

THE GLORY OF THE 'KNICKERBOCKER' LINE.

by Helen Keeley

*A private company still runs the single-track railway between Harpenden and Hemel Hempstead.
Only eight miles in length, it passes through some glorious countryside.*

(First published in Hertfordshire Countryside Magazine November 1972)

ONE of the most picturesque rail routes in the district must be the single-line branch between Harpenden and Hemel Hempstead. Long ago many folk called it the "Nicky" railway; perhaps they meant a knickerbocker railway because of its small size. Not only has it some sharp curves; it also has one of the steepest gradients in the country. At the Harpenden end there is a stretch of a quarter of a mile with a gradient of 1:37. Still used by a private company, this little railway has seen much busier days.

In 1863 the Hemel Hempstead Railway Company was formed to build a line between Boxmoor, on the L.N.W.R. main line, and Hemel Hempstead. It was some time, however, before it could begin to build, owing to the difficulty of constructing the proposed embankment across the moor, a piece of public land. With the advent of the Midland Railway London extension a branch from Hemel Hempstead to a junction just north of Harpenden was authorized in 1866 and opened on July 16, 1877. It ran a passenger service to and from Luton. This line also carried goods traffic.

In 1886 the Hemel Hempstead Railway Company was dissolved and the Midland Railway took over and two years later commenced running trains between Hemel Hempstead and Harpenden. In 1888 Harpenden became a junction, having a bay to hold the branch-line trains. In 1905 three halts were opened Roundwood Halt, Beaumont's crossing, and Godwin's Halt to try to encourage more traffic and trains were increased to nine daily.

The passenger service was extended to a new terminus at Heath Park halt. However, as the roads began to improve and the regular motor-bus services started from about 1929 the volume of railway traffic declined. By 1939 only two trains a day were running in each direction. In 1947 the passenger service was withdrawn, and since then the trains have only carried freight, with now and again a rail tour for enthusiasts.

When Hemel Hempstead town centre was built the line between Heath Park and Hemel Hempstead station had to be demolished, and this was done in 1960.

Where the Harpenden to Boxmoor railway used to cross the old bridge there now stands a towering office block. The bridge was built in 1870 and pulled down in 1960.

As the new town of Hemel Hempstead grew freight traffic became fairly heavy, then as British Rail reduced its freight services, it closed its yards at Redbourn and Hemel.

Now the only user of the line is the Hemelite Company, transporting ash from Harpenden to its Claydales works at Hemel Hempstead. This company took over the working of the line. Its two red diesel locomotives were bought in 1968, and these haul the trucks between the works and a point just short of Harpenden Junction, which is now the limit of British Rail responsibility.

Some unusual types of engines have been seen on this stretch of line. Being used in 1878 were two former Somerset and Dorset 2-4-0 tender engines built by George England, and in 1905 a sort of "push me, pull you," or motor train.

This was a Pullman car pulled by a loco- motive borrowed from the Midland and Great Western line. The steep gradients were too much for one of the Midland's two steam rail motors at the beginning of the century, and it was withdrawn. In 1931 the experimental Karrier road-railer was tried. Looking a bit like a single-decker bus, it was fitted not only with flanged wheels but with road wheels as well, which were designed to be quickly exchanged. Wooden ramps were built and trials took place between Hemel Hempstead and Redbourn on their local roads. Only experimental, it never worked in normal passenger service.

Ken Allen, who drives Hemelite's two scarlet Drewry locomotives, is a familiar figure to the people in the houses backing on to the railway. He travels the line several times daily, back and forth to the Hemelite yard at Claydales. As he passes the housewives pegging out their washing turn and smile and little boys run eagerly to the fence to wave. Mr. Allen never tires of the route. He passes farm and woodland, pastures, *and* even a golf course. In spring and summer, brambles and blackthorn, wild apple trees and hawthorn are a riot of blossom and bird life. The encroaching greenery has to be cut back firmly lest the line become overgrown.

At Beaumont's Halt Mr. Allen has to stop his engine and opens the level-crossing gates himself. Many years ago there was a woman who used to operate the gates and signals, but she was never replaced. Her house is empty and the signal stands rusty and disused, a reminder of the Knickerbocker railway's busy little past.