The trains that never came

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There were three railway proposals that would have run through the Wolds villages and they tell an interesting story of how the railways developed over the course of the nineteenth century.

The three schemes in question were the:

- Grand Trunk Railway of 1845 (sometimes referred to as the Stafford and Peterborough Union Railway)
- Melton, Loughborough and Ashby de la Zouch Railway of 1865
- North Leicestershire Railway of 1875

The Grand Trunk Railway

The extravagantly-named Grand Trunk Railway was devised during the height of the mid-1840s Railway Mania and is quite symbolic of it. The plan was for a long-distance, double-track main line that would join east and west by means of a direct line between the Syston and Peterborough Railway at Kirby Bellars, just west of Melton Mowbray, and the Trent Valley Railway at Armitage in Staffordshire. Like many schemes at the time it was futile and never gained an Act of Parliament, likely down to a simple lack of willing (or sufficiently naive) investors.

The route of the proposed line would have run west from a junction at Kirby Bellars and ascended the edge of the escarpment at a gradient of 1 in 75, passing above Ragdale before reaching a summit in a deep cutting just slightly north of Radgale Hall near the Fosse Way. From there, the line would then have descended by another 1 in 75 gradient down the northern edge of the Walton valley, until it levelled out around Burton Bandalls and ran in a straight line to cross over the Midland Main Line at Meadow Lane bridge. Beyond, the line would then have continued onwards due-west towards Ashby-de-la-Zouch.

No junction with the Midland Counties Railway at Loughborough was planned, but it can be assumed that a station was intended to be built close to the Midland Counties Railway site (on the opposite side of the road to the

present railway station built in the 1870s). At Six Hills meanwhile, it is possible that a station was planned to be built at the level section at the summit, but no reference is made in any of the documentations to the stations on the line, a theme with all of the proposals.

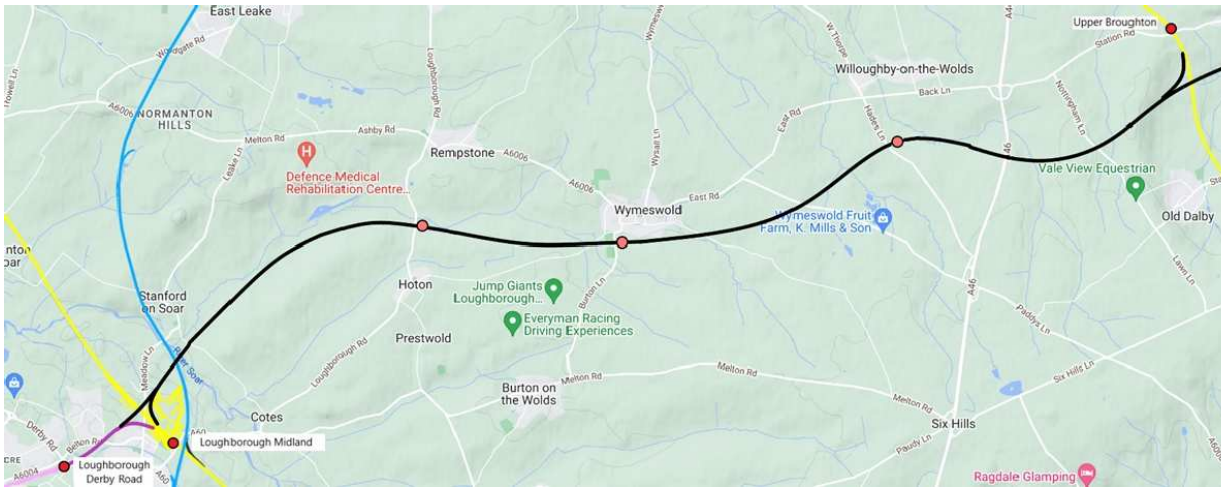
The Melton, Loughborough and Ashby de la Zouch Railway

The Melton, Loughborough and Ashby de la Zouch Railway (ML&AR) followed a similar trajectory to the Grand Trunk Railway both in terms of the circumstances the scheme was built, and the actual course of the railway itself. It was effectively a truncation of the Grand Trunk Railway, ending at Ashby rather than Armitage. The ML&AR was also a double-track proposal as well. The scheme was developed during a period of revived Railway Mania in the 1860s, which came to an end with the demise of the wholesale bank, Overend, Gurney & Co. in the "Great Crisis" of 1866. This bankrupted several railway companies and killed off many proposals, probably including the Melton, Loughborough and Ashby de la Zouch Railway.

A few differences with the Grand Trunk Railway were that Loughborough would have had a double junction, with the Ashby and Melton lines ending each side of the station site. As mentioned, the present station at Loughborough was moved to the other side of the road in the 1872. So, had this railway been built, it is possible the layout of the station would have looked rather different to what is does today and certainly would have been much larger. From the east again, the railway would have commenced from a junction on the Syston to Peterborough Line of the Midland Railway, this time just east of Frisby station, and would have climbed up the escarpment at Ragdale at gradients between 1 in 100 to 1 in 80, requiring some deep cuttings. However, instead of running as far north, the railway would have cut across the hill and reached its summit point just south of Seagrave, where there was a level section (and where a station may have been planned). From Seagrave, the line would have descended at an inclination of 1 in 96 along the top of Barrow Hill escarpment to the Soar floodplain, where after crossing the river it would have made a junction with the Midland Railway at Loughborough station.

North Leicestershire Railway

The third, and most relevant of the schemes to the Wolds, was the North Leicestershire Railway of 1875. The line would have directly served several Wolds villages, including Hoton, Wymeswold and Willoughby-on-the-Wolds. The line was planned as a single-track line to link between the both then-planned Charnwood Forest Railway and the Great Northern and London and North Western Joint Railway (both railways having been



Map prepared using the excellent resource RailMapOnline plus the original Quarter Sessions Plans (photographed at the Record Office in Wigston).

Key

Black – North Leicestershire Railway (never built)

Yellow – Midland Railway (including Midland Main Line on the left [1845–present] and the former Nottingham to Melton line (now the Old Dalby Test Track) on the right [1880–present])

Blue – Great Central Railway (didn't exist prior to the North Leicestershire Railway proposal [1899–present])

Lavender – Charnwood Forest Railway (operated by the London and North Western Railway [1883–1963])

Purple – Charnwood Forest Railway planned Railway No. 1 (never built)

Red – Stations opened by 1883

Pink – North Leicestershire Railway stations (conjecture based on Quarter Sessions sections)

authorised in 1873), with two spurs also projected to link with the pre-existing Midland Railway main line at Loughborough and the Midland Railway's then-planned Nottingham to Melton line, now known as the Old Dalby Test Track.

The route of the main line (Railway No. 1) of the North Leicestershire Railway commenced near the present site of Aldi on Belton Road, where it would have left the planned-but-never-built link between the Charnwood Forest Railway and Midland Railway main line and cross over the latter.

A south-east spur (Railway No. 4) was planned to connect to this main line. From there, it would cross Meadow Lane and over the Loughborough Meadows and the River Soar and across Stanford Lane near Stanford-on-Soar. After Stanford-on-Soar, the line would follow along the edge of King's Brook valley below Stanford Hall to reach the Nottingham Road next to King's Bridge. Here, the line had a short level section, where I am inclined to believe a station to serve Rempstone and Hoton would have been proposed on the eastern side of the planned level crossing there.

Proposed sites of stations.

From this station site beside King's Bridge, the line would continue to ascend the gentle gradient of 1 in 126 along the edge of the River Mantle valley, until it reached a level crossing at Burton Lane, Wymeswold. There, on the opposite (western) side of the road to the Scout Hut, was where the next possible station site was located (indicated by the short 1 in 400 gradient). Prior to this, Hoton Road would have been crossed by an overbridge with a height of 18 feet and a span of 20 feet.

From the Wymeswold station site, the North Leicestershire Railway would have skirted the southern edge of the village at a gradient of 1 in 100. Narrow Lane was planned to be crossed by a bridge of the same proportions as that of Hoton Road, while Wide Lane would have been raised to be crossed on the level.

Following Wide Lane, the North Leicestershire Railway would have levelled out to 1 in 560 and curved round to cross both Hades Lane (the existing road level lowered) and Occupation Lane on the level. Between the two roads, I expect a station for Willoughby-on-the-Wolds was planned, given the very shallow gradient. Beyond Occupation Lane, the railway would have climbed up a 1 in 80 bank, crossing the Fosse Way on the level, before descending a 1 in 100 gradient through an 80-foot-deep cutting. It then would have taken a sharp curve due north. Here, the railway would pass underneath Nottingham Lane by means of a 23-foot-tall underbridge, after which the line would pass through an even deeper 70 foot cutting.

Beyond the deep cutting, a junction was proposed to provide a north-west spur (Railway No. 2) connecting with the Midland Railway's Nottingham to Melton route (now the Old Dalby Test Track), while the main line of the North Leicestershire Railway would cross over the Midland Railway line and continue down a 40-foot tall embankment on a grade of 1 in 90 towards Nether Broughton. The rest of the main line (Railway No. 1) then would have continued onwards along the bottom of the escarpment via Long Clawson and Hose to reach a junction with the then-proposed Great Northern and London and North Western Joint Railway at the southern end of what would become the site of Harby and Stathern station.

Based on the gradient sections of the proposed line, the North Leicestershire Railway was to have had five stations, Hoton, Wymeswold, Willoughby-on-the-Wolds, Nether Broughton and Long Clawson.

Loughborough Derby Road, Loughborough Midland, Upper Broughton and Harby and Stathern would also have been served by North Leicestershire Railway trains based on the intended route of the line.

The reasons for the failure of the North Leicestershire Railway are less clear than the previous schemes, but I think there are a number of potential factors at play for why the scheme never got off the ground.

Firstly, was the cost of construction. The North Leicestershire Railway would have been, for the most part, a modest undertaking engineering-wise, with few serious cuttings and embankments except around the Dalby Wolds. However, the locality was not particularly populous nor wealthy, so raising finance for the construction of the line would have been a challenge as big-pocketed investors would have been hard to find outside Loughborough. As an initially independent company (like the Charnwood Forest Railway), the North Leicestershire Railway would have heavily relied upon the patronage of affluent local dignitaries and gentry, as well as potential goodwill of larger

railway companies, which the Charnwood Forest Railway came to benefit from.

Secondly, there was the open hostility of the Midland Railway. From the Reference Book of the North Leicestershire Railway, it is stated that the railway's act would

> … enable the [North Leicestershire Railway] Company and the Great Northern Railway Company, the Midland Railway Company, the London and North Western Railway Company, and the Charnwood Forest Railway Company enter into agreements with respect to the working, use, management, construction and maintenance of the said intended railways and any part or parts of thereof...

The prospect of the involvement of the GNR and LNWR in the North Leicestershire Railway would have been alarming to the Midland Railway, and could have been seen as a serious infringement upon its domain in Leicestershire, with the creation of a competing through-route for the LNWR from Nuneaton to Nottingham.

During the construction of the Charnwood Forest Railway in the 1880s, the Midland had consistently impeded the project, making complaints regarding both the underbridge at Charnwood Forest Junction at Coalville and the planned junction with the main line at Loughborough (which was never built in the end). Although the Midland eventually relented and enabled the construction of the underbridge at Coalville, they refused to budge on the matter of the main line connection at Loughborough, leaving the line truncated with Derby Road constructed as a terminus. The ironically oversized four-road engine shed at the station remained as a surviving legacy of the Charnwood Forest Railway's hubristic aspirations for a main line connection and perhaps ambitions for longer-distance services over the nascent North Leicestershire Railway to Harby and Stathern and beyond. In the end, only two of the four roads were ever used.

The lack of through-running proved to be very disadvantageous to the Charnwood Forest Railway in the long term, as the absence of through-running trains over the line seriously impaired the profitability of the company. Two years after the railway opened, it was placed into receivership, with the LNWR taking control. The failure to pay back its debentures combined with financial chicanery committed by the company secretary resulted in the Charnwood Forest Railway's bankruptcy.

The Midland Railway's fierce territoriality meant that the North Leicestershire, as the Charnwood Forest did, likely would have faced an uphill battle to lay its line. However, the provision of the two spurs at Loughborough and Upper Broughton do suggest that there was an attempt to placate and appeal the Midland with the allure of a new through route.

Furthermore, the unusual layout and location of Upper Broughton station may indicate that the Midland Railway was perhaps anticipating the North Leicestershire Railway. The station was built just a mile and a quarter away from Old Dalby station and was never provided with a goods yard. The roadside building further suggests that a station was not originally planned at the site, but was built as an afterthought. The station was located just north of the planned junction for the North Leicestershire Railway, so perhaps it was intended to act as an interchange with the North Leicestershire Railway?

To conclude, the first two schemes, the Grand Trunk Railway and the Melton, Loughborough and Ashby-de-la-Zouch Railway weren't much more than the products of mere opportunism on the behalf of their investors, and likely wouldn't have brought much in the way of immediate benefits to the Wolds parishes. The North Leicestershire Railway, meanwhile, was a much more likely proposition, but was still hampered by costs and railway politics, preventing its construction.

Three years following the North Leicestershire Railway's Act of Parliament, George Wells Owen, one of the two engineers for the proposed line, became the engineer of the Golden Valley Railway in Herefordshire. This railway had the distinction of being an early light railway, that is a railway built to lighter engineering standards than a conventional railway, making them much cheaper to construct. After 1896, with assent given to the Light Railways Act, this type of railway proliferated across the country, with many serving many rural areas that were not already served by rail.

Had the North Leicestershire Railway been proposed only a few years later, perhaps the Wolds would have been served by a less expensive-to-build railway, with either Mr Wells Owen applying his experience of building light railways or someone else with such experience in constructing economic railways, such as the famous Colonel Stephens.

Either way, there can be no doubt that the Wolds would've looked very different had there been trains!