

HORSE POWER ON THE HAMPTON COURT BRANCH IN 1849

By David Turner

On 3 February 1849, two days after the London and South Western Railway's (L&SWR) Hampton Court branch line opened, the *Illustrated London News* published a picture of the new station. Careful observation of the illustration shows a locomotive and four carriages, being boarded by men and women in smart attire. As with most of the illustrated weeklies, the *ILN* was apt to exaggerate events. In the first instance I have been unable to find a locomotive in the company's roster that matches the description of the one in the picture. Of course this is partly due to the lack of pictorial evidence from the period of the L&SWR's locomotives, but it does suggest that the *ILN* illustrator had drawn in a generic 1840s steam engine. The reason for this is simple, steam locomotives were not the first form of motive power on the line.¹

There are two pieces of evidence that corroborate this. The first is a letter to the *Times* of 13 February 1849, when an anonymous individual named MEDICUS wrote about his journey to London the day before. With more a sense of bemusement, than complaint, he described how on boarding the carriage an 'old grey horse trotted up, saddled and bridled, with some yards of rope attached to his tail,' to be followed by an 'important looking fellow with a whip.' The traveller seemed confused and joked whether the directors were going to put on a contest of horse versus steam power, as 'a diversion for the cockney passengers.' The carriage started to move slowly, with porters pushing at the handles and John Tagg, the Queen's Waterman extorted, 'Hero's a proddy punt, fetch my old woman, she'll shove her off.' The traveller leaned out the window and on further inspection found out that a horse, belonging to Evans the Molesey flyman, was daily providing the traction. The journey to Kingston Station (the former name of Surbiton) took 20 minutes, where another train had been waiting 28 minutes for the coaches from the Hampton Court service to be attached.²

For many years this was the only evidence that I had. However recently I discovered in the L&SWR's staff magazine, the *South Western Gazette*, a recollection by Thomas Maynard that provides further evidence. He had been on the first train and could possibly be considered the first guard on the line. He stated that initially all that was provided for the line was a 'small truck holding about 20 persons with no roof whatever.' This does of course contradict MEDICUS' description whereby he had to put his head out of the window, indicating a roof was present. Given that contemporaneous accounts are always of far more value than recollections, it is far more likely that MEDICUS was accurate. This said, it is quite possible that by 12 February 1849 roofed passenger accommodation had been provided. Once the journey to Kingston was complete, the truck would be attached to the train from Woking Junction and then pulled back by horse. Maynard confirmed that it was Evans' horse that did the work and also that the practice went on for some time. Maynard also had to provide the services of a Booking Clerk.³

Thus it is confirmed that horses were initially used on the line. It now only remains to find a cause for this unusual activity. The first possible reason is that there was not a turntable at Hampton Court early on to turn the locomotives. This is confirmed by a Locomotive & Way and Works Committee Minute of the 19 April 1849 in which Albino Martin, the company's resident engineer, was ordered to move the turntable at Datchet to Hampton Court, two months after the line's opening.⁴ However there are a number of factors that militate against this explanation. Firstly we find that the turntable is still being worked on in September 1850⁵ and while evidence stated above suggests that horsepower was used for some while, it

seems unlikely that it would be used for over a year and a half. Thus trains possibly ran tender first, something that is known to have happened.

A more logical explanation is that the L&SWR was suffering a locomotive shortage in the period. A report by Gooch, the Locomotive Superintendent of the company, in 1847 states that the company was 'deficient' in its motive power and that more locomotives should be built.⁶ This was an especially pressing concern as in the late 1840s the L&SWR opened lines to Windsor, Guildford, Dorchester and extended the line from its terminus at Nine Elms to Waterloo. Thus it seems quite probable that with the Hampton Court branch being so short the L&SWR found it unnecessary to waste a locomotive when they were in short supply.

The actual cause will probably never be fully determined, but until further evidence turns up, I am going to opt for this reason as it is the most logical.

¹ The National Archives [TNA], ZPER 34/14, *The Illustrated London News*, 3rd February 1849

² *The Times*, 13th February 1849

³ TNA, ZPER 11/19, *The South Western Gazette*, August 1899, pp.10

⁴ TNA, RAIL 411/174, Locomotive Way and Works Committee Minute, 19th April 1849

⁵ TNA, RAIL 411/174, Locomotive Way and Works Committee Minute, 14th September 1850

⁶ TNA, RAIL 411/174, Locomotive Way and Works Committee Minute, 18th June 1847