

Quarry Line at Blisworth

Notes on Northamptonshire's Third Railway

by GEORGE FREESTON

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE'S third railway appears for the first time in printed form on a map of the county published in 1827.¹ Unlike the two earlier railways—the Blisworth Hill railway (1800-5) and the Gayton wharf to Northampton railway (1805-15)—its track was confined to the parish of Blisworth where it had been built to serve a limestone quarry on land belonging to the Duke of Grafton.

This quarry was opened up in 1821. Early in that year John Roper, who was the Duke's agent, employed two men to make a search for stone in Blisworth Field, an area of land lying in the south-east corner of the parish, between the Courteenhall and the Stoke Bruerne roads, and close to two earlier quarries.² After five and a half days of toil at 2s. per day each, these men seem to have found a promising pocket of stone, for Roper paid out the sum of £1 2s. for their labours.³ At this point the utility of the two previous railways was no doubt remembered and appreciated, the more so because there was a supply of tram-plates lying unused at Gayton Wharf.⁴

Thus came into being Northamptonshire's third railway. For twelve days during the months of February, March and April 1821, a "team" was

April 13	To making 2 poal gates for rail road	7s. 0d.
14	To hanin [hanging] 2 do. & seting down poast & making good the fence	9s. 0d.
27	To one day 2 men & son poast and railing at the park at the rail road	6s. 0d.
30	To one day man & son at do.	4s. 0d.
May 7	To one day man & son at fencing at rail road	4s. 0d.
8	To one day at do.	4s. 0d.
10	To one day at do.	4s. 0d.
16	To one day at do.	4s. 0d.

John Goodridge, one of Blisworth's two blacksmiths, also contributed to the making of the railway, for on April 14 he rendered an account for 13s. 6d. in respect of "ironwork to 2 gates, rail road".⁵

Once the railway was in working order, its

Febr 4	14 lince [linch] pins & washers to waggons	1s. 9d.
March 24	2 new screw pins & mending 2 arms to waggons	7s.
May 19	Sharpend 40 nails & cutting 2 plates to ye rail road	1s. 6d.
June 11	Mending a lock chain & pin to a waggon	1s. 6d.
Aug. 12	Nails to ye rail road 18 lb. at 5d. per lb.	7s. 6d.
Sept. 24	Lengthening & mending 4 screw pins & new nuts to do.	2s. 0d.
Nov. 5	Mending a side iron & coupling chains	1s. 6d.

employed "drawing materials to the new rail road" at an inclusive rate of 12s. 6d. per day. At the same time three men worked alongside the "team" for a total of nineteen days between them at 2s. per day, one man being employed for three days "in getting up plates for the new road". John Dix, the contractor who supplied the men and the "team" was paid the sum of £9 8s. by Roper on 24 April.⁶ Two days previously Roper had paid another account which is of sufficient interest to be reproduced in full:⁷

April 22, 1821. Recvd. of His Grace the Duke of Grafton by payment of Mr. Roper the sum of £35 10s 5d. for on a count (*sic*) of makineng a new railway road to the son query [stone quarry] in Blisworth Field.

Reevd. by me £35 10s. 5d. by
payment of Mr Roper.
John Carter
Whitness Jno. Dix

Later in the same year Meshach Dunkley, a carpenter who lived at Blisworth, submitted an account to Roper for services rendered, in all a sum of £8 5s.⁸ They included several items of work on the railway:

maintenance man, at least in 1824, was Samuel Basford, the other blacksmith at Blisworth. His account for that year, which was headed "Iron-work to gang-waggons, & the rail road", was for £10 17s. 3d., although it contained no fewer than 104 items for which payment was required.⁹ Among these items were the following:—

It may be inferred from the 1827 map (reproduced below) that the railway ran westward from the quarry towards the road between Blisworth and Stoke Bruerne. It reached this road at a point about one third of a mile from the quarry and in line with the north end of the Blisworth Tunnel.



No details survive about the early working of this railway, or the waggons that were used on it, or the gauge between the tram-plate rails. At some date, now unknown, the tram-plates were replaced by edge-rails, and also—assuming that this had not been the case when the line was constructed in 1821—the track was extended across the Stoke Bruerne road, over the Blisworth Tunnel, and, bearing to the north-west, down to a wharf on the west side of the canal about three hundred yards from the mouth of the tunnel. This wharf was shared with another railway, constructed in 1863, which ran from ironstone workings a little to the west of the quarry, and which was carried across the canal by a wooden bridge.¹⁰ Some of the older folk at Blisworth still remember the “flag man” who controlled the crossing of the quarry railway on the Stoke Bruerne road. They also remember the loaded trucks, usually four in number, running down by gravity to the canal with an attendant “sprag” (brakesman), and also the return journey of the empty trucks hauled by a horse. East of the Stoke Bruerne road, the track ran for much of the way in a cutting, the bottom of which gradually increased in depth to about fifteen feet below the level of the adjacent fields.

The quarry was closed about 1912. For some

years previously it had been worked by the executors of Pickering Phipps as a source of flux for the smelting of iron-ore; this firm also operated the ironstone workings nearby. Nature ruled supreme in the abandoned quarry and in the railway cutting, and the whole excavation was soon enveloped in a luxuriant growth of hawthorn, crab-apple bushes and ash trees. Within the last few years, however, several sections of the cutting were cleared, thereby forming official hazards in the trials arranged by the Northamptonshire Motor Cycle Club. In 1965 a two-thirds length of tram-plate rail was found in one of these sections, hence the research which has resulted in these notes.

The present owner of the fields through which the tramway ran (Mr. C. Cherry) decided in 1966 to eliminate the cutting and to restore the land for farm use. During this operation several broken pieces of tram-plate rail were found,¹¹ but there was no trace of stone sleepers, intact or fragmentary. Most of the cutting has now disappeared, but the quarry, overgrown by vegetation, still remains open.

References

¹ A. Bryant, *Map of the County of Northampton . . . , 1827.* (Whitaker 388.)

² Blisworth enclosure of 1808, award map (custody of the Blisworth Parish Council).

³ Grafton Papers (Northamptonshire Record Office), Bundle 1510. (In the notes following, abbreviated to G.)

⁴ Grand Junction Canal, *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Select Committee*, 22 July 1824, 5 Feb. 1825. I have been unable to trace any record of the sale of rails to the Duke of Grafton, either in the Grafton Papers (which are numerous in quantity and have not yet been fully catalogued) or in the records of the Grand Junction Canal.

⁵ G. 1510. The phrase “getting up plates” is ambiguous in meaning. These plates may have been brought from some store (Gayton wharf?) or they may have been lifted from a stretch of disused track (which, given the history of the two previous railways in the Blisworth district, seems unlikely).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ G. 2376.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ G. 2378.

¹⁰ Eric S. Tonks, *The Ironstone Railways & Tramways of the Midlands*, 1959, 28-9.

¹¹ One fragment is marked C C, an indication that it was made for the Grand Junction Canal company (*Rails over Blisworth Hill*, footnote 34).

Note on “Brakesman” As a portion of the descent from quarry to the canal bank is at a gradient of over 1:40 a braking action from a wheel pad that probably was partially trapped between wheel and rail would be required. The brakesman would apply braking action through levers. “Sprag”, from a through-spokes pin would be a nickname.