
History in the making: All change at Goring and Streatley Station

With the current disruption in and around Goring and Streatley Station it is easy to forget that we are witnessing ‘history in the making’- the third major change to our part of the railway since Brunel rode his horse up on Lardon Chase to survey the route for the Great Western Railway (GWR). Before recording what is going on today it is worth briefly reminding ourselves about the two previous substantial upheavals caused by the railway, noting incidentally that protests and petitions by Goring residents are nothing new.

1840 on

The original stations planned for the GWR to the west of Reading were Pangbourne, Moulsoford (Wallingford Road) and Steventon (for Oxford). There was no Didcot (built 1844), Cholsey (1892), Tilehurst (1893) or, initially, Goring. However the residents of Goring petitioned in 1839 for a station and despite GWR scepticism were granted a ‘minor’ one – in effect a wooden shack. It offered a poor service (three trains a day in each direction cut back to two each way in 1841) and, despite the initial enthusiasm for it, was poorly patronised. The GWR eventually relented despite the comment in 1840 that *‘the station affords so very little traffic lying within a short distance from Moulsoford or Pangbourne that the public are pressing upon the Directors to abandon it altogether’*. Was the village split by pressure groups even then? Of course the great majority of this rural community only recently linked to Streatley by the new river bridge was illiterate and the village population had not yet been swelled by the late Victorian big houses, so maybe group is the wrong word.

But before the service began the village had to endure the arrival of the navvies and the despoilation for years of the local landscape. Imagine the white scars of the embankments by South Stoke. However time and nature mellowed things as we can see today. The arrival of the navvies was awaited with some anxiety by the inhabitants of this tranquil rural area. The clergy prepared to serve their spiritual welfare and were unhappy about the Sunday working required of the men. Although most fears were not realised there were small riots in Pangbourne in 1838 and trouble in Goring a bit later. An engineer's letter of 1839 complained of being unable to recruit constables from the local population because of their 'inferior class'. In fact there was not much trouble and the navvies were gone in a couple of years.

The timber shack soldiered on until burnt down in 1865 (not the last Goring Station to suffer thus) when, at last, a proper station was built. The station master's house (Flint Cottage - still with us) had to be used as a waiting room whilst the new station was built. The station master didn't have to pay rent for 6 months in compensation. This station had a short life and was replaced by the current one in 1893.



Goring Station with mixed gauge track [GGLHS collection]

Gauge conversion and widening

By the 1880s it was clear that Brunel's 7 foot wide broad gauge had no long term future. The lines through Goring became 'mixed gauge' to accept trains from standard gauge lines north of Oxford. In addition with the late Victorian expansion of traffic the capacity of the line from Taplow to Didcot was proving inadequate and the decision was made to quadruple it with work beginning in 1890. This meant a substantial widening of earth works and the bridges at Moulsoford and Gatehampton. Once more the navvies arrived and the landscape

was altered. Goring Station was moved 130 yards towards Reading to avoid unnecessary earth works (1893) and Moulsoford station was moved to Cholsey (1892) where a new station was built. Representations from Streatley residents who had been in the habit of using it (there was a direct train into Wallingford) were unsuccessful. Another factor may have been that they had to pay the river bridge toll when using Goring station. At least they had the comfort of seeing the name of the station change to Goring and Streatley. This was to avoid confusion with Goring on Sea, not to placate the sensitivities of Streatley residents. At the same time the broad gauge was abandoned and the track converted to reduce the amount of earthworks and infrastructure changes. It was a big engineering project. The new lines were laid to both the north and south of the old ones depending on location and the space available. Gatehampton Bridge was widened but at Moulsoford a second bridge alongside the old one was found to be necessary. Note that the widening approached us from the Didcot direction.

The rebuilding of the Goring road bridge over the line caused problems as the locals complained that although the bridge had been lengthened, it was too narrow for modern station traffic (sound familiar?) and there was no provision for pedestrians. After much local council activity and pressure by individuals the GWR grudgingly widened the road bridge.



Goring and Streatley Station in the late 1890s, soon after widening [Didcot Railway Centre]

The new station sported four platforms with substantial buildings including toilets and waiting rooms on the main and island platforms and on Platform 1 adjacent to where Yew Tree Court now stands. Passengers no longer had to dodge trains on the foot/baggage crossing as a fine new covered footbridge was provided.



The station in the 1950s [GGLHS collection]

The station withstood minor changes over the next 100 years or so including a fire that gutted the current booking hall in 1984. Pictures taken just after this incident show that the bridge had by that time lost its roof. Does anybody know when? Around 1973 the platforms were straightened to allow high speed running. The first High Speed Trains had trials in 1974. At this time neighbouring Pangbourne lost its fast line platforms altogether. Did Goring lose its Platform 1 buildings then? I have it on good authority that tickets could be purchased at this ‘village side’ platform entrance until then.



Left: A prototype High Speed Train passes through Goring in 1974 [Rod Payne]

Right: The station after an arson attack in 1984 [GGLHS collection]

The present day

The announcement in 2009 that the Great Western main line through Goring and Streatley was to be electrified did not excite much interest at first other than to cause conjecture as to what the new trains and services would be like. Then it began to dawn that it would involve some considerable disruption to Goring and adjacent line-side villages. We had had a taste three years earlier with the break in the gas main serving west of the tracks during bridge replacement that deprived a lot of people of heating and cooking ability for many days at Christmas 2006. Subsequently all bridges in the area were raised so that the wires could fit underneath. The tops of most Brunel over bridges were destroyed - witness those at the Leathern Bottel and Lower Basildon. In case you wonder why one cannot see the trains any more because of the high parapets it is apparently a Health and Safety decision (after a risk assessment of course) to prevent heavy weights being dropped on to the drivers of fast trains.

At the station it was clear that the days of the old, once covered, footbridge were numbered, not only because of the parlous state of the iron work corroded by rain and the urine of numerous drunks over the years but also because of inadequate clearance. It was temporarily patched up in 2012. The first temporary footbridge was installed for a few months while the repairs were carried out giving us all a chance to experience the effect of an extra flight of steps on aging legs and heart rates.

Then as work got underway the pile driving (at night to avoid travel disruption) began. Network Rail did send letters to 'Dear Railway Neighbour' and restricted the amount of nocturnal pile driving at any one location but the sounds of machinery safety alarms beeping disrupted many a summer night and it is not over yet. Many of the wire supports still need to be fitted and they are somewhat unsightly but, we are assured, will soon blend in. Late objections to these edifices commenced only recently but are only likely to result in even more delays, protracted working and of course, greatly increased costs.

At the station our ancient footbridge was taken down in March 2015. The replacement temporary structure seems more of a challenge than the previous one. Unfortunately the elaborate iron work of the old



bridge stairs was destroyed by a rogue demolition contractor with sledgehammer before the helpful and sympathetic men from Murphys could stop him. We did manage to save some bits for posterity. Demolition day was pretty spectacular with a huge crane lifting the two spans of the old bridge on to low loader lorries.

*Removal of the footbridge
in March 2015 [Mike Hurst]*

Construction of the new footbridge is about to begin (August 2015). It has to be at least 6 metres above the track to accommodate the overhead wires. Its location at the south end of the main station building has meant the demolition of a long redundant building on platforms 2 and 3 to accommodate the stairs. This used to contain a gents toilet - the enamel tiles were visible during demolition. The GGLHS Transport Group successfully requested through the Railway Heritage Trust that the building should not be destroyed. It was taken down very carefully to be used for new buildings at Wallingford and the Swindon and Cricklade Railway. Thanks are due to the Murphys' team once more who took a great pride in their work and used to take me to see the meticulously palletted bricks and stone work kept in the yard of the old UBC site just past Queens Court.

The new footbridge will be warren truss built and roofed and will have lifts thanks to efforts of MIGGS (Mobility Issues Group Goring and Streatley) led by John Boler. The Group has also been instrumental in arranging a new disabled toilet at the station (opened by John Howell MP in April 2015) and is currently working to have the pavement alongside the railway widened.

The west span of the footbridge is to be skewed to provide some privacy for the inhabitants of Yew Tree Court.

All we can now do is await the completion of the electrical works and the arrival of our new trains which will revolutionise the stopping services to Oxford and London. The familiar sound of the Thames Turbo units revving up to depart four times an hour will be no more. The thunder of the old HSTs will also disappear but the new Hitachi trains will run no faster. Even so the 'fast' platforms at Goring and Streatley have now been fenced off with lockable gates for use when the platforms are needed and have been extended to match the relief line platforms to accommodate longer trains. During the improvements either the relief or main lines are often shut at quiet times to enable work to be carried out on one set of tracks – much to the discomfiture of Pangbourne bound passengers as there are no fast line platforms there.

Pylons erected in readiness for the electrification of the line [Mike Hurst]

Then hopefully it will all settle down for another 100 years or so. That's in the future!

Mike Hurst

Sources

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Acknowledgements

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