

The Arrival of the Railway in Emsworth

Dr Margaret Rogers



A small boy poses whilst this Edwardian photograph was taken of Emsworth railway station circa 1910. A Billinton B2 4-4-0 tender engine is about to cross the bridge with a Brighton bound train.

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In order to gain access to Emsworth the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway Company was required to ask for permission to cross North Street, a parish road, as recorded on 9th April 1846 in the Vestry Book for the parish of Warblington and Emsworth. This was granted subject to the station being built on the west side of North Street 'with accommodation and appearance equal to that at Fareham at least, in the land of Mr Hale to the south of the railway and that all passenger trains, other than expresses, should stop there'. This was perhaps hopeful but unrealistic thinking by the Vestry, given that Fareham Station was owned and had been erected by the London & South Western Railway, not the LB&SCR.

So although permission was given for Emsworth's station to be similar to that at Fareham, obviously the townspeople had to shrug their shoulders and accept the much smaller one actually provided by the railway company. An advertisement inserted by the LB&SCR appeared in the local press on 20th February 1847 requiring tenders to be submitted for building the stations, warehouses and platforms at Emsworth, Havant and Bosham. Contracts must have been swiftly entered into, and it is not known whether building work on the three stations had been completed by the time they all opened together on the same day just over three weeks later on 15th March 1847. This and other advertisements suggest that the railway company was in a race, hastily trying to complete its building programme in stations approaching Portsmouth, which in turn had its own first station three months afterwards in June 1847.

A throng of navvies ('excavators', 'trenchers' and 'runners') as well as masons, platelayers, carpenters, fitters, blacksmiths and enginemen with picks, shovels, wheelbarrows, horse-drawn waggons and gunpowder must have descended upon the district in order to build the line and stations. Their typical staple diet was a weekly ration of 15 lb of beefsteak and daily quantities of porter – requirements which undoubtedly had a tremendous

impact on local butchers and beershops – and some of them would have required lodgings in the town. At Emsworth an embankment had to be built over the Ems in Brook Meadow, passing over North Street which then had to be lowered some 7ft in order to allow the passage beneath of high carriages or waggon-transported hayricks, but luckily no houses had to be demolished. The work also included the building of no less than four more bridges over parish roadways and paths, and one large and one small culvert under the embankment to carry the Ems. There was also a good series of crossing-keepers' houses adjoining the various crossings between Bosham and Emsworth. Almost 100 people bought tickets at Emsworth on the day of opening.

A Mr Frederick Bluett, a former Marine, having had some training at Chichester, was the first clerk appointed to Emsworth station. Like Victorian policemen and fire officers, station staff were enormously proud to wear the livery of a particular railway company, and their status was there for all to see in arm chevrons, the type of hat they wore and the colour of the uniforms. Appointments to a particular station depended upon the number of years men had worked, their grade and experience, promotions being eagerly sought. At the top of the station hierarchy was of course the large city stationmaster, often wearing a tall top hat, and on the railway itself the kingpins were the engine drivers, one of whom lived at Gooseberry Cottage for many years. The LB&SCR was one of the first railway companies to insist on a literacy qualification for service, and encouraged and rewarded its staff accordingly.

As well as two platforms and a small booking hall entrance, Emsworth station had an adjacent signal box, placed on the east side of North Street, a large animal yard and sheds, a coal storage depot and, some 20 years later, two adjoining cottages, one for the stationmaster and his family and the other for railway staff. They were neat and compact, designed to accommodate the staff the LB&SCR envisaged appropriate to Emsworth. Looking at census returns between 1851 and 1901, to our 21st century eyes they managed to house an extraordinarily large number of people, including railway lodgers such as the telegraph clerks. Other staff lived close at hand in North Street. In 1870 lightning caused a fire which burnt down the station,

luckily not spreading to either of the staff cottages, and the station was speedily rebuilt. In 1872 and 1891 further extensions were built.

The types of traffic Emsworth handled included goods, passengers and parcels, furniture vans, carriages and machines on wheels, livestock, horse boxes, prize cattle and vans, and station yard accommodation and reception for these was accordingly provided. Havant had a special loading dock for handling coaches and horses, but not Emsworth. Some of the timber required by Emsworth boat builders arrived by rail, to be off-loaded on to carts and waggons and sent onward to storage in Bridge Road, King Street, or direct to a shipyard. It was quite a dangerous enterprise to transfer large mast-sized logs from a railway waggon to a cart and was not without accidents.

By 1872 the rail transport of cattle from Emsworth to Havant had grown in importance, under the auspices of livestock auctioneer Mr W Gatehouse of Emsworth, and monthly auctions in a field belonging to the Star public house in Havant adjoining the railway proved so popular that it was decided to hold them fortnightly.

By 1896 Emsworth residents clearly thought that the original station provision had been outgrown for such a thriving town and a petition was presented at LB&SCR London headquarters, on behalf of some 270 townspeople, for improved station accommodation. The result was that the company built an entrance to the subway on the north side of the station, allowing safer access to platform 1, and the old lamp house and other buildings adjoining on the down platform were removed, allowing better platform accommodation. The only other recorded improvement requested in Victorian times by Emsworth townspeople was another footpath under the North Street bridge on the west side, but the Vestry, and later Warblington RDC, judged that it would take up too much road space, and road and banking alterations would be too costly, and it has remained as originally designed to the present day.

The railway line between Bosham and Emsworth is virtually straight and there is little explanation for the first fatal local accident which occurred on this stretch on the afternoon of June 1st 1847. The engine left the rails,

toppled over a 4ft embankment and ended up wheels uppermost in a ditch, killing the engine driver and severely injuring the stoker. The company's locomotive engineer, a Mr Thomas Kirtley, who had travelled aboard the engine as far as Chichester, had luckily decided to re-join his family in their carriage just before the accident happened.

Later a very bad collision occurred in 1861 on the line just 5 miles from Brighton, claiming 23 lives, and another 20 years later between Nutbourne and Southbourne, again with fatalities. While no railway fatalities occurred at Emsworth, on 25th July 1860 the then stationmaster, Mr Mark Wenham, saved the lives of a Miss Bolmaison and a youth, Thomas Byerley. A long mail train was coming through from Portsmouth and a special from Goodwood Races approaching in the opposite direction, the noise of the first masking the arrival of the second. Mr Wenham bodily threw Byerley out of danger and then picked up Miss Bolmaison in his arms and leapt to safety with her. For this act of bravery Emsworth townspeople raised a subscription and later presented him with money and a silver snuff box. One of the most bizarre near-miss accidents to happen at Emsworth was that of a very depressed and suicidal lady from Westbourne who tried to jump to her death by leaping down on to the rail watched by her husband but was luckily saved by the prompt action of one of the porters.

Over the years the station has been spruced up and repainted many times, and now, with the addition of ticket machines and ramps allowing wheelchair access on both sides, it still provides a useful and convenient travelling alternative east and west for many Emsworth people.

Sources:

Vestry Book of Warblington with Emsworth 9th April 1846. Portsmouth City Records Office 10M60/19. *The Railway Clearing House Handbook of Railway Stations (1904).* *Hampshire Telegraph*, 4306, 30th March 1872. *West Sussex Gazette*, 347, 2nd August 1860. *Census tables 1851–1901.*

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