Escrick Railway Station

A well attended Escrick Heritage meeting on 5 February 2020, led by Caroline Wandless, generated many facts, photographs, personal memories and family stories from the days when Escrick had a railway station on the East Coast Main Line. Express trains thundered by where today cyclists and walkers enjoy the peace of the Sustrans cycleway between Riccall and Naburn.

Timeline

1829 George Stephenson designed Rocket
1830 Rocket entered into service on 15 September
1839 The first train left York station
1840 The first direct train from York to London
1850 13 trains a day from York to London
1871 Escrick station opened
1888 294 trains arriving daily at York
1938 Mallard broke the world speed record
1952 Escrick station closed to passengers
1961 Escrick station closed to goods
1983 Selby diversion

Heading south out of Escrick along the A19 road towards Selby is a junction with a turning to the right signposted towards Stillingfleet. This road leads to the long-abandoned Escrick Railway Station, then located on the East Coast Main Line route between Kings Cross, London and Edinburgh. This stretch of road is lined by an avenue of resplendent Holm evergreen oak trees, a surprisingly imposing approach to a simple country village railway station. It is a reminder that the avenue was once seen as a prelude to the main entrance to Escrick Hall (now Queen Margaret's School) for the Lawley family and their guests when arriving by rail.

As you approach the bridge which carries the Stillingfleet road over the cycleway, a turning on the left leads down to a walkers' car park area which is part of the site of the former station. The station was opened in 1871 by the North Eastern Railway (NER). The avenue of trees was plantd by Beilby Lawley, 3rd Lord Wenlock when the station opened to enhance the route between the station and his residence.

Escrick station, around a mile from Escrick village was served by the NER's new route from Shaftholme Junction four and a half miles north of Doncaster to York, via Selby. NER ran the local stopping trains, whilst the Great Northern Railway (GNR) had running rights on the line for long distance trains.

Sam Taylor in his book 'Escrick, A Village History' refers to the comments of Lady Sybil Lubbock, Lady Wenlock's neice, on her railway journey from London to Escrick when she sought refuge from the capital because of the terrifying crimes of Jack the Ripper. "The visit started with the five-hour journey from London, its boredom compensated for by the stopping of the express at Escrick station (Lord Wenlock was a director of the North Eastern Railway and this was one of his perks) and the delight at the sight of the indignant faces at the carriage windows on this unexpected halt … We felt ourselves of unusual consequence as we and Nanny scrambled out and marched proudly down the platform to where the brougham and the luggage cart stood waiting."

Escrick railway station served the village from 1871. It closed to passengers in 1952 and goods transport in 1961. The line through Escrick was closed in October 1983, with all trains diverted onto the new section of the East Coast Main Line, known as the Selby Diversion. The diversion was to avoid speed restrictions due to new mining subsidences.

The old main line was abandoned between Barlby Junction and Challoners Whin near York. We now know the old line as the cycle track and forms part of the Pennine Trail.

Bradshaw's railway guides and timetable, indicate that by 1910 the section of line north of Selby had eight stopping services per day, but only three calling at all stations (Selby, Riccall, Escrick, Naburn and York). By the 1940s, there were six stopping trains per day but only one called at all stations.

The Railway Revolution which touched Escrick

- Rail travel was still in its infancy when the first train left York in 1839 along what is now known as East Coast Main Line.
- The first inter-city line in the world had been built by George Stephenson only nine years before.
- Stephenson went on to plan a line from Newcastle to London. York's own railway king, George Hudson, convinced Stephenson to build the line through York rather than bypassing it on the way to Leeds. This had a profound effect on the city.
- In 1840 the first train ran direct from York to London.
- By the 1850s, there were 13 trains a day between the two cities, carrying 341,000 passengers a year. In 1877 a new York station was built, the largest in the country. By 1888 there were 294 trains arriving daily into York station.
- The impact of the railways on York was dramatic. The rail revolution allowed people and products to be transported to and from York faster than ever before. Entrepreneurs were given access to new markets.
- Tourism boomed: within two years of the first train steaming into York, excursions to York were arriving from Manchester, Nottingham and London.
- It also revolutionised communications. By the mid-1860s York had two postal deliveries a day; a letter posted in London before noon was delivered in York the same evening. York's main post office in Lendal was built in 1884.
- The railways also brought heavy industry to the city for the first time

A few facts about the line

- The companies running train services on the eastern side of the country merged in 1923 to become London & North Eastern Railways (LNER). The whole system was nationalised in 1948 to become British Railways. What had originally been the Doncaster-York branch of the NER had become part of the East Coast Main Line.
- The most famous Gresley-designed Pacific

(4-6-2 wheel configuration) locomotives, such as "Mallard", which still holds the world's steam engine speed record at over 126 mph, and "Flying Scotsman" thundered through Escrick station – but rarely stopped!

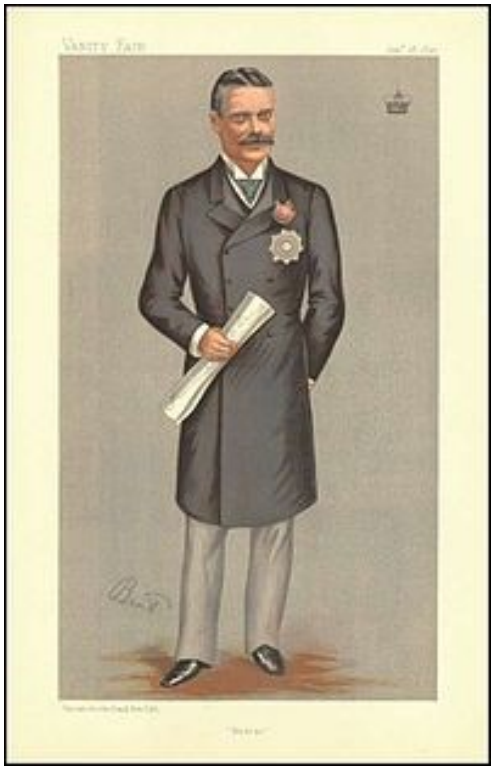
- LNER's chief engineer, Sir Nigel Gresley, was sometimes a guest at Escrick Hall shooting parties. There is a delightful and almost certainly apocryphal story that "Mallard" was chosen as a locomotive name after Sir Nigel shot one on the estate.

Personal connections

John Heaton, who lives in Bubwith, recently discovered that his great grandfather, Henry Mitchill Heaton served as a signalman at Escrick in the 1870s. Henry had been a policeman but, while still a young man, had suffered a knee injury and left the police service. He retrained as a railway signalman for the NER. He wrote in his memoirs:

"… (after recounting his early experiences in Northumberland) I had charge of Bootham Junction Cabin (Earswick, York) and level crossing and gates. Here my second son, Thomas Henry, was born (1876). The hours were long, twelve hours a day for a seven day week with one twelve hours off in three weeks. Added to this my shift partner gave trouble through excessive drinking. I therefore asked for a move and was sent to Escrick, a one street village seven miles south of York, where I had only a six day week, though the weekly hours were never less than seventy two.

The village possessed three characters, the schoolmaster, the cobbler, and the tailor, with whom I struck up an intimate acquaintance. Their intelligent discussions were a constant stimulant to a young man passionately desirous of lifting himself from the mass of his unintellectual surroundings. I remember hearing of the iniquities perpetrated under Enclosure Acts, the Wakefield Act being in all man's minds, though few understood how it had come about. I continued with the Popular Educator, kept a dictionary in my Cabin, and occasionally wrote to the newspapers, chiefly the "Leeds Mercury", mostly on railway accidents and how to prevent them.



In connection with this, I invented a system of automatically stopping trains, but I don't think it was taken up. It may have been through these things that I came to know Lord Wenlock, whose mansion, Escrick Hall, lay in the park at the end of the village street. One day the village parson came into my cabin and talked upon improving my position, and that he would use his influence with Lord Wenlock to take up my case. Following this, Lord Wenlock walked into my cabin and asked if he might sit down. As he watched me at work we gradually fell into conversation, first on my work, and on later visits he introduced politics and endeavoured to persuade me to aim at higher things on the railway, offering his assistance with the management. But I was beginning to feel the confinement was telling on my health, my independence was threatened and for other reasons which I cannot now remember I declined his friendly offices. Although my wage had continued at 22 shillings per week, and in spite of family expenses increasing (my third son, Jack, was born during my second year at Escrick in 1877) my wife and I had managed to save money. So after seven years as a signalman, I left the railway service and removed to York."

This voice from the 1870s speaks volumes about the working conditions of the time, and how a benevolent paternalistic landowner might use his influence to help an earnest young man to better himself.

First hand memories

Pat Reader, lifelong Escrick resident and widow of long serving Escrick Park agent, Bill Reader, has rather different personal memories of Escrick station.

"It was a long walk from the station to the village! Edwin Reader (Bill's father) with a pony and trap ferried passengers to and from the station. Agnes Ada Ward, a lady from Westgate-on-Sea in Kent came to stay for a month with her sister Nell and husband Charlie at The Black Bull which they owned. She stayed for 60 years, postmistress for 24 years, having married the trap driver Edwin Reader. At Kings Cross station, she had been accompanied by her sister Gwen who said to her "Oh don't go Agnes they don't know where Escrick is". Eddie also delivered the mail, driving a motorbike and sidecar.

The Station Master's house sat virtually on the station platform, where near the offices, was a penny chocolate bar machine! – a real treat. Mr Claude Fryer was the Station Master (Uncle Claude and Auntie Freda to me). Some of you may remember his daughter Anita who in her adult life was dispenser at Escrick surgery for many years. We became life-long friends.

My father, Vic Hale, was brought up at No 1 Station Cottages, his father (my grandfather) was head porter. There were 3 cottages, Mr Dundas in No 2 and Mr Haith in No 3. They had no electricity or hot water and it was an outside toilet. Every Sunday, along with my parents, plus Scamp our Fox Terrier I walked to visit my dad's family at the station and together with their dog Jack we then went for a walk along the embankment to either Heron Wood, picking brambles or to Moreby Wood. I remember lots of large white dog daises and wild flowers, anemonies and masses of bluebells and primroses and hedges covered in wild roses and honeysuckle.

My father won a scholarship to Archbishop Holgate's in York, and along with others travelled to York by train.

After our walk it was back for tea, wobbly blancmange, junket and buttered haycocks. After we had eaten, the table (large and round) was cleared, the oil lamp was lit and it was time for playing cards. My grandma soon became annoyed, accusing my dad of looking at her cards, leaving the table to join me at a small table to play snap. – she won every time.

Every Monday – an eye out for Scamp – determined to return to my grandparents, he was often seen looking both ways before crossing onto Stillingfleet road.