



**NORTHAMPTONSHIRE INDUSTRIAL  
ARCHAEOLOGY GROUP  
Newsletter 160 – October 2021**

*NIAG's newsletter is published four times a year in:-  
January, April, July and October*

# NIAG committee

**President:** Geoffrey Starmer 34 The Crescent Northampton NN1 4SB

**Secretary:** Peter Perkins 116 Northampton Road Earls Barton  
Northampton NN6 0HF                      secretary@niag.org.uk

**Treasurer:** Terry Waterfield 6 Bakers Lane Norton Daventry NN11 2EL  
treasurer@niag.org.uk

**Members:** Adrian Denton; Mick Dix; Ron Hanson; Mike Ringwood;  
Geoff West

**Website:** niag.org.uk      (webmaster: Terry Waterfield)

**Newsletter:** Editor: Roy Sheffield  
7 Elysium Terrace Northampton NN2 6EN  
newsletter@niag.org.uk    01604 720983

**Next issue: JANUARY 2022** for which all copy must be received by **15 November 2021** please.

Articles: around 1200 words please and accompanied by good quality photographs/drawings, etc. where possible. Shorter items always welcome – from one photo with caption upwards – if in doubt please contact the editor who will do his level best to talk you into becoming a contributor!

**Front cover photo:** *London Transport 1959 stock train at Edgware station, Northern Line in the days when trains had guards!* (See article on page 20)

( *Photo reproduced by kind permission of Richard Griffin / www.Squarewheels.org.uk* )

## Roy Thomson

Members will be saddened to learn that Roy Thomson, a founder member of NIAG who served on its committee for a number of years and was ever after a good friend to the Group, died on 14 June 2021 after a period of ill-health. Despite this ill health Roy willingly agreed to contribute an article to this newsletter – this will be included in the next issue.

Roy gained a BSc with honours in the chemistry of leather manufacture from the University of Leeds in 1960 and worked in research and technical services associated with the leather trades until 1968 when he was appointed works director responsible for technical and production management at Strong and Fisher's Wellington Tannery in Raunds. the largest lambskin clothing leather tannery in the UK and possibly in Europe. NIAG made a couple of most enjoyable visits to this tannery under Roy's aegis.

In 1994 he was appointed Chief Executive at the Leather Conservation Centre from where he retired in 2004. He was an Accredited Conservator, Fellow of the Royal Society of Chemistry, a Fellow and past President of the Society of Leather Technologists and Chemists and Fellow of the International Institute for Conservation. He is a past Chairman of the Council of the Museum of Leathercraft and Treasurer of the Archaeological Leather Group. Roy told me only this year that the leather conservation chapter of his career was the most enjoyable of all and he had volunteered a second newsletter article covering this period. Roy still had his impish good humour whilst I was having these later conversations with him and I confidently think he would have kept that to the end!

## R.S.

\*\*\*\*\*

Details of industrial photographer, Maurice Broomfield's exhibition at the V&A in London (see editorial of last issue) have now become available.....

**Exhibition title: 'Industrial Sublime'**

**Accompanying catalogue (same title): Available 28 October 2021**

**Opens: Saturday 6 November 2021**

**Location: Room 100, Photography Centre, V&A Museum, Cromwell Road, LONDON SW7**

**Cost: FREE.....but essential to pre-book to comply with health requirements**

## 2

### **Northampton Freehold Land Society and The Racecourse**

The Northampton Freehold Land Society (FLS) was founded in 1848, evolving into the Northampton Town & County Building Society, and, following sundry acquisitions and mergers, the Nationwide Building Society. It was established to promote property ownership and enable the working man to buy a piece of land on which he could build a house and thereby have the right to vote. The FLS played an active part in acquiring land, collecting savings and allocating building plots.

A notice appeared in the 26 February 1870 edition of the Northampton Mercury for the sale of some 17 acres of land adjacent to the Racecourse and Kettering Road. A few days later there is a report that the FLS had purchased the land subsequently laying out the roads and building plots that became Colwyn Road, Hood Street and Shakespeare Road. The Society lent prospective home-owners the money to build their houses which were constructed over the next 20 years or so, including those backing onto the Racecourse.

According to the Northampton Mercury, the FLS had an informal agreement with the Trustees of Freeman's Common (of which the Racecourse was part) to gate the entrance to the Racecourse between numbers 39 and 41 Colwyn Road but ill-feeling ensued (involving the tearing down of a fence put up by the Freeman) and eventually it became an accepted public access point. Following an 1883 petition the Racecourse access was widened to the width it now is.

### **NIAG's field trip to the site in 2021**

Fourteen hardy NIAG members braved the cold, wind and rain of an early summer's day on 21 May to investigate what remains of the decorative and functional Victorian ironwork.

There is a 500 metre length of iron railing separating the gardens of the houses on the north side of Colwyn Road as far as the brick wall behind what was the Drill Ground of the Militia Stores which in turn front on to Clare Street. The railings are about 5 feet high and are of wrought-iron with cast-iron fleur-de-lys style heads. Each railing is fixed into a plain rectangular horizontal top rail and, at the bottom, a shaped cast-iron coping which sits on a low brick wall. The railings are braced at intervals by decorative cast-iron posts, each with an elaborate scrolling back-stay fixed into a short length of cast-iron coping set at right angles to the main run.

(Photo #2). In several locations along the length of the wall's coping, the often almost indistinct name of *Barwell & Co Northampton* appears in relief, immediately in front of one of the cast-iron posts.

Evidence of the origin of the railings can be found in an interview with Joseph Gurney, Secretary of the Northampton Freehold Land Society (FLS) in the Northampton Mercury of 20 November 1886. In it he says: *Amongst the good public works we did in this district was putting up those railings on the Racecourse which go from the Kettering Rd down to the Militia Stores. We also provided that opening to the Racecourse from Colwyn road or High street, as it used to be called.*

At the Kettering Road end of the iron railings is a cast-iron gas lamp-post, (Photo #1) thought to be the last one remaining in position on the streets of Northampton. Unmarked, it consists of a fluted column surmounted by a ladder support bracket which is usually hidden by the foliage of an adjacent tree. Note that the cast-iron railing coping has been cut to fit to the profile of the lamp-post. Which came first – lamp-post or railings? The fact that a bracket has been welded to the lamp-post to which the top rail of the railings are bolted, suggests the lamp-post may have been present when the railings were erected.

Although we do not have a specific date when the railings were put up, based on documentary evidence they probably appeared between 1870 and 1875. This period spans the date of Barwell's death and the taking over of his foundry by Rice & Co. When originally constructed, the railings were probably continuous between Kettering Road and the Militia Stores, except for the initial 6 foot wide locked gate where, today, there is a wide entrance to the Racecourse from Colwyn Road. At this spot, one of the cast-iron bollards carries the name *Tattersall Foundry Towcester*. The same name can be seen on some of the posts which form the iron railings separating Becketts Park and Victoria Promenade south of the town centre. Groom & Tattersall had a foundry at Towcester from c.1910 until they closed sometime between 1979 and 1996. In 1964 the company was taken over by JA Perkins of Northampton and after that traded as Tattersall Foundries Ltd. This suggests that the bollard/posts bearing that name were produced post-1964.

Not long after this, gates must have been permitted to be inserted into the fence from properties in Colwyn Road a number were clearly added after the railings were erected. While some of these gate openings are very rough and ready, perhaps an early form of DIY, there are others that look a

## 4

little more professional, having proper gate latches or locks. Two specific types of lock/latch can be identified, one carrying the name of *Henry Mobbs' Lion Foundry* (who had works in Guildhall Road and what is now Swan Street) with their eponymous lion motif. The other type of lock has the words *Dunn Whitesmith* on the lock/latch. William Dunn was a whitesmith, locksmith and bellhanger by 1859, at 2 Regent Square and later 4 Campbell Street. He died in 1885 aged 61 and business was continued by his son Samuel who died in 1895.

There is something of an anomaly at the west end of the railings (adjacent to the site of the Militia Stores). The final 16 foot or so section bordering the gardens of 3 and 5 Colwyn Road and 117 Hunter Street has three gates inserted into the fence, each surmounted by a simple iron arch. However, the cast-iron coping on this section carries the name of *H Mobbs* in two places. It is not clear why Mobbs's name is there. Possibly the company was asked to insert the three gates and had to supply replacement fence components as well as form the gates but, at present, this is surmise.

**Watkin Terrace** was built adjacent to the southern side of the Racecourse, west of the Militia Stores, by James Watkin, of 40 Sheep Street Northampton, from 1875 It consists of 21 three-storey-plus-basement houses which appear on the 1885 OS map and four 2-storey, double-fronted houses which first appear on the 1900 map. All have unusual blue brick quoins on the red brick chimney stacks, suggesting the same builder. Most of the first generation houses have their original iron railings and gates bordering the basement steps at the front of the houses. These have a cast-iron coping on a low brick wall and the name *Rice & Co Northampton* at intervals on the coping. Only the first house in the block has a bay window at the front, with cast-iron balcony above. Some of the other 3-storey houses have similar cast-iron balconies above bay windows at the back overlooking the Racecourse. It is presumed that all would have had these balconies originally. In the pavement in front of Watkin Terrace are several cast-iron coal hole covers, one of which bears the name: *Johnson & Wright Northampton (Photo #4)*. This company was a builders' ironmonger in Gold Street by 1880 until at least 1914. Coal storage was beneath the pavement, being accessed from the basement steps. The four double-fronted houses have no ironwork on the houses themselves. However, a wall which forms the boundary between all Watkin Terrace houses and the Racecourse, has half-height decorative cast-iron panels, with similar cast-iron panels forming the gates. A couple of the gates carry lock-plates with the name *Rice & Co, Northampton* cast into them (*Photo #3*). The boundary wall may have been built in phases as

part of it is entirely of brick while another part of it is stone with brick piers.

**Langham Place** on the east side of Barrack Road backing onto the west side of the Racecourse is a terrace of houses built from 1858 onwards. Most of houses at the north end have decorative cast-iron balconies above the front ground-floor bay windows, for the most part original. There are two different designs, both different to those on Watkin Terrace, but no clue as to who manufactured them (*Photos #5 and 6*).

### Finally

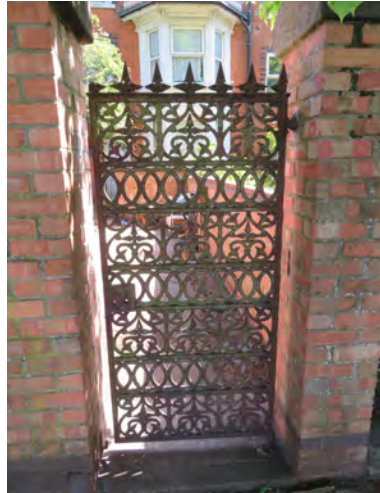
Our walk finished in St George's Avenue where Vicki Sheffield spotted a decorative cast-iron snow guard on the roof of No.9 (named *South View*), an unusual stone-built house. Thanks to Vicki, who also pointed out later that *The Poplars* 55 Barrack Road, just south of Langham Place, has a cast-iron verandah attached to the south side of the house which is not easily visible from the road due to a fence and foliage. The house is listed Grade II on account of its 'late Georgian verandah'.



**Picture 1**  
Believed to be Northampton's last remaining in situ gas lamp standard



Picture 2  
Railing components



Picture 3  
Watkin Terrace gate by Rice & Co.



Picture 4  
Johnson & Wright coal-hole cover  
over domestic, sub-pavement storage  
in Watkin Terrace



Picture 5     Langham Place balcony



Picture 6     Langham Place balcony



## Mumbai fountain (by E.H. Barwell) unveiled after restoration



*The restored Fitzgerald Fountain, twin of Northampton's former Market Square Fountain, supplied by Northampton ironfounder Barwell & Co and originally erected in Mumbai (Bombay) in 1867, has been unveiled close to its original site in Mumbai after languishing in a museum for 60 years. See Newsletter 159, pp11-14. PJP (picture courtesy of Arun and Jona Kotnis)*

\*\*\*\*\*

## Hunsbury Hill – ironstone quarry face walk 2nd June 2021

Hunsbury Hill country park of 94 acres was brought into being by Northampton Development Corporation, which was founded in 1968 to augment the town's population by 100,000. The Park includes an Iron Age fort from between 600 to 300 BC and some Roman industrial activity.

Our walk started on the level crossing by the The Northamptonshire Ironstone Railway Trust Museum, reminiscing about a previous visit many years ago which included a trip on the railway. Commercial ore extraction

## 8

took place between 1873 and 1897. In 7 years from 1873 194,000 tons of ore was won. A smaller area was then worked from 1912 to 1920 from which period the remaining working face dates. The ore was smelted by the Northampton Coal, Iron and Wagon Company's works at the foot of the hill by the canal. The furnaces were also supplied from Duston mines on the other side of the canal. Northampton sand ore generally has a high silica content and was usually mixed with other ore to render it usable in blast furnaces.

The Northampton Arm of the Grand Junction Canal was fully open by 1815 and was used to bring in some ore from workings at Blisworth. Ore from Hunsbury Hill was moved by a horse-powered 3ft 8ins. gauge railway with Bagnall steam engines taking over as motive power in 1912. The furnaces were finally blown out in 1921.

Phipps Brewery owned most of Hunsbury Hill and their farm (now ACRE) supplied barley for the brewery. From 1883 they started to cut down oak trees to make barrels. Old horses were supplied to the railway when they could no longer pull the loaded drays. Part of the track bed is still present within the grounds of ACRE.

Pickering Phipps, the company chairman, was actively interested in antiquity and rewarded the quarry workers for finds. Between 1882 and 1887, while digging in the area of the Iron Age fort, over 300 articles were discovered and passed to Northampton Museum. That area is now designated as an ancient schedule monument.

The rock face is accessed by a little-used trail, which was the final working track bed, running parallel to Hunsbury Hill Rd on the park's southern perimeter. This was easily accessed in February during a reconnoitre, but



*Final, now overgrown, working face*

nature had intervened and the walk was slightly more adventurous than planned. Ian Clarke, a friend with an interest in geology, accompanied us and explained the box structure formation of the ironstone we were looking at.. The remaining working face is some 300yds long and around 12 to 15ft in height. These features were recorded and submitted to the British Geological Survey by Diana Sutherland in 2001 and led to the site's designation as a Regionally Important Geological and Geomorphological Site. This does not have the same level of legal status or protection as a Site of Special Scientific Interest but it does alert interested parties to its being of historical significance, its geological content and features, educational value, access and regional context.

Eventually we clambered out of the sunken track way and walked back via the paths in the park viewing the excavations from above.

*(Additional notes supplied by Mike.....It was only in 1846 that parliament passed the Standard (4' 8½") gauge act with track under that size being designated narrow gauge. Trevithick's 1802 Coalbrookdale loco was 3ft and his 1804 Pennydarren was 4ft. Mathew Murrays 1812 loco Salamanca was 4'1". The Ffestiniog railway which opened 1836 was 1' 11 ½ ". If it is considered that 194,000 tons of ore took seven years to dig out by pick and shovel in the 1880s, think about this: China's current transportation electrification programme will need 2 billion tons of copper alone – that is 119 years of production at current global extraction rates. Copper doubled in price last year (2020) to US\$10,000 per ton. New research methods into mineral extraction include dissolving, bacterial, oxidisation, leaching and fracking using low voltage currents for disposition. Ed.)*

**Report by Mike Ringwood**

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Daventry railway walk – 11 June 2021**

Eighteen members and friends gathered for a walk along part the trackbed of what was Daventry's one and only railway line.

The LNWR built a branch line from the West Coast Mainline at Weedon, reaching Daventry in 1888 and opening on 1 March of that year. In 1895 the line was extended through Braunston to join the LNWR's line from Rugby to Leamington at Marton Junction with stations at Daventry, Braunston, Flecknoe, Napton & Stockton, Southam and Long Itchington. The line was built with economy in mind, and contained some steep

## 10

gradients of up to 1 in 80, especially south of Daventry. It was single track with passing loops throughout, although earthworks allowed for doubling if traffic required. In 1906 a rail-motor was experimentally used on the line but proved to be underpowered and passenger services reverted to push-pull operation for the rest of the line's existence. A short-lived slip coach service from London was introduced for a few months in 1901-02. A coach off the 5.35pm train from London to Liverpool was slipped at Weedon and was then attached to a train that worked through to Leamington; but this was not a success either. The service was cut back sharply during World War II, and never fully reintroduced. All passenger services on the line were withdrawn on 13 September 1958 and it closed to freight in December 1963.

Our walk began north of the Icon Centre where the remains of the trackbed can be seen. It is now covered in tarmac, running northwards in trees on a rising gradient, through what, until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, was open fields but is now housing estates. It serves as a useful walking/cycling route for residents to reach the town centre. We walked about 1 mile, on our way crossing over what was an accommodation underbridge, over the Welton Road on a wooden bridge built on the site of the original bridge, as far as the Ashby Road which still passes over the former railway line on a skew, iron-decked bridge. (Beyond this the path continues to an industrial estate on the north-west edge of the town and is due to be extended to Braunston.) En route, we came across a concrete gradient post, perhaps dating from when the line opened (unless someone know differently?) but, judging from the indicated upward gradients of 1 in 80 and 1 in 100, almost certainly moved here from another part of the route. Also, several rectangular-stone bridge cappings have been re-purposed as seats along the route. Returning whence we came, albeit via Welton Road,



*LNWR crane base*

we made our way to the roundabout at the junction of the A425 South Way and Abbey Street, the site of Daventry railway station. Some 150 yards south of this roundabout on the west side of South Way, hard up against the shrubbery on the verge is the cast-iron column of a crane base standing some 4 feet high with *LNW CREWE* cast into it, indicating it was cast by the LNWR at Crewe Works sometime before the grouping of railway companies in 1923. It is remarkable that it still exists seemingly in its original position, the only remnant of the station and goods yard at Daventry. The 1925 25-inch OS map of Daventry shows this crane in the goods yard, south of the station. Standing with map in hand by the crane looking northwards, it is possible to imagine what the area would have looked like when the railway was still extant.

**Report by Peter Perkins**

\*\*\*\*\*

## **The Northampton Arm (.....and the River Nene)**

An initial 150 yard waterway was dug from a point on the Grand Junction Canal north of Blisworth which connected with a temporary, horse drawn railed way to carry material down towards Northampton whilst the canal proper was being built. The canal, finally completed in 1815, has 17 locks and covers the 5 miles down into Northampton with a fall of 107 feet. The works were supervised by Benjamin Bevan and cost £35,000.

This canal branch was initially called the Northampton arm but changed to the Blisworth arm in 1891. Much deliberation was taken over its naming, it being very close to the Gayton/Blisworth parish boundary and both names are today in common usage.

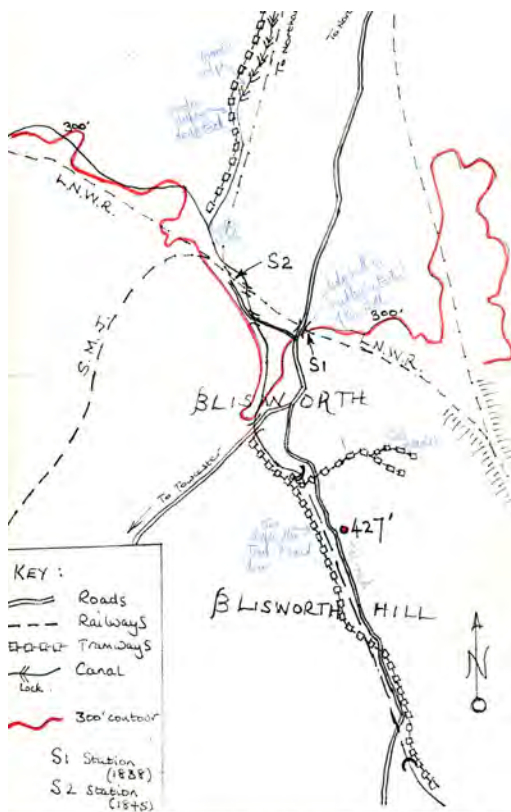
Pickfords moved from the wharves at Blisworth to one on the new arm in order to operate the horse drawn railed way down to Northampton. The company previously operated the horse drawn railed way over Blisworth Hill from 1800-1805 whilst the Blisworth tunnel was being constructed. The railed way down into Northampton was double tracked which allowed the traffic to move without interruption. The rails were taken from the redundant Blisworth Hill system, supplemented by previously used track from elsewhere. It was reported by Thomas Telford that the railed track consisted of downgrades of 1 in 1800 at the Grand Junction end, 1 in 48 in the middle section and 1 in 800 near Duston Mill.

## 12

The point where canal and River Nene join, now named Cotton End, was previously known as East Cotone, this being derived from a Saxon word for settlement and nothing to do with the manufacture of cotton. The canal/river junction is close to South Bridge and just downstream from the confluence of the two tributaries of the Nene, prior to the combined flow continuing east from Northampton. The southern part of the Nene flows down from the Bramptons and the Great Oxenden area whilst the river's northern arm comes down from Badby and Arbury Hill, near Daventry. This combination provides a sufficient channel to enable use by boats to move goods eastwards towards the Wash via Peterborough.

A brickworks was also developed adjacent to the arm circa 1899 and a wharf was constructed on the canal adjacent to Sandlanding Bridge for their use. This wharf was also used in later times for the movement and storage of road stone by a road-mender employed by Towcester Rural District Council. The narrow boats carried bricks from the Milton brickworks to Northampton for the housing estates then being erected in Far Cotton. Three lock-keepers with purpose built cottages to house them were employed by the canal company for the arm.

A small community developed at the junction of the Arm with the GJC, with a public house being opened in 1807 and closing in 1953 serving locals, navvies, boatmen and Pickford's employees prior to and after the



completion of the canal into Northampton. An 1899 OS Map shows workshops, blacksmiths, warehouses, toll house, cottages, office, public house and stables all situated close to the arm junction. Adjacent to the toll house a floating swing bridge was operated for crossing the canal and facilitating the collection of tolls. One important resident of this community was Thomas W. Milner, the canal company's northern section engineer from 1895 to 1930. He oversaw the maintenance of the canal system in this area and made his HQ here. Another, lesser known, occupant of premises in the area was Russian Oil Products Ltd who had storage facilities at the arm junction circa 1931. The company needed to supply their depot by canal from Brentford, redistributing their products to Northampton and the surrounding area by road.

One of the principal cargoes passing through Cotton End on narrow boats was coal from Northumberland and County Durham. This was unloaded from coasters at Kings Lynn and hauled in barges through the fens to join the River Nene at Peterborough. The movement of coal via canal and river reduced its purchase price dramatically, Northampton having been previously supplied by North Warwickshire and Leicestershire pits by road. It has been calculated that in 1836 60,000 tons of coal was carried by canal to Northampton and in 1839 a River Nene toll book indicates that about 10,000 tons was dispatched from Northampton down river to Wellingborough/Thrapston. In 1928 an NCC survey recorded 65 limekilns at 17 sites adjacent to the GJC using raw material from close to the canal for producing flux for the smelting of iron and also for agricultural use.

The upkeep of the canals was paid for by tolls on boats using the cut. This was in the form of fees set in pennies per mile and depending on cargoes carried. Empty boats ran free, with cargoes of coal, stone and lime attracting the lowest rates.

Specially selected and trained canal horses differed from agricultural and dray horses in that a canal horse was trained to stand and lean, waiting for the boat to start to move before walking on. Most other working horses were accustomed to walking on from the outset – this is known as “standing tight” in the equine world. The tow ropes used for pulling the narrow boats were about 90 feet long so as not to pull the horse back into the canal and to give enough slack for the crossing of the canal via Turnover bridges without unhitching.

Once railways became established it was the end of the boom years for the canals, by and large. Some commodities were still hauled to sundry

destinations on the canal and river systems into the 1960s, with wheat brought up from London to Whitworths Brothers' Victoria Mills at Wellingborough being amongst the last regular traffic to use the Northampton arm but this ceased in 1969 leaving the waterways clear for leisure boats alone.

## **Report by Adrian Denton (Visit date: 28 May 2021)**

\*\*\*\*\*

### **The Construction of the Suez Canal 1859 – 1869**

There are canals and there are canals. We “NIAGers” are used to thinking in terms of, say, the Grand Union Canal, but the recent grounding of the large container vessel “Ever Given” of 200,000 tonnes, 440yds. long x 23 containers wide, in the Suez Canal takes on a completely new dimension. Whilst we can't, as part of our summer programme, arrange an evening walk there, I thought that we might consider the canal's topography and construction from the comfort of our own armchairs. This has the double advantage of not having to put up with the heat and the flies and not having the hassle of pushy hawkers selling “genuine” ancient artefacts.

The Suez Canal (often referred to as the Maritime Canal) connects Port Sa'id on the Mediterranean Sea at its northern end to Suez on the Red Sea in the south. To do this it crosses the Isthmus of Suez, a 120 mile wide (north to south) tract of land which geographically is the fault line separating the continents of Africa and Asia. It is mainly low-lying terrain and the route of the canal utilises several natural depressions and lakes. Most of this land area consists of mud, sand, gravel and alluvial clays. There is very little rock to contend with and most of that which was encountered was gypsum and limestone and fairly easy to remove. Approximately 60% of the course of the canal would be through lakes, with only 40% to be cut through solid land. Over the centuries various Pharaohs had commissioned waterways to be dug; some for irrigation, some for trade. It is recorded that grain and pilgrims were being shipped from Cairo to Mecca via canal to the Red Sea in 640AD. In the mid-19th century a French group petitioned Pasha Mohamed Sa'id for permission to construct a waterway connecting the two seas. Eventually permission was given and The Suez Canal Company was formed by Ferdinand de Lesseps in 1858. The original construction specification was for a canal 26ft. deep, 72ft. wide at the bottom, and 200 to 300ft. at the top, with sloping banks, normally 1 lift in 2, but sometimes 1 in



5. It would be a single lane with passing places every 5-6 mls.

In 1859, when work commenced no infrastructure was in place, so the first requirements were for the construction of ports at each end of the maritime canal, and a sweet water service canal: At the north end, Port Sa'id on the Mediterranean, two stone moles were built, the longer being 1.75mls. out into the Mediterranean. This formed the northern access into the canal. In the south, on the Red Sea, an existing small port (Tewfik) had to be extensively rebuilt to accept consignments of quarried construction stone plus general supplies. The service canal (78 mls. long) had to be dug east from the Nile near Cairo, to Lake Timsah which was approximately halfway along the proposed route. From this point it would split into two arms - one going north and one going south to the sea. Taking two years to complete (1861 – 1863), it would provide fresh water for the thousands of workmen building the main canal as well as ferrying food, supplies and materials. After the old Pasha died in 1863, work was halted as the new Pasha wanted better terms for the project. This caused a delay of three years. When work eventually recommenced, however, technology had advanced, providing mechanisation which would speed up the work. Civil engineering at this time had not garnered the experience that we now enjoy for projects on this scale, therefore ingenuity and confidence had to provide the engineers with solutions to challenges that today would be overcome with science, specialised materials and / or heavy machinery.

In the first few years, much of the work was carried out using forced manual labour along with some dredging. Very slow progress was made and it was soon realised that more efficient techniques were needed. Bucket dredgers were in use but these needed to be improved. This had the knock-on problem of how to handle and dispose of the spoil at a sufficient rate that the excavation work was not hindered. There were up to sixty dredgers in use at any one time, ranging between 15 and 75 h.p. Spoil removal varied with the type of material coming out and its proposed use – much of it was to be used to form the canal's banks. Spoil coming up in the dredging buckets would be emptied on to a conveyor which would in turn empty into an attending barge. This barge held seven boxes of 4 cu yds each. A full barge would be floated off to a position beneath a steam crane which then lifted the boxes onto tramway trucks. On arrival at its destination the spoil would be discharged by opening a hinged side. Unusable spoil was barged out to sea or to artificial lakes, to be discharged by means of bottom opening doors. The large proportion of spoil which was needed to build up the initial low banks of the canal was handled by the long "couloirs"; up to 75 yds. long, these were iron troughs, half-elliptical in section, 5ft. wide x

2ft. deep. The troughs housed an endless chain conveyor fitted with scrapers shaped to fit the inside of the trough. This trough was mounted on a framework on the deck of a barge raised high at the barge end. The spoil, when dropped onto this elevated end, was assisted downward by both the flow of water pumped into the trough and the scraper conveyor. The upper end would be approx. 36ft. and the lower approximately 20ft. above the water line, thus clearing the top of the previously constructed low banks. Some of the shorter "couloirs" were directly mounted on the dredger itself with a counter balancing on the opposing side.

Construction of the main shipping canal commenced at the northern end, at Port Sa'id. The first challenge presented itself over the first 22 mls. The canal was to run alongside Lake Manzala which was, on average, about 4 ft. deep. Consolidation of the ground at the edge of the lake was required to establish embankments to contain the boundaries of the canal. The solution, which seems unbelievably crude, was to have the labourers scoop up a large lump of mud, squeeze the water out like a cheese, then stack it to dry in the sun. This formed a 12ft. wide channel down the side of the lake deep enough to allow dredgers to operate. The dried blocks were then stacked to define the line of the canal, with subsequent dredged spoil filling and drying in layers behind. This process increased the soil's cohesion, which allowed the banks of soil to stand 6ft. above the water level. The sun baked the whole thing into a solid mass so firm that the bank could be used as a road for substantial loads. Moving south, the terrain became an almost dry swamp, Lake Ballah. The material to be excavated here was either gypsum or mud and gypsum mix. Unsuitable for embankments, this had to be carried away from the course of the canal. After Ballah the land begins to rise to El Guir with high sand slopes and a friable marl up to 55ft. above sea level. This ends abruptly at Lake Timsah which is midway and the site of what was to become the city of Ismailia. South of Lake Timsah the land rises again in the area of Serapeum to a maximum of 37ft., but here the material had to be blasted and dug out, proving difficult and labour-intensive, so it was decided that dredging would provide the solution, even though the problem was on the top of a hill. A dredger was brought south down the canal from Port Sa'id as far as Lake Timsah, through the lock onto the sweet water canal which already had locks to raise the water to 17ft.. It travelled south on the service canal to a small arm and locks which had been temporarily constructed to place the dredger in its own water on the line of the canal on the high ground. Spoil was taken away in lighters. An Ingenious solution by any measure! Here again the land fell away into the Bitter Lakes which had dried out but which contained a layer of solid salt which was dissolved out rather than needing to be dug or blasted.

The last hurdle was El Shalouf, a piece of ground 35ft. high which contained a layer of rock. Even up to 15 days before the canal opened, blasting was still in progress to move the last deposits. From here it was a short way to Port Suez and the Red Sea and final completion in 1869, after ten years in the making.

There are no locks on the canal, but there is no actual flow of water since the levels of the now connected seas are virtually equal - approximately 2.6ft. higher at high tide in the Red Sea. The Bitter Lakes create a regulating reservoir for the canal. At the northern end above the Bitter Lakes water flows north in the winter and south in the summer. South of the Bitter Lakes it flows as per the tides at Suez.

**Ron Hanson**

**ship** *n.* Prison, with a chance of drowning

(Dr. Johnson, paraphrased only slightly!)

## Hold on tight!

My worst fears have been realised! Roy Sheffield has persuaded me to reveal my interest in bus services and operators in Northamptonshire. For years I have tried to keep a low profile but Roy is having none of it!

It all started when I was a schoolboy living in Wellingborough where, for reasons I cannot explain I started collecting bus numbers whilst most other lads did likewise with train numbers. I took photographs of the vehicles I saw and listed each class in an exercise book. By chance another pupil at school was training to be a news reporter and he wrote an article about my interest in buses which was published in the Wellingborough News. A week or so later the assistant general manager of United Counties Bus Company wrote to me asking me to visit him to discuss my interest. The outcome was that he offered me employment as a traffic trainee with United Counties at the princely sum of 75/- (£3.75) per week and at the end of 1957 my career started with the local bus company and lasted for over forty years.

United Counties was the major bus operator in Northamptonshire having originated with the Wellingborough Motor Omnibus Co Ltd in 1913 and becoming United Counties Omnibus & Road Transport Co Ltd in 1921. It remained an independent company until 1931 when the Tilling Group acquired it but after the war, fearing nationalisation, Tilling's sold to the Government in 1948. United Counties remained publicly

## 18

owned for almost the next forty years, latterly as part of the National Bus Company, until the Thatcher Conservative government decided to privatise their interests in bus companies. Thus in November 1987 United Counties was sold to the Stagecoach Group where it has remained ever since, latterly operating as Stagecoach rather than United Counties.



*A 1914 Leyland ST of the Wellingborough Motor Omnibus Co Ltd standing outside the Bull Hotel, Irthlingborough in readiness for a journey to Northampton taking 1 hour and 25 minutes.*

Over the years I worked for the company I acquired so many photographs of buses and accumulated so much information on the history of the firm that I decided I would like to share this information with others who were similarly interested and write an illustrated history of United Counties. By this time it was in the mid-1970s and there were only two publishers specialising in transport history – Ian Allan and David & Charles, neither of whom were interested in my project. So I decided to publish it myself in small parts as I did not have the wherewithal to fund the publication of a substantial book. Thus I started with a history of the Wellingborough Motor Omnibus Co Ltd., the forerunner of United Counties, as a thirty-two page booklet which I published in 1977. Learning how many copies I was likely to sell I was

able to double the size of the next part and the project snowballed to end up twenty-five years later with Part 17! Available information concerning the early years of the company's history was pretty thin so I was not able to write such a comprehensive history of the earlier years as I would have liked. However, starting the project in the 1970s enabled me to record the events of the 1970 to 1999 period as they happened, so from 1970 onwards the history is very detailed.



*Three Brockways and a Guy from the fleet of WA Nightingale & Sons of Northampton touting for excursion traffic on Northampton Market Square in the early 1930s.*

The history of United Counties was only one of my projects. During the 1920s and 1930s the company took over the services and sometimes the vehicles of quite a number of Northamptonshire independent bus operators, which led to me investigating the histories of these concerns also. Thereafter it seemed a good idea to record how these independents had developed as all had played their part in the provision of passenger transport in the County and beyond. There were several hundreds of these operators and I have tried to write potted histories of each but it is a project that can never be completed. Initially I introduced a loose-leaf system to record these histories so that amendments could easily be made as additional information was unearthed. Latterly I have placed them on the Omnibus Society's web site where they can be viewed by any interested person. They can be

## 20

found at [www.omnibus-society.org](http://www.omnibus-society.org) and then by following drop down menus to Branches & Groups / Provincial Historical Research Group/ Bygone Buses of Northamptonshire.

### Roger Warwick

\*\*\*\*\*

### Stand well clear of the doors!

It is now 22 years since the last crew-operated tube train ran on London Underground's Northern line. The role of the guard at the rear of the train, opening and closing the doors and generally keeping an eye out for passengers' safety, as well as answering their many queries, has been consigned to the history books!

As the senior guard at Golders Green depot, my colleagues and I, in those last few weeks operating the 1959 / 1962 / 1972 stock on the line, sat around the table whilst our Line Manager wished us well for the future, at the same time regretting that he would not be joining us. Congregated around that table on that Friday in May 1999 were, as he put it, about 500 years of collective seniority – no advice was given on how to go about our business, just a reminder to sign on at the Labour Exchange on the Monday to be sure of getting our National Insurance contributions credited!

Back in 1986 London Transport had introduced the very first one-man-operated (OMO) trains on the Hammersmith & City line. Despite the strike of guard/shunters which immediately followed, 13 years later my shift at Golders Green was the last to convert to OMO.

In earlier times, when I was 7 years old, my parents had moved into our council flat in Hackney. From our flat we could walk 5 minutes to the Graham Road stop for a route 30 bus to Islington and from there take the Northern Line nine stops to Hendon Central in order to visit one of my grandmothers. Parents felt safer riding in the last carriage where the guard was ever-present, operating the car doors, a sight which I myself found quite mesmerising.

In 1955 the Northern Line stock consisted of 7-car 1938 red liveried trains. It was still in the days of passengers being able to open train doors themselves, the guard's panel showing a red light when this type of operation was in use. Although this system had been in use for many years, many was the time a slow-on-the-button passenger was transported past his intended station or, conversely, was left platform-bound and obliged to await the next train. The guard's twin-button door openers/closers later replaced this and passengers could relax, leaving all that hard work to the guard!

Certainly for the next few years I took up train, bus and underground train-spotting which later stood me in good stead, as we shall see.

I left school at nearly 17 years of age and had a number of jobs in the record business but in 1971 took myself to Griffith House, just off Marylebone Road, then LT's recruitment offices, still there as general offices. I passed the written tests, although struggling with a couple of the more technical questions, but failed the eyesight test during the medical exam. The examiner told me all I needed was a 'pair of specs' – point taken!

After a three year gap I applied again, this time at Manor House in North London and, except, again, for the technical questions, did well enough to go forward to the 3-4 week training course at White City in West London. Whilst some of the White City instructors showed themselves as tyrants, my time spent 'tube-spotting' in my youth gave me a better overview than some who came in straight off the streets.

One of the senior Train Inspectors, Len Robinson, was drafted in to take



*Guard's control panel on 1959 train*

three of us for our guard's exam. A lovely, quietly spoken man, Len put us at ease with a joke or story before starting to ask us questions on the various types of automatic and semi-automatic signals and their identifying numbers, gently coaxing us towards the correct answers. We all three passed this stage and moved on to road- and route-learning.

Normally a guard's road-training period would start with 2 weeks 'on the back' with a Guard Instructor, learning the route, remembering which side's doors to open, as well as positions of sidings, train reversing procedures, depot movements and some technical functions. I should have had an instructor for 2-3 days on the back but no-one was available so I was told to report to platform 9 at Baker Street station for 3 days driver training with Frank Martenstyn. As it turned out it could not have been a more fortuitous combination for me because Frank's method of making me get the feel of how a train rides, brakes, slows and accelerates was the best way for any newcomer to know what to expect in a totally alien situation – hands-on experience! I've never forgotten Frank and his style of tuition – he and I did work together a few times but not often enough for me!

With my training completed, I was recommended to write to the Station Manager at Elephant & Castle asking if I could be rostered to work with the senior driver at the depot, George Frazer. George had 42 years of service and was 6 months from retirement to his family home in Worcester Park, Surrey. He was 6 foot tall, weighed 15 stone and smoked a pipe! He was a grandfatherly figure and grounded in common sense, at least some of which rubbed off on me! The upshot of my memo was that I was rostered to work with George Frazer, as I had requested. Sunday, first trip up the Bakerloo line with George driving. First two stops – everything fine. Embankment onwards – problems with doors-closed warning light on panel which didn't seem to be reflecting the actual situation. Piccadilly Circus and Oxford Circus – still problems. Regents Park – called George on cab phone relay. He listened to me relating what had happened. 'OK, Marc – tip the passengers out' which I did.....then realised I had mis-used the Guard's key! Who would believe me now? George did, and backed me up when a mini-enquiry started at the depot, unbeknown to me. But as soon as the Area Manager found out the driver was George Frazer the whole affair was quickly forgotten, save that I was ever after known as 'Frazer's guard' and that was the foundation of my reputation for reliability, a steady work ethic and, in particular, common sense!

My passing-out test was conducted by area manager Len Lane and started at Baker Street station. We were talking whilst walking from his office and



down the escalator to meet our train on platform 9 (again!). I got in to the driver's cab (guards needed to know the rudiments of driving in case accident or illness befell the rostered driver) and asked how the brakes handled on this particular 1938 stock train, some of which could be temperamental. Mr Lane enquired why I had asked that question. I told him he might need to see me make an emergency application of the Westinghouse braking system to which he replied: 'I don't know why you are so bothered, lad – you've passed!' We hadn't even left the platform! 'I can see you know what you're doing – I'm a good judge of character on this job!'

You qualify as a train guard / emergency motorman which means that in an emergency you are allowed to de-train passengers and run empty to the nearest siding or depot, with a railman or supervisor in attendance at all times. I had to do this a couple of times in my career, always with the permission of the line controller and station master but it was never seen as standard practice..

I was now a fully qualified guard! We were asked to nominate the line or depot of our choice but at the same time had to be prepared to travel any distance from home to work to suit LT's needs. I had done my homework on the Night Bus timetables to and from the depot at Elephant & Castle (Bakerloo Line) in south-east London, which I had heard was suffering badly from staff shortages. Another lad nominated Neasden depot in north west London – what were we offered? Me – Neasden, the other lad, Elephant! LT stuck to their guns until the Union rep became involved and managed to smooth things out!.

7 October 1974 saw me start my 25-year career with London Transport as a guard, something I have no regrets about in any respect, only wishing I had started those three years earlier.

## **Marc Ferdman**

### **HELP NEEDED!**

If any NIAG member has knowledge of a speaker (or speakers) suitable for giving a NIAG winter lecture in the 2022-2023 season, would they contact Peter Perkins as soon as possible please.

## 43 ROMANS BUILT WATLING STREET!!

### PART 2

*Part 1, in the April 2021 NIAG Newsletter, covered the history of Watling Street from the Roman period through to Tudor times*

Towcester is, on the major route between London and Holyhead, a major port for Dublin traffic and going through St Albans, Lichfield and Chester. There had been an increase in economic activity after the restoration to the throne of Charles II with increased movement of goods around the country resulting in the opening of the first coach service from London to Chester in 1657.

Major improvements to the state of roads, bridges and fords became essential. Although parishes were responsible for maintaining the main roads passing through them, improvements had to be undertaken by county authorities through the Quarter Sessions. Unsurprisingly there was a general reluctance to pay out local ratepayers' money to finance these. The 1663 Highways Act was enacted to remedy the difficulty that was experienced in getting goods to London via Hertfordshire. Justices of the Peace were allowed to borrow money at 5% interest to cover the counties' costs and establish toll gatherers to take money for the use of roads for wheeled traffic and livestock. Under this arrangement the first toll gate was erected on the Great North Road at Wadesmill in Hertfordshire and similar powers were given to other counties.

In the early 1700s there was the first private initiative to improve roads rather than leave it to the county authorities. The driving force behind this was the gentry of Northamptonshire and Warwickshire who were not content with the state of the London to Chester post road stating that the parishes through which the road passed, including Towcester, had no local materials to repair it and as a result it was dangerous to all persons using it. The resulting 1707 Act for repairing the highways from Old Stratford to Dunchurch gave the trustees the right to erect three tollhouses along its twenty mile length at Old Stratford, Paulerspury (Cuttle Mill) and Dunchurch. Later, toll gates were erected both north and south of Towcester near Caldecote and the Folly on London Road. In 1781 the Towcester toll gate obtained £602 from travellers along the road. This was £38 less than the income from the toll gate at Old Stratford and £58 less than obtained at Stowe Hill. This reduction in road traffic may have been

the result of the coaches and wagons needing to hire additional horses to go up and down the steep sides of the valley between Paulerspury and Towcester. Some travellers resorted to going via Northampton, leaving Watling Street at Stony Stratford and re-joining at Dunchurch.



**1 1817:** *There is a considerable, though not very steep, descent to Cuttle Mill and after the road has passed the valley bottom it rises at 1 in 10 for 100 yards and 1 in 12 for 150 yards before easing towards the summit, about 600 yards further north.*

**2** *The present gradients are 1 in 12 for 200 yds. and, further on, for 300 yds.*

The heavy wagons using the road made its maintenance a constant problem for both the Turnpike Trust and the parishes along the route, who had to pay for the work. A local man, Gilbert Flesher, who lived where Towcester Post Office now is, set about devising methods of road construction to combat this problem. He was Deputy Lieutenant of the County, and on several turnpike committees. His experiments in road construction established that roads should be overlain with a compacted layer of small stones and pebbles to form a smooth surface. He had this technique implemented in Towcester and Buckinghamshire with some success. Unfortunately the civil engineer, John McAdam, published this process first and got national credit. Gilbert claimed that McAdam had got the idea from him.

The Act of Union in 1800 unified Great Britain and Ireland and in 1810

## 26

Thomas Telford was commissioned by the Government to improve the Holyhead Road to link their two capital cities via a ferry from Holyhead. Improvements were made to the stretch of road between Stony Stratford and Towcester in 1822. Cuttings and embankments were made to alleviate some of the gradients on the road. At Cuttle Mill a new embankment 44 feet high was raised and the hill approaching Towcester had a new cutting 15 feet deep. Telford's construction methods improved on those of McAdam and Flesher, as he demanded greater care in the construction of the foundations. The approach to Towcester from the south down London Road, was re-engineered to create a constant slope, leaving the footpath to some of the houses on the west side of the road lower than the road surface.



*Watling Street, south side of Towcester, in 1836*

Even while these improvements were being made, George Stephenson was engineering the Stockton and Darlington Railway to allow for steam haulage and the Act for the railway later allowed passengers to be carried. By 1825 the railway was in operation and a prospectus for building a railway between London and Birmingham was in circulation. The section from London to Denbigh Hall, Bletchley and a section from Birmingham to Rugby were completed on the 9<sup>th</sup> April 1838 ready for the coronation of Queen Victoria on the 28<sup>th</sup> June. Between 9<sup>th</sup> April and 16<sup>th</sup> September the hundreds of passengers using this new form of transport had to get out of

their railway carriages at Denbigh Hall and Rugby and get on coaches which went through Towcester, where many would have changed horses and got refreshments. This was a busy time for the town but on the 17<sup>th</sup> September it all changed. Lord Southampton, in a speech made at the opening of the Town Hall in 1865, recalled that when he first came to Towcester *“it was a most amusing town to come to. Thirty-six coaches came through it every day, and so many post horses and carriages that one might be amused a whole afternoon in seeing what occurred. Then came the railways, and poor Towcester went to the dogs, and if one went through the town of an afternoon then, it seemed as if the place had a plague, there was not a living soul to be seen”*. The town and Watling Street went into decline and it took about 20 years for a recovery to take place.

The loss of trade brought about by the almost complete disappearance of coach traffic through Towcester in 1838 was keenly felt by local inns and eventually led to the closure of the large White Horse Inn. Ancillary traders catering for coach traffic also suffered reductions in their income.

Coincidentally, this economic blow to the town happened at the same time that gas street lighting was introduced. Although the lamps stood some distance apart and would not have given a great deal of light, they were an improvement on light from buildings filtering into the streets as previously relied upon.

Coaches still passed through the town connecting Northampton to Oxford. In January 1841 any coaches still using Watling Street had to pass through flood waters a foot deep along the Bottom End of the town, the worst for many years. Fourteen years later travellers would have been wary of passing through the town as there was an outbreak of cholera. During autumn alone in that year (1855) around 400 cases of diarrhoea were recorded, 120 cases of cholera proper and over 60 deaths occurred. The construction of a sewer along the Bottom End section of Watling Street during 1856 improved sanitary conditions and helped prevent further visitations of this disease.

Market Hill, as it was in the 1800s, covered the stretch of Watling street from the present Town Hall to Park Street. From earliest times this was the economic centre of the town where a weekly Tuesday market was held. Here the wives of smallholders and farmers would come in from the local villages to sell their goods from wicker panniers and dealers would set up stalls to entice the local population to purchase their wares. In earlier times those attending would have seen local drunkards secured in the stocks for

their misdemeanours or a baker standing in the pillory being pelted with stale bread for selling under-weight loaves. Now that Victoria was on the throne this punishment was a thing of the past.

As well as the weekly market, fairs were held along this section of Watling street on Shrove Tuesday, May 12<sup>th</sup> plus two more such in October, the first of which was the Statute Fair for the hiring of servants. Those seeking employment would gather on Market Hill wearing a badge or tool particular to their occupation so that they could be recognized as seeking work. Housemaids would hold a broom or mop, dairy maids a milking stool, shepherds a crook and cow men had wisps of straw attached to their coats. Fairs were much larger affairs than the weekly markets and brought in traders from further afield. A much greater variety of goods was on offer, as well as livestock. The extra stalls extended the market northwards to the area then known as the Pig Market. This was where the Albion, Wheat Sheaf, Nelsons Arms and The Crown public houses, as well as the stray animal pound were all located. The markets had an area set aside for visitors to be entertained by Punch and Judy shows, acrobats, roundabouts, swing boats and stalls selling sweet stuffs. Along with the crowds came the thieves and vagabonds, of course, and in 1810 a gang of as many as 16 men robbed visitors, stallholders and coach passengers. Annual Fairs ceased to be held in Towcester in 1902 and the regular Tuesday market seems to have ceased sometime between 1931 and 1936. In 1932 and 1935, the October St Luke's fair was briefly revived and held where Malthouse Court now is.

The demise of both these long-standing institutions was brought about by changes to peoples' shopping habits as those who wished could easily travel to shops in neighbouring towns. In October 1929, the Northampton Chronicle and Echo reported how life had changed for residents along Watling Street from sleepy to sleeplessness, with a constant stream of motor traffic both day and night. The volume of traffic meant that it was difficult for drivers to stop in the town and a by-pass was proposed by the County Council. The Ministry of Transport agreed to finance and construct it but shopkeepers were alarmed about the potential loss of trade and the Rural District Councillors decided by seven votes to six to support a protest by 300 ratepayers against the scheme. Consequently, in 1932 the Ministry shelved the scheme and the residents congratulated themselves on their success! How different Towcester would be now if 88 years ago the by-pass had become a reality!

**Brian Giggins** (*Chairman. Towcester & Dist. Local Hist. Society*)

## Irthlingborough Old Bridge...over 700 years of service

In Northamptonshire we are fortunate in having a number of ancient bridges which have served as important crossing points of the River Nene. Ditchford, Irthlingborough Thrapston and Oundle North bridges all date from at least the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

The Grade 1 listed bridge at Irthlingborough has always been of interest to NIAG due to its links with the leather industry and its proximity to the site of Irthlingborough's former railway station. The bridge consists of ten double and triple chamfered arches. Those on the west side have outer arches, although the medieval arches are still visible, whilst on the east side five of the arches have refuges. There is a date stone of 1668 on the east side of the bridge which it is thought refers to restoration of the bridge at that date and a plaque with the cross keys of St. Peter adorns the west side. A central plate with an inscription relates to further restoration work done in 1829. Causeways attached at each end, and consisting of of five arches, form part of the bridge.



In recent years the most prominent building in the vicinity of the bridge was Keunen's tannery which NIAG had the opportunity to visit in 1986, just before it was demolished to make way for a one-storey modern tannery built on the same site. Nene Valley Tanning Co. built the first tannery in

## 30

1916 and had a wharf alongside on the Nene. The company ceased trading in 1930 and the premises were purchased in 1934 by Keunen Bros., based in Eindhoven in Holland. The modern one-storey tannery opened in 1987 but it had a short life. The shoemaker Griggs purchased the building in 1998 to produce Dr. Marten's boots and shoes, only to close it five years later when they moved all production to China.



At the NIAG Members' Evening in January 2020, Barry Taylor showed some old slides from Northamptonshire Record Office of various local scenes, taken in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the photos was of Irthlingborough Old Bridge which, with assistance from Irthlingborough Historical Society, we were able to date to just before WW1. The board on the left hand side refers to bridge widening by the contractor Ed. Archer & Sons of Northampton. Apparently in 1914 the Northamptonshire Roads and Bridges Committee decided that the old bridge should be widened to accommodate the increasing volume of road traffic. Some of the local councils objected to contributing to the costs but in the end the scheme was abandoned due to the start of the war before much work had been carried out. The scheme was revisited in 1920 but the costs had dramatically increased. However repair works, including renewing and re-facing of the east parapets of the old bridge were carried out in 1922. At about the same time, the Government had upgraded the status of the A6 road and discussions started about having an alternative route, which led to the construction of the new bridge in the 1930's.



The building of the new bridge in difficult economic times was a major event for the County Council and the A6 towns. Opened in October 1936 by the Minister of Transport Leslie Hore-Belisha, the nearly half mile long high viaduct transformed the landscape. When built, it was the longest road bridge in Northamptonshire and crossed the River Nene and the Northampton – Peterborough railway as well as a number of minor watercourses. It joined up with the new Irthlingborough by-pass which had been built four years earlier. Currently major improvements to ease traffic flow at the south end of the bridge are in progress with the reconfiguration of the new Chowns Mill roundabout, where the A6 and A45 roads meet.

The building of the new bridge greatly eased the traffic using Irthlingborough station and avoided the long queues which apparently built up at the level crossing, particularly when shunting in the goods yard was taking place. There is little of the station site left today, apart from the remains of the goods dock and some rails embedded in the road at the site of the level crossing.

The great legacy left by the railway which is today well used by the public is the opportunity to walk or cycle along 6 miles of the track of the old Northampton to Peterborough rail line. From Irthlingborough level crossing one can walk 4 miles eastwards through the Stanwick Lakes leisure and nature complex and the site of Ringstead and Addington station to Thrapston or 2 miles westward from the level crossing to the Rushden Lakes leisure and shopping centre. The path and cycleway also links with the Greenway which is a traffic free route between Irthlingborough, Rushden and Higham Ferrers. It is interesting that 180 years after the railway line was built it is still providing a major contribution to the local community who have appreciated using the old track for leisure and exercise, particularly during the recent lockdowns!

**Ron Whittaker**

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Rail journeys during the pandemic**

A press report in early June stated that the number of rail journeys undertaken during 2020 stood at 388 million compared with 1.7 billion during 2019. The figure of 388 million was the lowest since records started being made in 1872 (yes, eighteen seventy two !) when it stood at 407 million. January to March 2021 saw only 80 million rail journeys being made

with a markedly lower total of 35 million between April and June 2021. Busiest lines were London Underground, London Overground and C2C which operates between London and destinations in Essex. Least busy, unsurprisingly, was Heathrow Express which filled only 4.7% of available capacity during this period.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Discover Centre at Northamptonshire Central Library**

NIAG members may be interested to know that what was once called the 'Northamptonshire local studies collection' at Northampton Central Library (Abington Street, Northampton) is again open to the public and without a requirement to book in advance. **The Discover Centre is open 4 days a week: Tuesday to Friday from 10am to 4pm.**

Now called 'Discover Centre' the collection continues to be located in the basement of the Central Library. It holds a large collection of local, family history and other resources. These include old photographs, local newspapers on microfilm as well as access to the British Newspaper Archive; a large collection of Northampton and Northamptonshire historic and OS maps and plans together with census returns from 1841 to 1901 (microfilm and fiche), parish registers and trade and street directories and a variety of printed material and history and archaeology volumes and books. Some of the latter are available for loan.

The Library advises that due to staffing requirements opening hours may occasionally be changed at short notice so If you're planning to visit Discover, it's recommended that you email or telephone the library:-

Northampton.LibraryPlus@westnorthants.gov.uk or:-

0300 126 7000 ..... to confirm that it will be open on that day.

Please also email them if you have questions about the collections or would like them to locate something for you in advance of visiting. They can also provide access to computer and microfilm/fiche readers.

Further details about this valuable service are available at :-  
<https://www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/councilservices/library-service/visiting-your-library/Pages/local-and-family-history.aspx>

**Graham Cadman**

# Ireson Says it with Coal—and Gets the Sack!

Continued from Page 10

**HE WANTED  
TO BE A  
FIREMAN**

**LEFT  
KETERING  
ON THE  
TRAIN**

A NICE QUIET LITTLE TRAIN

IT WAS A PERFECT DAY

**HE WAS  
THE ONLY  
UNHAPPY  
CREATURE  
—what with  
the**

**AFTER  
AT  
SOME  
RAUNDS**

**HE TOOK OVER  
THE SHOVEL  
AND BEGAN TO  
SLING SNOWBALLS**

**AT  
KIMBOLTON**

**BUT  
AFTER  
INSTRUCTION  
ON  
HOW  
TO  
SHOVEL  
SIGNS  
BRIGHTENED VISIBLY**

**BUT ONLY FOR  
A FEW MINUTES  
MORE COAL  
WAS  
POUNDED**

**MORE  
AND MORE**

**OVER  
BUCKDEN**

**PROCEEDED  
TO  
GODMANCHESTER**

**RETURNING TO  
KETERING  
HE RODE IN  
THE**

**AT  
THRAPSTON  
HE STARTED  
AGAIN**

**195**

**NEXT TIME HELL  
RODE IN THE  
GUARDS VAN  
—YOU CAN STOVE  
THAT STOVE  
WITH A**

AND PUSHED  
HER ROUND  
ON HER  
UNCOMFORTABLE



Artwork reproduced by kind permission of Andy Burkett, Assistant Editor, Northamptonshire Telegraph

# CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Roy Thomson  | 1  |
| Northampton Racecourse – Peter Perkins               | 2  |
| Mumbai fountain (by E.H. Barwell)                    | 7  |
| Hunsbury Hill quarry – Mike Ringwood                 | 7  |
| Daventry railway walk – Peter Perkins                | 9  |
| Northampton Arm and River Nene – Adrian Denton       | 11 |
| Suez Canal: construction phase – Ron Hanson          | 14 |
| 'Hold On Tight!' - Roger Warwick                     | 17 |
| 'Stand Clear of the Doors!' - Marc Ferdman           | 20 |
| Watling Street in Towcester – Brian Giggins          | 24 |
| Irthlingborough Old Bridge – Ron Whittaker           | 29 |
| Railways during the pandemic                         | 31 |
| Discover Centre, Northampton Library – Graham Cadman | 32 |

## **'The Walled Kitchen Gardens of Northants. - FINEDON'**

NIAG member Liz Taylor has filled her lockdown months by producing a superb book on the above subject. A4 hardback, 36 pages with many photos and maps (both old and new) and to high production standards. Hopefully, the first of a series – next volume: Sulby Hall.

More information from: [gardenhistory@outlook.com](mailto:gardenhistory@outlook.com)

(No email? Contact newsletter editor who will forward your queries.