

King's Lynn and the Railway

The 19th century saw the advent of the Industrial Revolution and, particularly significantly, the growth of the railway. In the 18th century King's Lynn was an important trading town and port which took advantage of the waterways rather than relying on the poor road system. However the introduction of the steam railways was a threat to King's Lynn's waterborne industry and the town began to suffer as its markets became connected to the rail networks.

The Coming of the Railway

Businesses in King's Lynn soon saw that they had no choice but to link the town to its markets if they were to survive. Despite the obvious benefits there were some people who fought to prevent the railways coming to King's Lynn. They generally represented industries that might have suffered due to the railways, such as corn merchants, waterway coal and deal traders and the operators of the 'Victoria', 'Rover' and 'Union' stagecoaches.



However, despite these attempts the railway did come to King's Lynn. The Lynn and Ely line was incorporated on the 30th July

1845 with permission to build a twenty-five mile line between King's Lynn and Ely, with branches from Watlington to Wisbech and King's Lynn to King's Lynn Harbour. On the 25th October 1847 the line from King's Lynn was extended to link the town directly with London.

T H E E A S T A N G L I A N R A I L W A Y .



THE PORT OF LYNN AND THE "HALLOW BENCH" OF THE RAILWAY.

The first two miles of the line beyond Ipswich comprise three extensive viaducts over the town & one of these having one opening with a centre arch spanning the river, all of them being supported by the masonry in the bed of the river. The first viaduct which the masonry is to be built of Yorkstone, the second is to be built of brick, and the third of granite. The depth of about 25 feet below the level of the water.

The Station

As the railway grew in importance and popularity there was an increasing need to improve the facilities at the railway station in King's Lynn. In October 1846 The Advertiser described the station as a temporary building, 'substantial and ornamental in appearance'. It consisted of a ladies' and gentlemen's waiting room, booking offices, clerks' room and a spacious platform. However, complaints about the facilities, the increasing traffic on the line and the presence of the Prince of Wales (the future King Edward VII) following the purchase of Sandringham in 1862, led to improvements being made at the station.

The mayor laid the foundation stone for the new station on the 3rd of March 1871. The completed station included a large entrance hall and suites of waiting rooms for two classes of passengers.

The Rise of the Seaside Holiday and the Growth of Hunstanton

The development of the railway significantly changed how people perceived, and used, their leisure time. Cheap excursions and shorter journey times on the trains allowed working class families to have holidays. Seaside resorts benefited from this, as they became increasingly popular holiday destinations.



Hunstanton

The East Anglian Railway had tried to promote Hunstanton as an attraction in the 1840s. This was not successful until local entrepreneurs and landowners, such as Henry Styleman le Strange and Lightly Simpson of London, formed a company to link Hunstanton with the East Anglian Railway in 1857. Construction of a fifteen-mile branch line between King's Lynn and Hunstanton began in the autumn of 1861 and was completed the next year, opening on the 3rd October 1862.

The line terminated at 'New Hunstanton', a green field sites where hotels, villas and promenades were built with the specific purpose of attracting future residents and holidaymakers. The estate at Sandringham further boosted the popularity of the town. The presence of the Royal Trains on the line to Hunstanton being known as the 'Royal Branch'. The popularity of Hunstanton as a holiday resort continued into the Edwardian period and it is still a favourite with many people today.

The new freedom of movement brought by the railways, coupled with the introduction of Bank Holidays in 1871, changed the working classes' prospects for leisure time enormously.



Twentieth Century Developments and the Decline of the Railways

In the mid-twentieth century the railways faced some major changes. In 1947 the railways were nationalised by Clement Atlee's government. In the 1950s the 'dieselisation' of East Anglian Railways began and, by the 1960s, steam engines had almost entirely been replaced by diesel trains. However during this period the railways were facing some serious problems and began to decline. On the 29th June 1952 the West Norfolk Line was closed. Any chance of the line reopening was ended in January 1953 when the devastating East Coast floods destroyed the section of track between Wells and Holkham. Flooding on the line between Hunstanton and Heacham also caused the deaths of thirty-one people. The decline of the railways worsened during the 1960s, in part due to the increase in private car ownership, and in May 1969 the Hunstanton line closed. Some of the lines did continue and the original, and busy, Ely to King's Lynn line was upgraded in 1992 to an electrical service.

The coming of the railway to King's Lynn had a similar transforming effect on the town as it did to many others across the country. It brought new trade, prosperity and greater freedom of movement to King's Lynn and the surrounding area and many people felt its loss when the railway began to decline in the 1950s and 1960s.