a mile from home. Godwin's Halt, lost in the fields of Cupid Green at the summit of the Hemel Hempstead North Bank, had its own waiting room, siding, weighbridge and office, not far from where the branch now ends. Beaumont's Halt served the environs of Redbourn, and boasted two distant signals (the only ones on the line) operated by the crossing keeper there.

This rather Emett-like passenger promotion scheme was carried off with great *panache* by the introduction on the branch of one of the celebrated first-class American Pullman Parlour cars of 1874, of which C. Hamilton Ellis wrote "In their day there were no more gorgeous railway vehicles than these in their pride of plush and grandeur of gilding" (*vide* "The Midland Railway", p. 73).

This somewhat ageing outfit arrived complete with a permanently harnessed M&GN 4-4-0 tank raced along the backbone of England now played a gentle staccato on the curving rail byway, but the Midland meant business. Besides putting a conductor aboard to issue third-class tickets to passengers

joining at the halts, the company opened a platform booking office at Harpenden for continuing main-line journeys. During the same period, the LNWR commenced a motor-bus service from Boxmoor Station to Hemel Hempstead, competing with the plush penny ride on the Pullman.

The period from 1905 was the heyday of passenger traffic on the branch. It was well patronised by the local paper-mill workers, and even the drastic wartime train reductions of January 1, 1917, passed it by. The LMSR in due course opened a new halt at Roundwood, near Harpenden, in the twenties, but a traveller in those days would have seen little change under the new management.

The small friendly two-coach trains in their Midland colours puffed laboriously up the steep grades or round the protesting curves, still carrying parcels, press and passengers. They could even wait for a few moments at Hemel Hempstead for the odd last-minute commuter, or pause while the guard issued tickets at the halts.

It was not until March 1929 that the run-down of the branch began with the introduction by the LMSR of a country bus service at last connecting Boxmoor and Harpenden stations. The passenger services on the branch were severely pruned, but rail tickets could be used on the buses. In 1931 the "Ro-Railer" motor bus, capable of running on road or rail, was inconclusively tried on the line, and Godwin's Halt had its moment of glory when the late Lord Stamp, President of the LMS Executive, alighted there. The reduced passenger train service continued right through the second world war until the coal crisis finished it off on June 16, 1947. It had run for seventy years.

Freight and coal made another story. Such was the increase that the LMSR relaid the branch from end to end in 1935, and even repainted the stations. The "Jinty" 0-6-0s from St. Albans shed gave way to larger locomotives, culminating in the allocation of class "4" Ivatt 2-6-0 No. 43119 in the closing years after nationalisation. For many years two daily freight trips were diagrammed, originally fitting round the passenger trains. A modern freight terminal was also planned for the Godwin's Halt area, but unfortunately British Railways and Hemel Hempstead Development Corporation were unable to agree on the role of the railway in the concept of the new town. Consequently on August 31, 1959, the Boxmoor extension was closed, and the lofty three-arch viaduct over Marlowes (near the present Kodak building) was dismantled. All the extensive earth-works and bridges on this section were then eliminated.

Sadly, on July 1, 1963, Hemel Hempstead Mid-land Station with its run-round loop and five sidings was also abandoned, and after 85 years the North Bank ceased to resound to the shout of steam. A few months later Godwin's Depot was closed. The final three miles of the branch thus fell victim to the bulldozer, and the Midland Road Station has become a building site. Even the Midland Hotel has metamorphosed to "The Mayflower" and only the tall rail bridge over Queensway, retained to carry a footpath, reminds the town of its erstwhile local line.

The Beeching process continued along the remainder of the route. Redbourn sidings closed on July 6, 1964, and the branch faced total extinction. Fortunately a concrete-construction company located at the Claydale Sidings (a short distance north-east of Godwin's Depot) took over the operation of the line as a six-mile siding, hauling with its own locomotives up to 300 tons of power-station ash daily from Harpenden Junction for use in its process. Motive power is mainly supplied by 1952 Drewry 0-6-0 diesel. No. 2203 (formerly BR No. 11103, stationed at March, ER, for work on the Wisbech & Upwell Tramway).

Standing by for use if required is ex-BR Clayton Bo-Bo diesel No.. D8568, which must have created a record, running 400 miles under its own power from Polmadie (Glasgow) to Claydale Sidings (Hemel Hempstead) via Ais Gill when collected by Driver Ken Alien a few years ago.

Although the run-down of the branch began almost half a century ago, it is a long time a-dying. Even now, wheels still turn, and this month sees the incredible centenary of most of the Hemel Hempstead Railway.