

# THE RINGING GROOVES OF CHANGE:

## Chapter One

As William Lane, the landlord of Bath's White Lion Inn, completed his Census returns on the evening of 7 June 1841, one of the names must have given him pause. The coaching business, which had fuelled the inn's – and the city's – prosperity for over 150 years, had less than three weeks left to run. The man responsible for its demise was on Lane's list. Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Chief Engineer of the Great Western Railway, in town to oversee the completion of the line from London, was staying at the inn.

The first regular stagecoach from London had rolled into the yard of the White Lion one evening in 1667. It had taken three days for the journey: London was just over a hundred miles away. Many stretches of road were little better than quagmires. In wet weather, coaches were often axle-deep in mud; when the mud baked hard, they stood the chance of having their axles broken as they bounced over the deep rutted ways. There was a constant danger of highwaymen. The worst spots were just out of London, at Hounslow Heath and Maidenhead Thicket, but any point where coaches had to slow down to negotiate a hill – at Sandy Lane or Cherhill or King's Down, for example – was likely to attract a gentleman of the road. It was customary for travellers, when they set out on a long journey, to make their wills and bid solemn farewells to their friends and relations. It is difficult for us, with no major world city more than a day's journey away, to imagine what it must have been like to travel from London to Bath in 1667.

It is also difficult to imagine what the city those intrepid travellers arrived in, after three harrowing days being shaken half to death on the road, was like. Bath was still a walled city, with many vestiges of its medieval past still standing. By the time mailcoaches were introduced, just over a century later, not only had roads – and stagecoaches – improved so markedly that the journey could be

undertaken in one day; Bath had been transformed, spreading out beyond the confines of its walls in a efflorescence of squares, crescents and terraces. Much of the old city – the walls included – had been demolished to make way for Europe’s first pleasure resort.

The first mailcoach arrived in Bath in 1784, hauled by a pair of horses, changed every six or eight miles, and carrying only four passengers. It took 13 hours. By 1835, after further road improvements, a regular stagecoach had not only cut half an hour off the time; it stopped at Thatcham for passengers to take dinner. This was, in the words of Thomas Burke, the “golden age, the high noon of coaching; and it never declined from noon to sunset. When it ended, it was still at its meridian. It was the age of fast coaches whose names have passed into history ... coaches which seemed to have a being and a pace of their own ... There was a passion and a precision about the whole business of coaching; something that stirred men’s minds ... and moved them to rhapsody.”

William Lane had taken over the White Lion in 1836. From tentative beginnings in the mid-seventeenth century, the inn had grown until now it was one of the city’s top inns, with stabling for 115 horses. Brunel and his assistant engineers, along with the directors of the Great Western Railway, had adopted it as their unofficial headquarters in the city. Meetings to drum up support for the railway, to enquire into its merits, expound its virtues, or settle compensation for those dispossessed by it, had become regular events at the inn over the previous eight years. The business had been very welcome, but there was no doubt that, once the railway was open, once they disappeared, trade would collapse.

When the railway opened, the journey time to London would be cut to less than four hours. Some coach proprietors had expressed their intention to keep going, claiming that people did not trust the railway or would soon tire of it, but, on any objective assessment, it was clear the coaching age was effectively over.

As the railway had crept nearer, first to Maidenhead, then to Twyford, to Reading, to Steventon, to Faringdon Road, to Wootton

Bassett Road, and finally to Chippenham, a mere 13 miles away, coaches had run from Bath to each successive railhead. Now the great tunnel through Box Hill was nearly complete; the rails to bring the trains on into Bath were already being laid.

The city had seen its first railway over a century earlier, when John Padmore constructed a tramway from Ralph Allen's quarries at Combe Down, down what is now Prior Park Road to a wharf at Widcombe. It was one of the wonders of eighteenth-century Bath, but when Ralph Allen died in 1764, the quarries were sold and the line was dismantled. Later, when the Kennet & Avon Canal was being built, inclined planes were laid down steep hillsides, carrying stone for bridges, wharves and aqueducts – at Conkwell in 1801, Murhill in 1803, and at Bathampton in 1808. As on Ralph Allen's tramway, the loaded trucks relied on gravity, their descent controlled by a brakeman; once unloaded, horses hauled them back up. There were hundreds, if not thousands, of similar lines all over the country, all relying on gravity or horsepower, and all built to carry stone, coal, or other minerals. Then came the oft-retold saga of experiments with steam, and, within a few years, people were thinking about railways not as a way of carrying heavy goods short distances, but as a means of getting from one end of the country to the other at speeds never before deemed possible.

The first proposal for a railway from Bath to Bristol came in 1824. The prospectus spoke of the “advantages of the locomotive steam engine, for the conveyance of passengers and merchandise on a railroad. By means of this power, a company will be enabled to transport the heaviest goods with certainty and security, by day and night, at all times of the year – in periods of frost or of drought, at the rate of at least eight miles an hour, and passengers at a rate of twelve.”

The directors of the Kennet & Avon Canal Company were in favour of the line; they even sent their engineer, Mr Blackwell, to the north of England to inspect railways there. Their idea was that a line should run from Bath to Bristol, and another from London and Reading,

with the Kennet & Avon linking them. The idea that the railway could be a serious threat to the canal does not even seem to have occurred to them.

Nothing came of this scheme, nor of the next one, in 1829. In the intervening seven years, significant advances in technology had been made. Instead of twelve miles an hour, the prospectus now held out to passengers the prospect of travelling at twenty. "I think it is clearly proved," said one of the promoters, "that the journey to Bath may be effected with perfect safety in an hour; so that the parties of pleasure in Bath may pay their morning visits to Clifton with little or no fatigue, and without abridging their usual arrangements at home."

On 4 January 1830, a meeting was called at the Assembly Rooms in Bath to drum up support for the railway. Thomas Pycroft of Bath and John Harford of Bristol headed the committee. The engineer was William Brunton, a 52-year-old Scots engineer whose chief claim to fame was as the inventor of a steam engine with a pair of mechanical feet which helped it climb gradients. Although initial tests proved promising, the design was abandoned after the prototype exploded at a public demonstration, killing 13 people. Brunton told the audience at the Assembly Rooms that, "the railway, when completed, will be most perfect; and by the judicious selection of the line, and the arrangement made to form the necessary embankments with arches of stone masonry, the road will be nearly level throughout, except in one place, and there the rise and fall will only be as 1 in 800."

A few weeks later, with interest in the line growing, Thomas Pycroft and John Harford inspected the site of the proposed terminus in Bath near Queen Square, and sent their proposals to the Town Clerk. The line was to run to the north of the Upper Bristol Road, before crossing Charlotte Street to terminate on Stable Lane, directly behind the New Inn in Monmouth Place. The goods depot would be 100 yards to the west, at the bottom of Charlotte Street. They also sought to put the Town Clerk's mind at rest over the effect of the line on what was soon to become Royal Victoria Park, adding that, "we also viewed the line through the Common Field and do not think the rail road will at

all interfere with the intended improvements. The ground north of the rail road may be planted and thereby the rail road hid from the rides and walks.”

The railway soon ran up against some formidable opposition. On 1 February 1830, John Hurle, a prominent citizen, took the chair at “a numerous and respectable meeting of landowners” in the Lamb Inn at Keynsham. They passed – unanimously – the following two resolutions:

That it appears to this meeting that the contemplated railway if executed, will be productive of serious injury to the land, houses and property generally through and near its line without any adequate benefit to the landholders and occupiers whose interests it will so prejudicially affect.

That in the opinion of this meeting the land and water communications now existing between the cities of Bristol and Bath are fully sufficient for all purposes of conveyance and that the proposed railway is uncalled for upon public grounds which would alone justify the inroad it will make upon private property and the rights and comforts of individuals.

And that, for the moment at least, was that.

A few miles to the north, however, a railway – the grandly-titled Bristol & Gloucestershire Railway – had got off the ground, gaining parliamentary approval on 17 June 1828. Despite its name, this was a horse-drawn tramway, built to carry coal. The main shareholder was the Kennet & Avon Canal Company. Brunel eventually converted part of it to a broad-gauge steam-hauled line, when it was incorporated into the Bristol & Gloucester Railway. For now, it will suffice to record that it was responsible for the first railway fatality in the Bath area, when a man left the pub at Willsbridge late one night in July 1830, “and fell into the hollow, through which the railway is made, a height of 36 feet.”

While Messrs Pycroft and Harford were trying to win support for a railway from Bath to Bristol, other promoters, with far bigger ambitions, were canvassing support for a line from London to Bristol.

This was not a railway line, however: it was a canal, a ship canal capable of carrying “vessels of upwards of 400 tons burthen.” It was linked with a similar proposal for a ship canal to Portsmouth, which would bear ships “of 700 tons burthen.” It would cost a staggering £8,000,000; annual revenue was calculated at £500,000. At the dawn of the railway age, there were many who saw no reason why trains should be the transport of the future. Why not canals, bigger and better than ever before, fed, where necessary, by enterprises like the Bristol & Gloucestershire Railway? It was, as we now know, a vision of the future that was never to be realized. Like it or not, railway mania was about to sweep everything before it.