

The Hemel Hempsted and Harpenden Railway

By D. S. Barrie

(Published in *The Railway Magazine* - March/April 1945)

BOTH in history and location one of the most picturesque of the smaller branch railways near London, the Hemel Hempsted and Harpenden branch of the L.M.S.R Midland Division, has more than once been the subject of brief notes in *The Railway Magazine* and deserves a more adequate description. Of the twin towns of Hemel Hempsted (or Hempstead) and Boxmoor, which are now comprised within a single borough, the former lies on the flank of the ridge of hills forming the eastern rampart of the River Gade, and the latter down in the valley of the Gade and along its banks. Boxmoor, of course, is a place of historical importance in the railway sense, since from July 20 to October 16, 1837, it was the temporary terminus, 24½ miles from Euston Square, of the London and Birmingham Railway, -which Stephenson carried up the valley towards Tring and so left Hemel Hempsted town marooned on its hill to the eastward.

Various proposals were mooted from time to time for connecting Hemel Hempsted and Boxmoor with nearby towns, such as Chesham, Harpenden, and Luton, from which they are separated by natural barriers, but the first project to gain Parliamentary sanction was for a short line from Boxmoor L.N.W.R. Station up to Hemel Hempsted. The Hemel Hempsted Railway Company was incorporated by an Act of July 12 1863 with an authorised capital of £20,000, and £6,600 on loan. Three years later the company changed its plans completely, the Boxmoor-Hemel Hempsted project being temporarily dropped (owing, in all probability, to difficulties with the Boxmoor Trust, wealthy owner of the protected common known as Boxmoor) in favour of a new line across country from Hemel Hempsted to Harpenden. At the latter place, the line was to connect both with the Hertford, Luton & Dunstable branch of the Great Northern, and the London extension of the Midland. By this Act of 1866, further capital was authorised to the extent of £170,000 in shares and £56,600 on loan. A few years later the company again essayed, to connect with the L.N.W.R. at Boxmoor, and under its Act of July 18, 1872, obtained powers for an extension 1m. 3ch in length from Hemel Hempsted to Boxmoor goods station. Still further financial powers comprised the right to attach a 6 per cent preference qualification to some £85,000 of unissued ordinary shares, which presumably could not be unloaded otherwise, and to issue debentures. Nothing more was heard of the proposed connection with the Great Northern Hatfield and Luton branch; with the opening of the Midland main line through Harpenden to London in 1868, and with the possibility already in view of the Midland working the Hemel Hempsted line, the smaller company placed itself more or less completely under the Wyvern's wing.

Working of the Hemel Hempsted and Harpenden line by the Midland, in consideration of the latter paying a half-yearly rental of £3,750, was provided for by an agreement dated December 1, 1871, and ratified by the Midland Railway (Further Powers) Act of July 12, July 1877. A few days later, on July 16, 1877, the line was opened for traffic between Harpenden and Hemel Hempsted, but the extension from Hemel Hempsted to Boxmoor, L.N.W.R., was never used during the lifetime of the Hemel Hempsted & London & North Western Railway Company. It had been intended that passenger as well as goods traffic should be worked to and from Boxmoor L.N.W.R. (now Hemel Hempsted & Boxmoor), although the physical connection there was by means of turntables only; arrangements had gone so far as the provision of staff and stationery when suddenly the whole of the arrangements were cancelled. Various theories have been advanced for this sudden abandonment of plan; the most likely, perhaps, is that the Midland feared the diversion over the L.N.W.R. of through London traffic which would otherwise have to pass over its longer route *via* Harpenden. Another suggestion is that difficulties arose with the Boxmoor Trust, which is stated to have collected tolls on traffic dealt with at Cotterell's Goods siding, near Heath Park.

At any rate, the section beyond Hemel Hempsted stood practically derelict until after the Midland had formally acquired the independent company under its Acts of 1885-86; in the former year the annual rental payable by the Midland was commuted for an exchange of Midland rent charge stock, and in 1886 the Hemel Hempsted Company was formally dissolved. Significantly, the regular working of traffic over the Boxmoor extension began in that year, when the Midland started running a train from Luton with coal for Boxmoor gas works. The points and signals remained intact at the junction of the L.N.W.R. and Hemel Hempsted lines until taken out during the last war, but the turntable connections had been removed about 25 years previously.

When the Hemel Hempsted & Harpenden line was first opened, the junction with the Midland, main line faced towards Luton, and connections from and to Harpenden and St. Pancras were made at Chiltern Green.

There were three trains in each direction daily between Luton and Hemel Hempsted; the journey of 13¼ miles took about 40 min. with intermediate stops at Chiltern Green and Redbourn. This service continued with slight alteration until July, 1888, when the junction with the Midland was altered to face towards Harpenden, and the service was increased to seven trains each way on weekdays, most of them with St. Pancras connections. One was by a slip off the 9 am, from St. Pancras at Harpenden : by most services the throughout journey time between Hemel Hempsted and London or *vice versa* was about 1½ hr. One of the trains introduced in July, 1888, was a through afternoon service from Hemel Hempsted to St. Albans and back, and this continued to run until October, 1895.

The next important development occurred on August 9, 1905, when, participating in the rail-motor boom then in progress on many British railways, the Midland introduced a rail motor-coach consisting of an ex-Pullman car hauled by an Eastern & Midlands type outside-cylinder 4-4-0 tank engine, and at the same time brought into use the halts at Godwin's, Beaumont's, and Heath Park. The service was further increased to nine trips each way, of which all but a few early and late ones were worked by the push-and-pull unit and ran to and from Heath Park. This development produced the interesting situation (paralleled on the G.W.R. Cleobury, Mortimer & Ditton Priors, and the Cardiff-Coryton Halt section of the former Cardiff Railway) of a halt becoming the passenger terminus of a line, although, of course, Heath Park was not the terminus proper.

For some years from 1906 the rail motor- carriage or motor-coach, as it was variously designated in the Midland timetables, was stabled at St. Albans, and began its day with a morning trip from there to Luton and back to Harpenden, before taking up work on the branch. It finished by running empty from Harpenden to St. Albans at about 7 p.m., the last trip from Hemel Hempsted at this time being run as a mixed train. At the beginning of the 1914-1919 war the train service was still eight double trips daily, three each way running to Heath Park, and even in September, 1918, it had not been reduced by more than two double trips, although Heath Park then had only two daily services. In the last of the independent Midland timetables, in 1922, seven double trips were shown, with Heath Park served thrice daily, Mondays to Fridays, and by an additional afternoon service on Saturdays. The twilight of the branch as a passenger-carrying line set in early in 1929, with the introduction of an L.M.S.R. bus service (later taken over by an associated operator and now worked by London Transport) between Harpenden and Boxmoor. From March 4, 1929, the service was reduced to the level at which it remained with little change until the present war – a morning passenger train each way, two mid-day trains on Saturdays only, and a late afternoon train Mondays to Fridays only. Thus the branch engine was able comfortably to combine the whole of the freight and passenger business in its day's work.

Sharply curved and with many steep gradients, as it follows closely the natural lie of undulating country, the branch bears all the evidence of having been constructed as cheaply as possible, under compulsion of the financial circumstances of its promoters. It is single throughout, and is worked by train staff under one-engine-in-steam regulations. There is a general speed restriction of 30mph. At Harpenden, branch trains were formerly accommodated in a short bay adjoining the down fast platform, but this bay has been filled in, and the main platforms are now used. Connecting to and from the fast lines only, the

branch diverges at Harpenden Junction, 1½ mile north of the station, and turns sharply away westward through a deep cutting. At the end of this curve is the site of the old spur facing towards Luton; here the Hertford, Luton & Dunstable branch of the former G.N.R., with which the Hemel Hempsted & Harpenden was originally intended to connect, is only ½-mile distant to the east, although at a considerably lower level in the valley of the Lea' Crossing the Luton road by a high and massive brick-arch bridge, the line now climbs ¼-mile at 1 in 37 up to Roundwood Halt, which, of more recent origin than the other halts, serves a residential quarter on the outskirts of Harpenden. Open country is now traversed on falling gradients for 2½ miles to Redbourn: the initial descent from Roundwood. is at 1 in 39. Redbourn is the only intermediate place of any size, and, although the station is only a single-platform structure, there is a fair-sized goods yard.

Only slight alteration would be needed to effect a crossing-place here if required.

Immediately beyond Redbourn the line crosses Watling Street by a girder bridge, and begins a steady climb at 1 in 42, 56, and 39, through pleasant and well-wooded country, for 3¼ miles to the summit level at Godwin's Halt, 469 ft. above sea level. Intermediately there is another halt at Beaumont's Crossing, a mile from Redbourn, and, near Godwin's, a siding for the Claydale Brick & Tile Company. Godwin's Halt is a difficult place for a stranger to find, as there is no access by public road, but only by field footpath; a small goods siding nearby, however, has access from the highway.

Beyond Godwin's Halt, the train passes through woods and then descends for a mile at 1 in 39, over a long embankment, to Hemel Hempsted. The passenger station is on the east side and slightly above the town, with a run-round loop, and a goods yard which, in relation to its size, handles a considerable traffic. For ¾-mile the line now falls, first through a cutting and then on a brick viaduct above road and stream, to Heath Park Halt; most of this descent is at 1 in 61. Heath Park Halt, which, has a ground-frame controlling back-shunt access to the adjacent Cotterell's yard, used principally for coal traffic, is a wooden platform situated between two bridges over converging roads, within the angles of which are located the steps to the platform. Beyond Heath Park the railway is continued for another ½-mile, crossing over the Grand Union Canal and the Tring Road; at the terminus 9¼ miles from Harpenden) two sidings diverge into the gas works, and the course of the old line curves round the back of them to peter out in a wide cutting about 100 yards south of the *ex*-L.N.W.R. Boxmoor Station. It is quite easy to trace the alignment of the Midland line up to the entrance to the L.N.W.R. goods yard, where the bridge over Rough Down Road bears trace of having been widened to accommodate the Midland line; adjacent to this bridge is an M.R. trespass board. In the first year of operation the branch service was presumably worked by small Midland tank engines, but in the next year (1878) one or two of the three small 2-4-0 tender engines built by George England & Co. in the 'sixties for the Somerset & Dorset Railway, and acquired by the Midland from the S. & D. when the latter became a joint undertaking with the L.S.W.R., were put to work on the branch, and they continued for some years in this rural retreat, far from their native Mendips. In 1886, the working timetable specified that these engines, numbered 1397 to 1399 in the Midland list, were the heaviest locomotives allowed to work between Hemel Hempsted and Boxmoor, while the "760" class were the heaviest permitted between Harpenden and Hemel Hempsted. After the appearance of the Eastern & Midlands 4-4-0 tank on the rail motor coach, the line was worked mostly by 0-4-4 and 0-6-0 tank engines. At present the whole of the traffic on the branch is worked by one locomotive, usually a standard Class "3" 2-6-2 passenger tank, which also handles the freight, including shunting at Harpenden and Hemel Hempsted, and trips to Cotterells and the gas works. Only tank engines of Classes "1", "2," and "3" are allowed to work passenger trains, but freight engines up to and including Class "4" are permitted on the branch. As the gradients in the down direction are on the whole slightly easier than in the up, the maximum loads permitted each class of engine are a trifle heavier going towards Hemel Hempsted, but the severity of the gradients is seen in the fact that the maximum for a Class "4" freight engine is only 170 tons up and 200 tons down.

Passenger trains consist of a single brake- third of modern type, and the journey of 8¾ miles takes about half an hour; first-class was discontinued in July, 1914. For a short time about 1931, the vehicle used for the service was an *ex*-Somerset & Dorset brake-third still in the blue livery of that line's independent days, and its appearance in the district resulted from the division between the L.M.S. and Southern Companies of the coaching stock previously maintained by the S. & D. Joint Committee. Viewed in relation to the use of *ex*-Somerset & Dorset locomotives on the branch more than fifty years previously, this was a remarkable example of history repeating itself. In 1931, trials were carried out, principally between Hemel Hempsted and Redbourn, of the experimental Ro-Railer vehicle, for the use of which change-over ramps from road to rail and *vice versa* were provided at several points.

In an age of motorbus omnipotence for short local journeys in country districts, the Hemel-Harpenden branch is something of a rural anachronism on London's outskirts, but it carries a useful freight traffic and its chances of surviving the present war seem at least as good as they were in that of twenty-five years ago. For the railway enthusiast, a journey over the line is an experience not to be missed while the opportunity still remains. The writer is indebted to Mr, V. Stewart Haram and Dr. J. R. Hollick for certain of the notes incorporated in the foregoing description,