

About the railway through King's Cliffe

(Based partly on extracts from 'The Railway comes to Cliffe' which you can read in full under 'Historical Essays by Canon John Bryan' on the Features page)

The London & North Western Railway line through King's Cliffe came eventually in 1879 – the station opened to passengers in November 1879. But the trains had been a long time coming! In the 1850s and 1860s people in King's Cliffe agitated for a line to be brought through to the village, seeing the advantages it would bring particularly to local tradesmen and landowners. A line from Northampton to Peterborough opened in 1845, and another from Rugby to Stamford in 1851. In the 1860s several different routes were proposed for a line which would come through King's Cliffe, but none of them was pursued. It was not until 1871, after considerable lobbying, that the London and North Western Railway company began its plans to build an 11-mile line between Yarwell, on the Northampton to Peterborough line, and Seaton, on the Rugby to Stamford line. This finally brought the railway through King's Cliffe.

In May 1873 'The Seaton, King's Cliffe and Wansford Railway Bill' passed through Parliament. The next stage was for land along the line to be purchased and this process was completed in early 1875. In July that year construction began. The main contractor was Mr William Moss of Stafford. The length of the route was fenced, ready for the navvies to start work. The first sod was turned on Monday, 9th July 1875 by Mr Buxton, sub-contractor and engineer for the King's Cliffe stretch of the line.

There were challenges along the route for the builders of the railway: a climb up from the Welland Valley at Wakerley to the 225ft contour at Fineshade Top Lodge; then a further climb out of the Willowbrook valley to reach the 225ft contour at the Jack's Green & Ring Haw level, before dropping to Nassington and the flood-plain of the River Nene. This led to the excavation of cuttings: the very deep "Fineshade Cutting" and others, not so deep, for the stretch between King's Cliffe and Nassington.

Some 20 navvies set to work. Their biggest task was the Fineshade cutting, which entailed endless blasting through the limestone rock which ran under Cliffe Forest. Only a few months into the work, the navvies went on strike for more pay, demanding 24 shillings a week, an increase of 3 shillings. Their demands were refused and the men who went on strike were let go, never to be re-employed 'on any terms whatsoever'.

Another element of the construction was the building of the railway bridge over Park Street, the road leading out of the village towards Stamford. This bridge still provides a handsome 'entrance gate' to the village. The bridge was almost complete when, in April 1877, it was struck by lightning which caused very considerable damage.

Before the 11-mile line was completed there were numerous accidents among the men involved in the hazardous work of excavating the cuttings and building embankments. There were several fatalities, one at least due to the men's habit of taking swift rides on the light trucks from their working-place to the embankment-tips and back. One such tragedy occurred only a few months before the line was opened for traffic. William Stapleton, a King's Cliffe man, was crushed between two waggons and later died. In a generous gesture, the jury at the Coroner's Court presented their fees to William Stapleton's widow, who had two very young children to support.

Then came the great day – Monday 21st July 1879 – when the line was completed, tested and declared open, at first for goods traffic only.

The Stamford Mercury reported:

"KING'S CLIFFE - The London and North-Western Railway Company's new line from Seaton to Wansford was opened for goods traffic on Monday. There are three stations on the line;

after leaving Seaton the first is Wakerley, then King's Cliffe, and lastly Nassington. The first train that ran through King's Cliffe (about 6 am) was from Birmingham, and consisted of 26 waggons and a guard's brake van. It was piloted by Mr. Brickenden, the company's engineer, accompanied by Messrs. Moss, the contractors. The first train from Peterborough passed through Cliffe about mid-day, and the first fish train, through for Birmingham, passed about 2 am on Tuesday."



This is a very early picture of King's Cliffe station with Stationmaster, Mr John Humphries, and his staff including men working on the track-bed. The picture was taken around the time the line opened in 1879.

Not long afterwards, there were complaints from tradesmen in the village about the lack of a delivery service from the station – which was a quarter of a mile outside the village. The bad state of the road leading up to the station gates was also a cause for concern: it was said to stand 8 inches deep in mud and water.

On the 1st of November 1879 the line was formally opened for passenger traffic. The Stamford Mercury reported that the LNWR had “made this a through route from Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Rugby, Peterboro’, and the Eastern Counties Railway to Norwich, Yarmouth, and Lowestoft”. The very first passenger train from Peterborough arrived at 9.12 am; and from Rugby at 10.09am. No fewer than 139 passengers booked to travel from Cliffe station that day. There were five trains each way a day, all of which, except the 12.25pm express, stopped at Cliffe station.

The Mercury described Cliffe station as: “A very neat little structure, comprising of a commodious booking office, gentlemen's and ladies' waiting-rooms, and other offices on both sides; and the platforms, which are made of wood on piles, are each about 150 yards long.” There was no foot-bridge at the station, so passengers had to cross the line on the level to get to the east-bound platform. Tragically, this led to three fatal accidents in the years after the opening of the station.

The railway brought new jobs and opportunities to the village. The 1881 census shows 15 men from Cliffe worked on the railways. Young men and women could look for employment

further afield using the railway network. Peterborough became more easily accessible both as a market town and a place for employment and education. Pleasure excursions by train became popular to destinations like Skegness and Yarmouth. The transportation of goods of all sorts, including coal supplies to the village, could now be made by train rather than horse and cart.

The handsome platform canopies seen in early pictures of the station had gone by the time of this photograph taken by H C Casserley on 29th May 1937.



Goods traffic was always important at King's Cliffe station and a high-level dock was installed to allow goods to be loaded by tipping into railway trucks. The dock was extended and raised slightly in 1934 to accommodate more railway trucks.

Sugar-beet being loaded at the high-level dock in 1934.



Picture from the early 1950s.



Local quarry operators used the high-level dock to load iron-ore from pits along the Wansford Road, and silica clay from pits south of the road to Apethorpe. Lorries had first to drive onto the weighbridge in the station yard.



Picture from 1963.

The Second World War brought military personnel and materiel through to King's Cliffe, much of it destined for the wartime airfield above the village. From March 1946, the former airfield buildings were used by the RAF as a Holding Camp for German Prisoners-of-War being repatriated from North America and Canada. Over the next two years, 28,000 German PoWs came to King's Cliffe station and from there were walked up to the Holding Camp.



In 1964 the nearby A47/A1 flyover bridge at Wansford was built. The concrete beams for the flyover came by train to King's Cliffe and were off-loaded onto lorries to complete their journey by road.

20th September 1964 is remembered in the village as the day of the 'concrete beam accident'. A crane off-loading one of the beams fell sideways: the beam fell and broke in two.

Many photos were taken by onlookers that day: this is one of them.

Less than two years later, the decision was taken to close the railway line through King's Cliffe. The last passenger service train was photographed as it stopped at the station on June 6th 1966.



The line remained open to goods traffic until June 3rd 1968, after which the track was lifted and the station buildings and platforms were demolished, though some concrete remains of the platform supports can still be found along the 'King's Cliffe Railway Path'.

The old Stationmaster's House remains at the top of Station road, to the right of where the station buildings stood. The picture below shows the station buildings in June 1966.



The old station site stood deserted for the next twenty years. Then in the late 1980s the District Council acquired the site and developed it as Kingsmead Industrial Estate with a number of small industrial units.

Compiled by Sue Trow-Smith, August 2020