

Memories of Merry Wakefield by Henry Clarkson, 2nd. edition, 1889.

“An Octogenarian’s Recollections: Being Personal Reminiscences, Anecdotes, and Impressions During the Greater Part of the Nineteenth Century”.

Extract from Chapter IX – Railway Times.

In the summer of 1835, the first great Railway Mania took its rise, and, of course, there are many now living who will recollect the immense excitement it caused throughout the land. In this part of the country, its immediate result was the projection of three or four lines of railway, namely, a line from Leeds to Derby, seventy-two miles in length, under the title of “North Midland Railway”; another line, extending from the North Midland at Normanton, to Manchester, called the “Manchester and Leeds”; another from Normanton to York, called the “York and North Midland” (now part of the North Eastern); and one from Sheffield to Rotherham, called the “Sheffield and Rotherham” (since merged in the Midland), each of these lines being carried out under the direction of THE Engineer of the day, George Stephenson.

On the 16th of September, 1835, I was at work in my office, which was then in the Manor House yard, when my late old friend, Mr. S. D. Martin, of Leeds, whose name was even then well known and respected wherever it was heard, walked in, and asked me to go with him to meet a Deputation, consisting of a number of gentlemen from Leeds and Derby, who were assembled to consider the projected line of railway. They were accompanied by a London Solicitor, Mr. Hunt, and Mr. Swanwick, an Engineer, representing Mr. Stephenson; and their object was to confer with sundry Wakefield gentlemen as to the carrying out of the scheme for the North Midland. Amongst those present, I recollect Mr. Jo. Holdsworth, of Belle Vue; Mr. Thomas White, of the Cliff, Crigglestone - father of the late Mr. Tolson White, and others. The scheme was explained and plans of the proposed line shewn me, and I was asked if I would take a portion of the survey, and prepare the necessary plans for an application to Parliament in the ensuing session. This I at once undertook to do, and the part apportioned to me was from the crossing of the Wakefield and Pontefract road at Oakenshaw, to the Barnsley and Pontefract road, near Cudworth, some seven or eight miles in length. The whole distance from Leeds to Derby, about seventy-two miles, was apportioned to seven local surveyors, being an average of ten miles each.

I set to work at once, and all went on very well for the two first miles, when I came to the boundary of the Chevet estate-the property of Sir William Pilkington, father of the present Baronet. On the morning of the 1st of October, 1835, I walked from Wakefield with my clerk and small staff of helpers, and got early to work. I had begun near the village of Walton setting out a long base line five or six miles in length, and had only proceeded a few yards over the boundary fence of the Chevet estate, when Mr. Sorby, who occupied the principal farm on the property, came riding up to me, and said, very resolutely, that he must stop my further proceedings. I told him upon what I was engaged, to which he replied, that he was quite aware of it, and had been on the look out for me for three or four days, adding that he had strict orders from his landlord, Sir William, not only to stop my work, but to take me up to Chevet Hall. In vain I pleaded, his orders, I found, were imperative; so, saying I would follow him immediately, I gave rapid orders to my principal assistant to get on as fast as ever he could with the work across the Chevet estate, as soon as Mr. Sorby and I were out of sight ; this was absolute necessary in order to connect the survey with the estates lying beyond the Chevet property.

I need not say I made our journey to Chevet Hall as long as I could, stopping to ask questions, and pointing out anything likely to lead to a few minutes talk, so as to gain time for my assistant; and I remember my object was further carried out by an unlucky hare that got up as we crossed the park. Mr. Sorby, being a keen sportsman, had a couple of greyhounds with him, which immediately gave chase, in spite of his efforts to call them off, added to mine to hasten them on; and we had a splendid course, which took up a good quarter-of-an-hour of poor pussy's time.

At length, however, the Hall was reached, and I was ushered into Sir William's presence, and on my name and occupation being announced to him by Mr. Sorby, he was excessively angry, and demanded, with the utmost warmth, to know by what authority I dared to enter upon his estate without his permission. I made the best apologies I could, and tried to explain things, but without avail: and the interview ended by his discharging me from entering upon his estate again, assuring me that if I did, he would commit me to the House of Correction as a wilful trespasser. I walked with Mr. Sorby towards his home, and then wished him good morning, wending my steps, however, not towards Wakefield, but to where I supposed my staff would be found-clear of the Chevet estate, having done what was absolutely necessary, and on the adjoining estate of Mr. Godfrey Wentworth, who, fortunately, was not opposed to us.

A few days after this, Mr. Swanwick came over to ascertain how the work was going on, and hearing my story, decided to go over with me to see Sir William Pilkington and try to conciliate him. It was evening when we arrived at Chevet, and though it was just after his dinner, when most Englishmen are supposed to be in a good humour, we found him

more intractable than ever. In vain Mr. Swanwick, who had a very genial and persuasive manner, urged the great benefit to the country that the railway would be, and told him of the large proportion of land-owners who were favourable to the scheme, he only reiterated, -What did he want with a railroad to London; if he wished to go he could travel in his own carriage, etc., etc. Finding we could do no good, we left, and it was arranged between Mr. Swanwick and myself that as the survey must be made, I must complete it by a trigonometrical survey taken from the public roads and footpaths intersecting the estate, from whence of course I could not be discharged.

Accordingly, on the following morning, I left home early, and proceeded with this work. About eleven o'clock I was taking observations with my instrument from a public footpath, when Sir William Pilkington accompanied by his old friend and neighbour, Charles Waterton, of Walton Hall, came up to me, and Sir William's threats of imprisonment, etc., were redoubled; but as I knew I was not now a trespasser, and had not moreover too much time to waste, I continued my work, which only served further to increase his anger. With a view to put an end to this unpleasant scene, Mr. Waterton took me by the arm and led me away a little distance, and very kindly and earnestly entreated me to wrap up my "tools" and go home, assuring me that I should never get paid a farthing for what I was employed on, as the scheme was only promoted by a set of London stock jobbers and speculators to serve their own ends. I told Mr. Waterton that as I had received my instructions from Mr. Stephenson, and his acting Engineer, I was bound to carry out what I had undertaken to do, but I thanked him at the same time for his friendly advice. I was enabled to complete the survey of this estate, with the exception of three or four minute parts, which, however, were very important, and lay chiefly near Mr. Sorby's house; therefore my only chance of finishing my work was when he was from home.

I knew he came to Wakefield market on Fridays, so I stationed myself where I could see him depart on that errand, and then set to my work with all speed. I was measuring the distance along the side of a fence, when, to my horror, I suddenly perceived a coursing party almost close to me in the next field, one of the number being Sir William himself. My only chance of escaping detection was to throw myself at full length into the ditch, which, fortunately for me, was on my side of the fence. There I lay, with the fear of the prison gates before my eyes, the coursing party passing so near to my ignominious hiding place that I could hear every word they said. Fortunately, the dogs took an opposite turn, and relieved me from further anxiety. It was now getting late on in the afternoon, and I had only one other fence to complete, which led straight to Mr. Sorby's house, and I was measuring quickly along it, when I came to a gate over which a man's coat was hanging, the man himself being just within the field. "There!" I thought, "my surveying days are over for the present!" I put on a bold front, however, and called out, "Holloa! are you Mr. Sorby's man?" "Yis, Sor." "Is your master at home?" "He's this minute gone down to the house, Sor." In another minute I had finished my measurement and was off to the high road, congratulating myself upon a second narrow escape.

Things went on pretty smoothly after this, and the Engineer on his next visit of inspection finding that I had nearly completed my work, before the specified time, very considerably either to myself or the Surveyor who had the adjoining portion, cut off some distance from his survey and added it to mine. But the difficulties with the Chevet estate were not yet over; the actual survey was completed, but the levels were still to be taken, and this was no easy matter, as watchers were set during all daylight hours to prevent this being done. A little stratagem had to be called in here; as far as possible the levels were taken from footpaths and highways in the daytime, but the intermediate parts were taken by stealth during the night by means of a small lantern, which reflected just sufficient faint light on to the figures of the levelling staff to be read at a distance by a telescope. I dare not undertake this work myself, for having been once warned off the estate, I did not care to risk a three or six months' imprisonment for wilful trespass.

All Sir William's violent opposition to the scheme died away, however, on the Company's agreeing to give what was then thought an extravagant price for the land taken, and the comforting promise of a stone viaduct instead of an embankment over certain parts, added to the diversion of particular roads, which really improved the estate. There was no further opposition from landowners in my district, and the work went on smoothly after this. On the 9th day of November in that year, all the Surveyors on the line were summoned to meet Mr. Stephenson, at the old Tontine Hotel at Sheffield.

This was my first interview with the great Engineer of the day, and I remember being much struck with his commanding and dignified looks and manner; and I had every reason to be satisfied with my reception, for he gave me instructions to go on with other and more important work.

I well recollect a little incident of that very day. When Mr. Stephenson left Sheffield by the night mail for London, he found, as usual, the coachman and guard waiting obsequiously to conduct him to his place in the coach, and he said jocularly, "What is to become of all you saucy coachmen and guards, when the railways are made?" The ready-witted coachman, politely touching his hat, said, "Oh, Sir, make CIVIL ENGINEERS of us!"