

The Leicester and Swannington railway

Did you know that one of the first railways in the country was built only a few miles away from us by Robert Stephenson? And that for several years it boasted the longest railway tunnel in the world? Historian Bill Pemberton is the man who knows the answers, as he told the Local History Group in December.

It was all about coal. The owners of the Leicestershire coalfields were not happy because they couldn't sell their coal in Leicester. Coal from the Nottingham coalfields was being shipped on the Erewash Canal to the Trent, up the River Soar to Leicester and sold there at a price the Leicestershire coalfields couldn't match.

The Charnwood forest Canal had been built to solve this problem. It took coal from the mines to Nanpantan, from where it went down to Loughborough on a tramway, then by boat on the Soar to Leicester. Not only was this was an expensive solution, but also it relied on the Blackbrook dam for its water supply. In 1799 the dam collapsed, and caused so much damage to the canal that it never fully reopened.

In 1828 William Stenson opened Whitwick Colliery (where Morrisons supermarket is today). He wanted to sell his coal in Leicester, but he had no way of getting the coal there. A railway had just opened from Stockton to Darlington, so Stenson went there and talked to George Stephenson. Stephenson came to Whitwick, studied the route, and agreed to act as consultant. Furthermore he proposed that his son Robert be appointed as chief engineer. Parliamentary approval was obtained in 1830, and – incredibly by today's standards – the line was opened three years later in February 1833.



Glenfield Tunnel – once the longest in the world.

The Leicester terminus was at West Bridge, where the coal was taken onwards by wagon or barge on the River Soar. From there the line went under Glenfield in a tunnel which in itself was a feat of engineering, being one mile long, dead straight and dead level. At the time it was built it was the longest railway tunnel in the world.

The line then turned West to avoid the rocky summits of Charnwood. But it still had to negotiate hills at Bagworth and Swannington which



The line from Swannington to Leicester.

were too much for the engines of the day. At Bagworth Stephenson's solution was to put a large horizontal pulley at the top of the slope. Empty wagons coming from Leicester were tied together and pulled up the slope by the weight of wagons full of coal going down. Five miles further along at Swannington Stephenson built another inclined plane, but this time the coal

wagons were hauled uphill by a stationary steam engine. The base of the engine and boiler house can still be seen at the top of the plane, whilst the engine itself is in the National Railway Museum at York.

The Company operated successfully until 1840 when the Midland Counties Railway opened and the Nottingham coalfields could once again dictate the price of coal in Leicester. Profitability declined, so when in 1845 the Midland offered to buy the company the shareholders did not hesitate to sell.



The steam engine in the museum at York.

The Midland made a lot of changes – the track was doubled; a whole new stretch was built from Leicester to Desford cutting out Ratby and Glenfield as well as the tunnel; and a diversion at Thornton cut out the Bagworth Incline. Then (at what was to become known as Coalville) the Midland line veered West to Burton-on-Trent and the Swannington line was left as a stub, feeding just one of the remaining coal mines.



The Swannington Incline today.

Today some parts of the abandoned line can still be seen. There are a few ventilation shafts to be spotted in the housing estates of Glenfield, and tours of the tunnel are arranged by Leicester Industrial History Society. Swannington Incline is now a permissive path run by the Swannington Heritage Trust, and the remains of the engine house can be seen at the top.

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