Account of Purley on Thames

Railways

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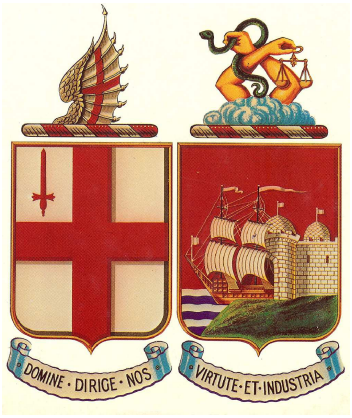
The Great Western Railway

The Great Western Railway was conceived in 1824 to link Bristol with London. The idea was promoted by Bristolians who saw a line to London as a way of enhancing the Port of Bristol and it was seen more as a part of the link between London and New York than just a link between London and Bristol. It was not until 1833 however that the project finally got underway and the name Great Western Railway was adopted. It took two years to get the required Act through Parliament and it received Royal Assent on 31st August 1835 (ref 2)



The badge of the GWR showing the coats of arms of London and Bristol

Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the Engineer responsible for the construction of the railway was a man of great vision. It was his intention to build a railway with minimal gradients and with sufficient width to accommodate the gauge of seven feet which he decided to adopt. He spent many months riding up and down the proposed line estimating the best alignment and calculating the quantities of soil that would have to be removed or brought in to maintain a level line. (ref a)

His first thoughts at Purley was for a mile long tunnel and he envisaged a second tunnel of three eights of a mile at Sonning to run under Holme Park. However he managed to come to an accommodation with local landowners to substitute two very deep cuttings. By somewhat of a coincidence the owner of Holme Park at the time was the MP for Berkshire, Robert Palmer, the father of Richard Palmer who was to become Rector of Purley in 1844. (ref 2)

The Purley tunnel was to be 87 chains long (1914 yards) and in 1835 Brunel calculated that in would cost around £34 per yard to construct, ie a total cost of £65076. In 1833 he also had in mind a second tunnel at Pangbourne which would have been 1320 chains or 29040 yards long. This is nearly fifteen miles and it would have come out somewhere near Newbury. This idea does not seem to have lasted long however: Brunel's standard tunnels for the broad gauge were 25 feet high and 30 feet wide. They were dug by hand and lined with brick. One would imagine that the problems that would have been encountered in digging through the wet chalk made the tunnelling in the area not a practical proposition. They had enough problems with springs washing away the trackbed as it was without compounding the problem in a tunnel. (ref f)

Land Acquisition

Negotiations with local landowners were often bitter and protracted, for not only had the land to be negotiated for or acquired compulsorily under the terms of the founding act, but arrangements had to be made for the transfer and commutation of tithes and for the diversion of roads and footpaths which crossed the line of route.

The largest landowner in the parish was Anthony Morris Storer of Purley Park. He controlled the stretch from the Roebuck to just west of New Hill plus some odd parcels of land by what is now

Winston Way. It was the former stretch which was to prove most difficult from the construction point of view. This line essentially divided the park lands of Purley Magna into two and part of the deal was the construction of a tunnel beneath the line to enable access from the main house to the church and gardens to the north.

The matter was further complicated by the historic entailment of the land. In order to complete the deal the GWR had to obtain the assent of everyone who could possibly have had a claim. This involved tracing back all the land transactions since 1662 and making all the successors of the several vendors parties to the agreement.

The final sum agreed was £10,000. George Gibbs recorded in his Diary on 13th October 1838 that 'all points of issue about Storer's land at Purley have been disposed of and we have possession of the land'. The final deed is dated 20th December 1838 so there must have been a few more points of detail to conclude.(ref d, 546-3681)

The most complex transaction however was that between the rector, Philip Powys of Hardwick and the railway. This involved the land between New Hill and Purley Lane which was partly owned by the Powys's and leased to the rector and partly Glebe land which was administered but not owned by the rector. The land in question had been known as Nutmore and had been strip farmed. Some of the strips had been Glebe and some had been acquired by the Powys-Lybbe's as part of the manor of Purley Parva, or Hardwick as it was tended to be called by that date. Under the deal the GWR purchased land from both parties with an agreement to sell back to the rector personally (not as part of his glebe) any surplus land which was not eventually required by the railway. A memorandum of agreement was signed on 11th August 1838 whereby approx 5 acres was transferred for a sum of £580 to be paid to Henry Philip Powys. Of this 3a 2r 14p were in the occupation of Philip Powys and 1a 2r 19p were formerly leased to William Viner and latterly to Edwood Sherwood and his undertenant, the Reverend Charles Manesty. The deed also covered lands in Goring, Whitchurch and Tilehurst (ref 546-5079)

A total of 2a 2r 24p of Glebe lands were also involved. This was transferred to the railway in a deed dated 10th August 1838 for the consideration of £580. The railway actually used 1a 1r 0p of the Powys land and the balance of 3a 3r 3p together with 1a 3r 17p of the glebe lands were sold back to Charles Manesty in 1844. (ref 546-5080)

Much of the line in the western part of the parish was on land owned by the Wilders. This involved most of the land from Westbury Lane to the Pangbourne border, although numerous pockets of land, mainly corners of fields were owned by various people like the Sherwoods, the rector, the Sorers and the Breedons of Pangbourne.

The Wilder conveyance was summarised in a Memorandum of Understanding dated 6th Feb 1838. The mconsideration was £800 of which £450 was for land and £350 for compensation. The land measured 7a 2r 31p. This was later amended to 5a 3r 31p in 1843 with the reduced price of £430. However the new agreement stipulated that the land should remain in the possession of the Wilders notwithstanding the use the railway made of it. (ref 546-4938)

Construction

Work started at London and Bristol as soon as the first Act was passed. The line was divided up into sections and individual contracts were identified by a key letter and a number. Thus in Reading's case the contracts were identified as 1R, 2R etc. It would seem that the contract for Sonning cutting to Reading station was 1R and the next stage to Purley was 2R.

Brunel was directed by the Directors on 1st March 1838 to 'make arrangements for letting the line from Reading to Purley ' and the remaining contracts for the Reading to Didcot portion were let later on in 1838. Construction started with the two bridges over the Thames at Basildon and Moulsford.

At Purley the first step was to dig a deep trench down to the level that Brunel had decreed as being the track alignment. This level was carefully checked along its route and then a plateway was laid down so that horse drawn trucks could remove the spoil as the trench was widened to form the cutting. Initially of course the spoil had had to be removed by pack horses and then carted along very slippery tracks as the cutting was made through loose chalk. All of the digging had to done by hand, mainly by Irishmen who traditionally had come to England to help build the canals and hence had become known as ‘Navvies’, short for Navigation cutters. The first trains were running to Reading on the 14th March 1840 and the line from Reading to Steventon was eventually opened to the public on 1st June 1840. (refs 2, d)

The Effect of the Railway on Purley

With the substitution of the cutting for the originally proposed tunnel, Purley was suddenly faced with being split into two and with the village cut off from the main road. The railway for its part had to begin a quite new series of negotiations with the local landowners to obtain the required parcels of land.

The route took no account of ancient field boundaries. It started tight against the river on the easternmost boundary of the parish and swung in a gentle curve through the side of the escarpment until it reached the plain between Purley and Pangbourne. The line bisected Purley Park which had only recently been completed and as noted before part of the deal called for the railway to build a tunnel beneath the line so that the occupiers of Purley Park House could reach the church and the lower part of the estate by the river. West of New Hill the line cut through the rectory Glebe lands and part of the property belonging to Purley Lodge. Thereafter it cut across the Great Common fields of both Purley and Pangbourne. (ref 78)

Four bridges over the railways were constructed. These were for New Hill, Purley Lane, Purveys Lane and Westbury Lane. Also three bridges were constructed to carry the railway over tracks at Purley Park, Fiddlers Bridge and by the Sul Brook.

The ancient road which had run down from the Roebuck to the village, along the Village Street, around Purley Lodge and had joined Westbury lane just before the junction with the turnpike was cut in two places. At the east of the parish the road was simply abandoned, but at the west the bridge at Purveys Lane was constructed and the road dog-legged towards what is now Glebe Road.

When the line was opened the parish discovered it had a rateable value. The one and a half miles of line was rated at £1950 and as soon as this was announced the Surveyor of the Roads for Purley, Edward Sherwood, promptly ordered a supplementary rate of 4d in the pound which raised an extra £30. He obviously got in quickly because when Pangbourne and Tilehurst tried to get their sections rated they found that the GWR were not prepared to give in so easily. They had gone to court to appeal other assessments and all Pangbourne and Tilehurst got was an assessment of £600 per mile as opposed to Purley’s £1300 per mile. (refs 173, b)

Services in the 1800s

When the GWR line was first opened in 1840 the main station for Purley was Pangbourne. The timetable for August 1840 showed passenger trains from Paddington to Pangbourne leaving at 0800, 0900, 1200, 1600 and 1900 with a goods train leaving at 0400. In addition there were four trains which did not stop at Pangbourne. They ran on to Faringdon Road, later Challow where coaches took passengers on to Oxford. In the reverse direction there were 5 passenger and one goods train each day except Sunday when there were only three passenger trains in each direction.

Pangbourne Station around 1860. The platform to the left has the ramp for loading coaches onto carriages.

As well as conveying passengers; coaches and horses could be accommodated providing they arrived at the station at least ten minutes before departure. It cost 24 shillings to take a four wheel carriage or 18s for a two wheeler. Horses were 20s for one and 32s for a pair. Passenger fares were 9/6 first class, 6/6 second class and 3/6 to ride on a goods train from Pangbourne to Paddington. To Reading it was 1/6, 1/- and 9d and to Faringdon Road 5/-, 4/- and 2/6 respectively. This timetable did not say when the trains arrived but compared with a coach it was considerably faster and there was no possible comparison with the comfort of the ride.

In December 1840 the line was extended to Wooton Bassett and the new timetable did give arrival times. The journey time from Paddington to Pangbourne varied between 1 hr 25 minutes and 1 hr 34 minutes. What was significant however was that the railway had realised the futility of trying to keep local times and insisted on using London times at all their stations. This added a slight hazard to the passenger as Reading was some 4 minutes later than London time and thus a train advertised to depart from Pangbourne for London at 0954, actually left at 0950 local time. It was not until 1884 that Greenwich Mean Time was finally adopted as the standard for the whole of Britain.

In the December 1840 timetable there were only four trains which stopped at Pangbourne, two on Sundays. By 31st July 1841 the line was now open as far as Bridgewater with the same service for Pangbourne. In the next few years the rail network expanded rapidly with more and more lines being opened

Tilehurst Station. You can see the short siding to the left which was used to hold the managing director's coach while he was at home. [M040000]

The Gauge Problem

When Brunel conceived the GWR it was as a broad gauge railway using a gauge of 7 feet and a quarter of an inch, rather than the standard gauge of 4’8½” which most other British Railways had adopted. This gave the GWR trains a much greater stability and they could run considerably faster because of this. However it became very difficult to transfer goods from one system to the other, necessitating unloading and reloading at transfer points. As a result of an enquiry into the problem, set up by Parliament in 1846 ,the Gauge Act of 1846 was passed. This decreed that outside of the territory of the Great Western Railway only standard gauge track could be laid.

Undeterred, the Directors of the Great Western continued to expand their network, although outside of the stipulated territory they were forced to adopt standard gauge. As far back as 1846 an agreement was reached which would bring Standard gauge to Reading when the line from Basingstoke to Oxford was authorised as part of the Manchester and Southampton Railway. This was effected by laying a third rail so that all trains ran on one of the three rails and the broad and standard gauge trains each used one of the other two. This made points and junctions very complicated and added considerably to the cost of track maintenance.

The final decision to abandon the broad gauge was not taken until February 1891 but by then most of the trains through Purley were standard gauge. The next year all the remaining broad-gauge-only lines were converted. The now useless third rail was left in place for a while but gradually it was all removed. It is assumed this was done at Purley at the same time as the new track for the widening was laid.

The Widening in 1891

By the end of the 1860s the railway was in a very healthy financial position. Both the value of the stock and the dividends had peaked in 1872. There was a recession and a coal strike in 1873 which caused a slight set back but traffic was rising steadily and there was really no competition. The company sought powers to widen the railway from Paddington to Didcot and the first stage was approved in 1873 as far as West Drayton.

Progress was steady and by 1890 all the land needed for the widening in Purley had been acquired and new boundary markers set. These were round plaques inscribed ‘Great Western Railway Cos - Boundary 1890’. The plaques were mounted on a short length of old broad gauge track and set into the ground.

The stolen boundary marker

Three are to be found on the stretch of footpath running between Westbury Lane and Purvey’s Lane. One of these was dug up and stolen by thieves in 1985 causing considerable local feeling. Eventually Allan Harmer, a member of the Parish Council, received an anonymous phone call which directed him to a spot in Sulham woods where the marker was found. It was returned to British Rail who reset it in concrete and took the opportunity to secure the other three as well and repaint the lettering.

When the widening took place a Saxon burial ground was discovered to the north west of the Westbury Lane bridge . The work necessitated the rebuilding of all seven bridges in Purley and one can see very clearly that all the bridges now are in fact two separate bridges, when one looks at them from the track. The new lines were laid to the narrow (4’8½”) gauge and thus the new bridges are not quite as as wide as the old which were built to span to broad gauge (7’0 ¼”?) track.

As when the line was originally constructed, a light railway was laid down to remove spoil. Finally on 30th July 1893 the new track was opened between Reading West Junction and Pangbourne, completing the quadrupling between Paddington and Didcot, except for a small portion through Reading which had to await the completion of the new station in 1899.

An interesting sidelight emerged when the Census for 1891 was published. In the return for Purley of April 1891 Charles Allen, a navvy aged 24 of Pallampton Lodge in Hampshire was a lodger in the house of Charles Cuthbert in Purley Street, presumably he would have been employed on the widening. (ref 124)

Purley Lane bridges - the arch on the left is the original Brunel arch for broad gauge trains and that on right for the widened (narrow) gauge lines.

Rolling Stock in the 20th Century

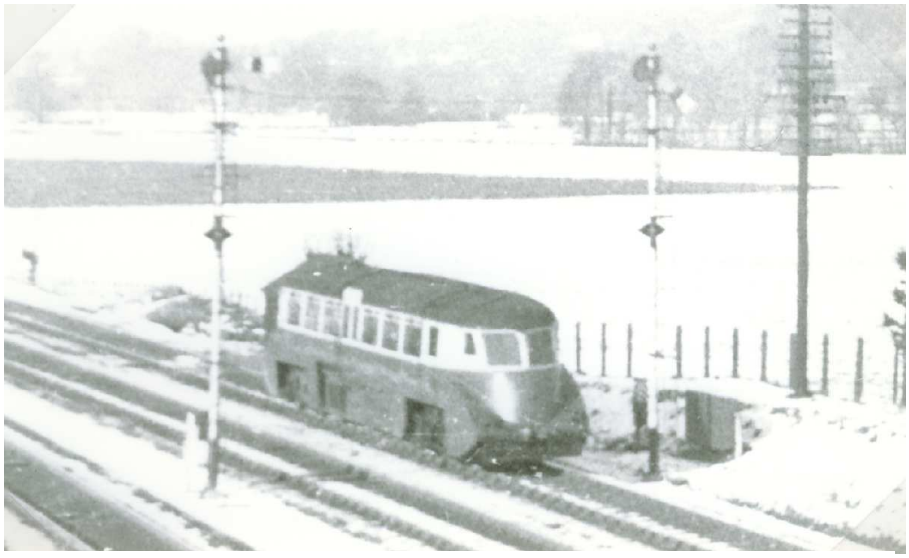
The rolling stock used on the line between Tilehurst and Pangbourne was pretty well all varieties of main line and suburban. The stopping trains were, for the first hundred years or so typical Great Western engines and carriages as used on other main lines. After Tilehurst Station was constructed however things began to change and passenger services were grouped into Fast, Semi-fast and Stopping. None of the fast trains hauled by 4-6-0 locos such as Stars or Saints would stop at either station but occasionally semi-fast did. These tended to be hauled by the medium sized 4-4-0 locos such as Bulldogs and the carriages were fairly standard corridor stock. The stopping, all stations, services were hauled by medium sized 2-6-2 tank locos often with non-corridor stock at first although by the 1920s corridor stock was the norm.

A 2800 class 2-8-0 on a mixed goods train near Westbury Lane [M]

There were three types of freight train; first the long distance heavy freights (eg coal) then the speedier trains carrying agricultural goods from the countryside to the towns and finally the pick up goods which ambled from station to station stopping in their goods yards with small 0-6-0 tank shunting engines rearranging the vehicles to get the train on its way while men did the loading and unloading. The heavy long distance trains were hauled by large 2-8-0s, the faster goods trains by 2-6-0s and the pick up goods by 0-6-0s. However almost any type of engine could be found on any type of train if there was a problem at the depot and a spare locomotive was drafted into service.

In the 1930s some of the semi-fast trains were provided by the GWR's diesel cars which were a real novelty and very comfortable to ride in.

Other services however could be seen in Purley. Trains from the Southern Railway would venture to Reading from Basingstoke, take the avoiding line between Reading West and Tilehurst and provide services from the south coast to the midlands and north. Usually they had Southern locos as far as Oxford and then change to an LNER or LMS loco for the onward journey but occasionally the LNER or LMS locos would work through to Basingstoke. LMS locos, particularly the 3F and 4F 0-6-0 types would be seen working from the Midlands to the Reading freight depot which was located beneath



One of the early diesel railcars approaching Westbury Lane Bridge [M]

the Bath Road on the site now the A33.

This pattern persisted until the end of steam in the mid 1960s when diesel locos took over the fast, semi-fast passenger and fast freights. The slow passenger trains became the preserve of the new Diesel Multiple Units.

A selection of train workings taken by Ian Nash

A Southern region Q class 0-6-0 hauling a mixed traffic train

A Southern Region double headed passenger train

A County class 4-6-0 approaching Westbury Lane Bridge. These were rarely seen in this area./

Problems and Vandalism

On 10th April 1851, George Hamblin aged 13, placed an iron bar on the railway line at Purley. George, an agricultural labourer, was taken to court and fined £5 with 8/6 costs. He was unable to pay however and so went to prison for six weeks (ref 1 (9/82))

About one month later on 12th May Henry Hunter and George Fuller abandoned a trolley on the line near the Roebuck. It was smashed by a train and the engine damaged. Hunter and Fuller were navvies employed by a contractor named Mr. Brotherhood who were working on the line between mileposts 36 and 41. They were summoned to the Quarter Sessions and tried for contravening railway bye-laws. They were sentenced to one months imprisonment (refs 8 (31/5/1851), 203)

In more recent years special guard rails were erected over the two main lines at Purvey'??s Lane and Purley Lane bridges. These were to stop children especially, from dropping things onto high speed trains as they passed beneath. An even more dangerous practice had been to hang a brick from a piece of string so that it struck the windscreen of hsts passing below, although we never had any reports of such incidents in Purley.

Pangbourne Station

Pangbourne was one of the original stations on the line and opened in 1844. The original layout was designed by Brunel and had a trailing cross over from down to up lines at each end of the station with a small siding to the east on the south side. This was fitted with a turntable.

After widening in 1892/3 the station was completely remodelled. It had four platforms with a subway linking them together. The main buildings were re-constructed on the north side. The main and relief lines were linked by a double cross-over running from down main to down relief and from up relief to up main. There was a very long and narrow goods yard to the north and west. It had a siding leading from a head shunt at the station passing through a goods shed plus a short spur. It was linked by two short cross overs to the up relief and by a longer one to the down relief, There was also a refuge siding between the main and relief lines to the west of the station and a signal box adjacent to the down main. All the extra track work was removed in 1964/65 and the signal box taken out of use 9/5/65. The station was left with four through lines with no cross overs or points anywhere. The two main platforms were removed in the early 1970s to allow the high speed trains to take a somewhat shallower curve.

The relief platforms were extended in 1991/92 to accommodate six car turbos as these had plug doors and were not allowed to stop at stations which were too short.

Tilehurst Station and the Commuters

By the 1880s Reading had expanded westwards and the need for a new station was apparent. This was constructed at Tilehurst, almost on the Tilehurst/Purley boundary. The line was at that time double track and a two platform station was constructed. The down platform had a substantial building including a booking office, plus a small goods shed. Both were built of a yellowish stone with limestone quoins and remain substantially unaltered. They were designed by J E Danks and Lancaster Owen. On the up platform there was a simple wooden waiting shed. All the buildings had a small canopy fringed with typical GWR valence boards. A footbridge was provided and a house built nearby for the station master. The opening in May/June 1882 was overshadowed by the opening of the Town Hall in Reading and received virtually no press publicity. (refs 9,e)

When the line was widened to four tracks in 1892 it was not necessary to rebuild the station as was required for all the other stations between Reading and Didcot. The up platform was turned into an island to serve the up main and new down relief lines. A new set of waiting rooms were designed by

J W Armstrong, to match the existing booking office. The waiting shed was moved to the new up relief platform where it remained for another hundred years. A new plate sided footbridge was constructed and the hand rails of the stairs were made of cast iron to a very high aesthetic design. The platforms were later lit by elegant gas lamps, but presumably at first oil lighting was used. (ref e)

One of the attractions of the site was the opportunity it gave for walkers who could ride out from Reading and walk back alongside the river. Thus the railway installed a penny in the slot gate and a footpath which rail travellers could use to get access to the river instead of having to walk to the Roebuck and cross the bridge there. The station was actively promoted by the GWR as a place for day trippers and picnickers to enjoy the riverside. As well as serving passengers a small goods yard was established where coal merchants could collect their shipments and there was a thriving parcels office. It was served for many years by a pick-up goods train which left Reading around 3.30 pm and which stopped at all the wayside stations between Reading and Didcot. It dropped off trucks and vans, the loco did a bit of shunting and then it assembled a new train and proceeded to the next station.

The goods yard was serviced by a fifth line which ran from Reading West yard alongside the down main which it joined shortly before Tilehurst station. This was linked to the two relief lines by a '??ladder' with connections to the other lines. The layout was revised in December 1958 and finally removed in 1964 and 1965. There was a small siding to the east of the station. This and the goods line were removed 26/5/1958.

The link to the goods yard came off this goods line a short distance east of the station. The yard was served by three spurs. It was taken out of use 8/11/64. Between Tilehurst station and the Roebuck bridge there was a single ended refuge siding which up goods trains could back into, either to wait to be overtaken by a faster train or to await an opportunity to cross the four through tracks to reach the goods yard. This was taken out of use 5/4/64

Off the down main to the west of the station was a short engine spur which was added in 1899 and had been removed by 1960. The Tilehurst signal box was located adjacent to the up relief just east of the station. It was closed 26/4/1965 (ref g)

Tilehurst was a popular station for commuters to London who bought houses within walking distance of the station. A notable commuter in later years was the General Manager of the GWR, Felix (later Sir Felix) Pole. He lived at Calcot Place and would arrange for his special carriage to be slipped off an express from London and brought into Tilehurst station by the goods yard shunter. Here his carriage (later his automobile) awaited him for the short journey home.

The Second World War

When the Second World War ended the railways were in a terrible state. Hardly any maintenance had been done on either rolling stock or infrastructure sine 1938. During the war the railways had been taken over by the Railway Executive with a total focus on supporting the war effort. Large signs at almost every station asked '*Is your journey really necessary?*' At a moment's notice all services could be suspended because a huge number of trains carrying soldiers or tanks were required and it was quite common for two-track lines to have both lines operating in the same direction.

During the war the only new locomotives were the Austerities and Americans. The Austerities were of three main types two classes of large freight engines either 2-8-0 or 2-10-0 and 0-6-0 saddle tanks for work at military sites, coal mines and similar shunting duties. The Americans were similar although a different design. The Americans were all either taken to the continent after D-Day or loaded aboard aircraft carriers and dumped in the sea off Cornwall after the end of the war so as not to compromise Lend-Lease. A small number of Americans survived to become dock shunters at Southampton.

Nationalisation

In 1945 a Labour Government was elected with a policy of *'bringing all the means of production and distribution'* under public ownership. The railways' turn came in January 1948 but they included only the actual railways. All the other components which had made the railway companies successful as integrated businesses, such as hotels, tourism, short haul lorries, ferries and air services were either included in other nationalisation schemes or sold off. This included the buses which now became competitors rather than the first and last stages of a the journey.

For the next fifty years the railway board tried almost every dodge in the book to make the railways pay with no success, they had a 'modernisation scheme' to introduce new classes of steam locomotives in 1951 only to scrap them all in 1968 as they tried to introduce diesels to be even more 'modern' Richard Beeching tried to run the railways as an accountant and numbered and accounted for every fence post and any other object in use. The result was a bureaucratic nightmare that justified the closing of most of the branch lines and driving passengers away.

Services after the Second World War

It was after the Second World War that Tilehurst came into its own as a commuter station, and largely took over from Pangbourne as the station for Purley. Such was the growth of traffic from the early 1950s that Purley Parish Council tried to get the railway to provide a halt at Purley. Although the idea was considered, and resurrected again in the 1980s by Berkshire County Council, nothing has ever come of it.

Also in these years the other traffic ceased. The Tilehurst coal yard closed in Sept 1964, (along with those at Pangbourne and Goring); the rails were later removed and the land used as a car park, and later partly redeveloped. The parcels business had closed by 1972 and the staff had been reduced to two railmen who dispensed tickets and generally kept an eye on the station, and a part-time car park attendant. In the early 1980s this latter job disappeared as the car park was made free for rail travellers.

In 1952 Tilehurst, along with the other Thames Valley stations was seen as being on the Oxford to Paddington line although it figured in the timetable under Taunton to Reading. There were through trains to Paddington at 0739, 0813 and 0832, the journey time being roughly an hour. later trains at 0916, 1034, 1126, 1212, 1313, 1434, 1615, 1706, 1805, 1928, 2057 and 2214 mostly requiring a change at Reading. Return through trains left Paddington at 1735, 1805, and 1853, otherwise the

down service was similar to the up service. The trains were all steam hauled and some did not have first class seating.

In essence the pattern remained unchanged until 1990. In the summer 1987 table there were through trains at 0703, 0724 and 0755, with other services to Reading at 0615, 0828, 0850, 0921, 1030, 1130, 1230 and roughly every hour until after midnight. Returning from London there were trains at 1730, 1814 and 1832. The through trains were diesel hauled 6 to 9 coach trains and the other services were 3 or 6 car diesel multiple units. In 1990 the local service was doubled at off peak hours with trains every half hour to Didcot and Reading.

There was a steady decline in patronage until around 1982 when things began to pick up and around a 15% growth in business was taking place each year. The waiting room on the up relief platform was rebuilt and the gate to the river removed, or at least the penny in the slot part was, although it had not been used for many years. By 1989 the major complaint was one of overcrowding, although cries of unpunctuality and unreliability were often heard.

The recession starting in 1989 allied to a steady transfer of peoples' place of work out of London led to a distinct reduction of passengers travelling. The rolling stock, dating from the 1960s was gradually replaced by the new Network Turbos from April 1992 but these had very uncomfortable seats and while proving a good service people preferred to change at Reading rather than using them for trips to London. All loco hauled trains were withdrawn because of the need to ban locomotives from Paddington whilst it was remodelled for the Cross-rail and Heathrow Airport projects.

Thus in the Summer 1992 timetable there were through services to London at 0545, 0653, 0714, 0732 and 0803, but all stopped several times between Reading and Paddington. Returning home there were trains from Paddington at 1738 and 1808 but for the rest of the day there was the regular 30 minute service from Tilehurst to Reading at xx10 and xx40 and from Reading at xx00 and xx30.

Signalling

Initially the line was signalled by the Brunel designed disc and crossbar system. This was based upon a tall post surmounted by a disc and a cross bar set at right angles. The top of the post could be rotated so that either the disc or the crossbar faced the train and the other was seen end on. The disc signified ‘All Right’ and the cross-bar ‘Danger’ The crossbars for up and down trains were slightly different so that they could not be mistaken. In a few cases a ball was used to indicate ‘all-right’ but this had to be lowered if there was danger. (ref 2)

In November 1869 the directors ordered the replacement of all disc and crossbar signals with the semaphore signals. These were made of a painted board which was hinged to the post and had two positions. When it stuck out at right angles (resembling the old crossbar) it signalled danger and for ‘all-right’?? it was allowed to drop to point to the ground at 45 degrees. Most other railways regarded the Great Western practice as unsafe and insisted on the ‘all-right’ signal pointing up to the sky so that if the mechanism failed it was ‘fail-safe’ to the danger position.

The two methods became known as ‘Lower-quadrant’ and ‘Upper-quadrant’? and the distinction was carried on into British Railways days where the Western Region changed the signals to lower quadrants when they had control of a line and the other regions changed them to upper quadrants when a former Great Western line was transferred to their control. (ref 2)

The track was divided up into blocks and each block was controlled by a ‘home’ signal which was situated at the start of a block and a distant signal which was situated at least half a mile from the Home. A driver could pass a distant at danger but it warned him the next home was likely also to be at danger, and that he could not pass. The distants were distinguished from homes by having a notch cut into the end and being painted yellow and black instead of red and white for the homes. An additional facility was a lamp which was located to the right of the signal arm and which could be viewed through either a green spectacle or a red (home) or orange (distant) one.

The signals in the Purley area were controlled from signal boxes at Tilehurst and Pangbourne. The distance between the two boxes was considered too long to be a single block and thus it was divided into two with the intermediate block point at Westbury Lane. This was indicated on the signals by a small diamond just below the semaphore arm. These therefore are ‘home’ type and if set to danger the train must stop at them. The Purley Intermediate Block signals were also different in that when a train had passed them they returned to danger automatically without the signalmanhaving to reset them. This was notified to the signalbox with a small repeater signal. These automatic signals were among those installed experimentally in 1922/23 betweenTilehurst and Goring by A T Blackwell when he was Signals Engineer for the GWR. (ref 2)

At Tilehurst and Pangbourne were home signals for all four lines. Each had to have distants set about a mile away, and an inner home set about a quarter of a mile away. These allowed the signalman to move a train up after it had been brought to a standstill so that they could talk directly to the driver. The distants for Pangbourne served the down main and down relief lines and were located on a gantry near the Sul brook. Pangbourne also operated the intermediate block signals approaching it. Thus they also operated the distances for the Purley signals which were located near Purley Park.

In the opposite direction for the up main and up relief lines, control was from Tilehurst. The Tilehurst distants were located near New Hill and the Purley distants near Fiddlers bridge.

When it was foggy the Purley signals were placed out of action and fogmen called in to set detonators on the line at the Pangbourne and Tilehurst distants. To call out the fogmen the railway installed special telephones at the homes of the senior ganger for the stretch. In the case of the Pangbourne box this led, in the 1950s and early 1960 to the home of Oswald Willey in Glebe Road.

He would call out whoever was on call for that period and had to keep him supplied with coal and detonators at his hut which was located near the Sul brook.

Although it was a long and lonely shift, lasting 12 hours, the men generally enjoyed the opportunity of making an extra 2/6 an hour ‘refreshment money’ The Tilehurst head ganger at the time lived in Southcote and he had to cycle from there to report first to the box and then into Purley to call out his man. Their fog hut was near Purley Park and located on the north side of the line. The detonators were clipped on by hand on the uprelief line, but for the up main there was a device which placed the detonator on the line which was operated by a wire and winding gear which stretched under the lines . It would have been very unsafe to have been crossing the line in the fog, although this had to be done to reload the device. In later years this was replaced by a magazine which held 24 detonators and was operated by a simple lever. The Pangbourne hut was on the south side and so they had the magazine for the down relief line.

The Signals had to be inspected regularly and a lamp man used to set off on his bicycle from Didcot each day with a load of newly trimmed lamps on a pole strapped to his cross-bar. Each lamp was inspected and replaced if necessary and the spectacles cleaned. He would stop off for a cup of tea at the signal boxes and at Purley there was a barrel of oil which he could use to replenish his supplies. This was kept outside the gangers hut near Westbury Lane.

Eventually all of the signals had electric lights run from an accumulator which lasted a week so every monday after the morning London trains had gone a service train would leave Didcot with a tank engine in charge at 0830 and this would stop at all the signals to change the accumulators.

The semaphores were replaced by colour lights towards the end of the 1960s when control was transferred to Reading. These signals displayed a combination of red, yellow and Green lights with increasing degrees of caution. Red means ‘stop’, a double yellow means ‘prepare to stop’??; a single yellow is roughly the same as a distant at ‘warning’, and a green means ‘??all clear’.

As well as the visual signal the Great Western also developed ‘Automatic Train Control’?? which consisted of a ramp set in the middle of the track and which was energised if the way was clear and not energised if it was not clear. A shoe below the engine engaged the ramp and was able to detect whether or not the ramp was energised. This caused audible signals to be given to the driver and if he passed a home at danger then the brakes were applied automatically.

The ramps were replaced around 1974 by a more sophisticated box of electronics but the principle remains the same. The main line through Purley was one of the first stretches to get ATC and this was installed before 1930. (ref 2)

The Trackwork

Initially the line was laid with standard broad gauge iron rails known as bridge rail which weighed 43 lbs per yard. This was nailed to longitudinal timbers over thin wedges of hardwood so that the lines were canted slightly to the centre of the track. They also allowed a certain amount of give in the track. The longitudinal timbers were spaced by similar timbers or cross bars of iron which spanned the two tracks. These cross bars were then spiked deep into the ground to secure the whole structure and then the track was ballasted. The timbers were soaked in biochloride of mercury in tanks beforehand in a process known as Kyanising. This was replaced by creosote in 1840 which remained the method of preserving sleepers until they were replaced by concrete in the 1960s and 1970s.

By 1867 the old iron rails were proving troublesome and so the decision was taken to relay all the mainlines with steel rails. The rails laid in Purley were double headed rails set in chairs and laid on lateral sleepers which had by now become preferred to the old longitudinal timbers. The idea was that when worn the rail could be reversed and the other side used, however in practice the weight on the chairs caused slight indentations in the undersurface, so that when reversed the wheels ran

unevenly and chattered.

When the lines were widened in 1890 the opportunity was taken to relay every track with bull headed rail at 86 lb per yard. This was soon increased to 92, to 95 and then to 97.5 lbs. The Great Western standard rail length was 44’ 6” but after amalgamation in 1923 these were gradually replaced by 60’, 95 lb rail (113A type rail) which was the British standard. However for special areas where water was a problem, eg in tunnels, there was a 97.5 lb rail known as type OO and was made of the highest grade stainless steel. Purley had a lot of this rail as the line is located in a deep cutting which is subject to upwards water pressure caused by rain water building up a head in the saturated chalk to the south.

Adjacent rails were joined by fishplates and these had to be removed and the ends of the rail inspected every spring. The bolts were then oiled and the fishplates replaced. Also because of the problems with water, the trackwork in Purley required ballast cleaning on a regular basis. This involved digging out the ballast to a depth of about 18 inches, sieving it and repacking the track. Specialised service vehicles now do this job mechanically on a regular basis, usually over a Saturday night/ Sunday morning.

Bull head rail was held in the chairs by wooden ‘keys’ which had a habit of working loose. Thus every day a ganger was sent to patrol the line and replace any keys that come loose. At certain times of the year, especially in spring and autumn almost all the keys worked loose overnight and complete gangs had to rush out to make the line safe.

Gangs consisted of a Ganger, a Sub-ganger and three length men and each had its own stretch of track to look after. The Purley gang had a cabin near Westbury Lane where they kept their tools and it was also used to store oil for signal lamps and for greasing rail joints. In 1956 the Purley gang was abolished and their work distributed between the Tilehurst and Pangbourne gangs. The cabin remained in place for many years. In recent years a new brick cabin has been constructed on the north side of the track just west of Purley Lane. There is access from the Lane and a footpath leads down the cutting side to track level. A similar path leads down from Westbury Lane bridge. This reflects the modern practice of transporting gangers to and from site by road vehicles rather than by rail.

Another of the gang’s tasks was to clear weeds from the track and it was a regular feature of the year to start weeding the track on Ascot day. Nowadays this is done by spraying with chemicals from a special train which patrols the system on a regular basis.

The first flat bottomed rail was laid between mileposts 40-20 and 40-40 near Westbury Lane bridge on the up main in the late 1940s. These were 110 lb/yd steel rails and were held in place by skull clips named after Jack Skull who was a Civil Engineer on the Western Region. From 1962 these rails were welded together into continuous lengths instead of being joined by fishplates. The first continuous welded stretch was on the up relief between mileposts 40 and 20-20.

Because it is not feasible to inspect rail ends manually with continuous welded track, the inspection has to be done by a special train with an ultrasonic scanner which passes over all the main lines four times a year. There is also a rail grinding train which reprofiles the track. This is Swiss owned and runs all over Europe on its annual tour.

Initially sleepers were laid at 24 sleepers per 60 ft rail this was raised to 26 and is now 28 for concrete sleepers. The wooden sleepers weighed in at around a hundredweight compared with five times that weight for the concrete sleepers. The modern continuous welded flat bottomed track is secured with pandrel fasteners.

The High Speed Trains

With the coming of the high speed trains in the mid 1970s the block sections had to be lengthened. All the smaller boxes were closed and control transferred to a main centre at Reading. Also the track was completely realigned and is very sharply cambered so that trains can run comfortably around the curves at speeds of up to 150 mph although the HSTs are nominally limited to 125 mph. In order to achieve this through Pangbourne station the platforms on the two main lines were removed.

In order to allow the track circuits to work, insulation sections have to be inserted at intervals. The track circuits enable a signalman to see when a train is occupying a section. With the fishplates this was a relatively easy thing to do, but with continuous welded track it means that a special section known as an insulated rail joint (IRJ) has to be inserted. These are made up of two 18ft rail lengths glued end to end making 36ft in all. They are made up in the Civil Engineers depot and dumped by the railside. The track crews then have to cut a corresponding section out of the track, insert the IRJ and then weld it into position. At one time a stock of rails used to be left by the track side but because vandals were placing them across the lines this practice had to be abandoned.

There are three sets in Purley. One on either side of New Lane bridge Up lines to the west and down lines to the east; the second is just east of Westbury Lane bridge where they all aligned, the third is between Fiddlers bridge and the sewage farm

An IRJ creates a significant weakness in the track so they have to be replaced regularly. However in due course they will all be replaced by French designed Astra boxes. These use three signal generators spaced at 10 yard intervals each emitting a different frequency. These signals are altered when a train is occupying the section and this is detected and notified to the control box.

The Turbos

Significant changes began to appear in the early 1990s as the ageing fleet of Diesel Multiple Units was withdrawn and replaced by a fleet of modern turbos.

A London bound three car turbo approoaching New Hill

Since about 1959 the local services from Tilehurst and Pangbourne had been provided by class 117 and 119 DMUs. By 1990 they had just about reached the end of their useful life. Many units had had to be withdrawn because they were insulated with asbestos and those that remained were becoming increasingly unreliable. Some class 101s were drafted in from East Anglia and a new fleet was ordered.

These new units were christened 'turbos' and began to appear from April 1991. There were three types, the class 165/0 was originally designed for the Chiltern Line and had a maximum speed of 75 mph. They were built to the old GWR loading gauge and were much roomier inside than anything else on the line although the effect was neutered by 5 abreast seating and a very short seat pitch. The result was that a 2 car train could seat 40 First and 132 Standard, with a 3 car set increasing the standard seating to 238. Several of these operated on local services when first introduced and later 7 units were transferred permanently to Reading. The design for the Thames Line was the 165/1 which were identical to the 165/0 but had a maximum speed of 90 mph. For longer distance operating the class 166 was introduced in 1992 with air conditioning and carpeted floors.

The new trains proved very popular and passenger loadings increased steadily after their introduc-

tion. There was a distinct change in the pattern of travel, caused partly by the recession and commuting to London decreased while off-peak travel increased substantially. To cater to the commuters a named train was introduced in May 1993 called the Thames Valley Limited which left Tilehurst at 0745 and ran non-stop to Paddington.

One of the features of the turbos was that they were operated by one man, the driver only. In order to facilitate this a radio system was set up with aerials alonside the track at approximately 5 mile intervals to provide communication between drivers and signalmen. But more noticably for Tilehurst and Pangbourne video cameras were installed on the platforms with display screens where the driver stopped so that the driver could see that the platform was clear before starting. Part of this programme required the erection of stop boards. On the two main platforms this was merely a small board bearing the letter 'S' but on the relief platforms, 3 and 4, each had two boards reading '2 3 4 car stop' and '5 6 car stop'.

In order to accommodate the turbos the platforms at Pangbourne Station had to be lengthened. This was because of a ruling by the Health and Safety Executive that all plug door trains could only stop at platforms which were longer enough for the complete train. As the new units were significantly longer that the old and as Thames wanted to operate six car units which were about 150 metres long the work had to be completed before the turbos were introduced.

The basic service operated by the turbos was half hourly with every other train working through to or from London during off peak hours. Most trains ran to or from Oxford but a few operated to Banbury or Bicester.

One of the problems with the turbos was that they were relatively light and thus would sometimes not work the track circuits when there were leaves on the line in Autumn. Many solutions were tried but eventually the decision was taken to fell all the trees adjacent to the track and in May 1994 Tilehurst took on an entirely different appearance when all the trees to the north of the line were felled.

Network South East

The railways suffered continuing decline until about 1982 when there was a sudden and very obvious change in people's habits. Numbers on the morning commuter services were gradually dwindling although there were still complaints about overcrowding. British Rail monitored passenger flows between Tilehurst and Reading and Paddington and total passenger journeys to and from Tilehurst. They make interesting reading:

	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983
Reading	54	49	44			
Paddington	18	21	19			
Total		193	192	265	200	226

Figures are 1000s of travellers The totals are one way and the others return journeys. (figures from Berks CC Transport Policy Programme)

It took BR about another two years before they would accept that a real change had occurred and that a completely different management style was needed to cope with the new expanding business climate. These changes can be traced back to 1985 when Network South East was created to provide a unified railway business to serve the London Commuter area. What had at one time been the London inner and outer commuter services of the old GWR were placed under the control of Thames and Chiltern Line with greatly devolved management powers. Operations remained with Western Region until 1989 when it was abolished and all operations handed over to the new business sectors.

Chris Green the new Director of Network South East believed very strongly in creating the right image so one of his first acts was to order all his stations repainted. Tilehurst and Pangbourne were both smartened up with red paint (later changed to blue) for the railings, all the woodwork and footbridge repainted and new signs erected. Another of his obsessions was timekeeping and all stations were provided with new digital clocks controlled from Derby. Unfortunately the Tilehurst one was faulty and let in rainwater so after a year or so it packed up and to date has never been repaired.

Further improvements were made to Tilehurst station with all the shrubbery cleared away and the forecourt opened to view from the road. In 1993 the board fence between the car park and the Oxford Road was removed and replaced by a chain link fence. The effect was dramatic. Vandalism and break ins to cars which had been running at 2 or 3 incidents a week dropped to about one every six months. The car park had been free from about 1982 but in 1993 control of it was handed over to a private firm and charges of 50p a day were introduced. A year later a peak rate up to 10.00 of 70p was charged. But by way of compensation the car park was paved and lit and proper spaces marked out. The car park was used for some time on Sunday mornings for car boot sales but these did not last long.

By arrangement with Reading Borough Council skips were introduced in 1993 to collect recyclable materials. There is one for glass, one for newspapers, one for cans and one for clothing for Oxfam.

While engineering work was carried out between Reading and Reading West Tilehurst became an Intercity Station on Saturdays and Sundays between 26th Feb and 13th March 1994. The Cross Country trains missed out Reading and so Tilehurst found itself with through services to such exotic destinations as Manchester, Edinburgh and Poole. In addition Thames trains ran a service from Didcot to Basingstoke to provide connections.

Tilehurst again came into its own on 24th/25th October 1993 when a bomb exploded at Reading and the station was closed. Tilehurst was used as a terminus for Intercity trains from the west and bus

services were provided to link Tilehurst with Twyford. One or two trains ran between Oxford and Newbury. By 10.00 on the 25th the west end of Reading station was opened and trains from Tilehurst shuttled into and out of platform 9. Full services were not restored until mid afternoon.

Privatisation

An even more significant set of changes took place when as a result of the 1993 Railways Act the Railways was split into a large number of free-standing businesses. This took effect on 1st April 1994. Responsibility for the track and signalling went to Railtrack, civil engineering went to TLF South East, rolling stock was owned by a number of leasing companies and Thames Trains took over local services. with passenger routes radiating from Reading to Paddington, Windsor, Gatwick, Basingstoke, Bedwyn, Worcester, Stratford on Avon, Bicester, Henley and Marlow.

The changes were mainly internal and transparent to the traveller. The first obvious sign that something had happened was when in August 1994 bridges were publicly numbered. White rectangular panels were painted on the side of bridges and their official number painted on. These numbers were simply the miles and chains from London which had always been used internally.

Railtrack got into difficulties and was re-nationalised as Network Rail. As far as the average passenger was concerned this made no difference at all. The main line services were run initially by a management buy-out and retitled Great Western Trains but they were soon taken over by First Group who re-labelled the services First Great Western and then took over Thames Trains as well. By 2016 they were all relabelled as Great Western Railway.

Bigger changes took place however with the freight services. These had now become highly specialised, the old style loose coupled trucks vanished from the scene to be replaced by specialist vehicles for carrying particular commodities, flat trucks to carry standard containers and car transporters for vehicles. New owners swept away most of the myriad of diesel locos used for freight and replaced them with the Class 66 from Canada.

The Travelling Post Offices were phased out in the early 2000s and a host of specialised vehicles for checking the track and infrastructure maintenance were introduced. It is now quite common to see trains from Germany (Deutsche Bahn) passing through Purley.

Electrification

The first stage in completely changing the character of the railway began with the remodelling of Reading Station and rebuilding many of the bridges on lines to be electrified. Purley's four overhead bridges were early targets. However High Bridge next to Winston Way and Purley Lane bridge were OK and only New Hill and Westbury Lane bridges needed to be replaced. There was considerable local opposition and steps were taken to list Westbury Lane Bridge for its heritage value but this was over-ruled by the minister.

Problems had been identified with new high containers which came in from Southampton and were travelling north. They often brushed the sides of the two low bridges so speed restrictions had to be imposed. Most of the problems had arisen from British Rail relaying track without removing the old granite chips so gradually the lines were rising.

Part of the remodelling included a new relief line between Reading West and Tilehurst which went under the two fast tracks and so allowed freight trains to access the relief lines without interfering with the main lines. As a consequence a new system of points was installed east of Tilehurst Station which could get traffic back onto the main lines.

Eventually the two bridges were completely rebuilt using the original Brunel foundations which meant no additional width for New Hill as was the footbridge at Tilehurst station where a new bridge to the east of the station was erected. The New Hill Bridge work meant that the buses could not get to the River Estate so a shuttle bus which ran via Purley Lane was set up and proved very popular to get people to the Knowsley Road stop where the buses turned around. The Westbury Lane bridge was built in a nearby field and lifted into position by a giant crane so it was completed by early January 2012 whereas the New Hill one was opened by children from the C of E School in May. All the bridges had an ugly new parapet to stop people peering over the railway.

From 2015 to 2016 ugly gantries were installed along the whole line from Reading to Didcot and eventually they were declared 'live' on 17/3/2016. This stretch had been designated as the running in line for the new electric stock supplied from Japan, but the tests were conducted at the dead of night so few people ever witnessed the new trains.

The whole scheme was several years behind schedule and the new service from London to Bristol and Cardiff is now scheduled to start in early 2019.

The first steps in erecting gantries for electrification

Lineside Features

Positions along the track are measured in miles and chains (22 yards). Thus a mile contains 80 chains. Mile posts are situated every 20 chains (quarter mile) on the north side of the up relief line. Proceeding from Tilehurst station to Pangbourne the features can be listed as follows:-

Miles	Chains	Feature
38	39	Signal north side of up relief
38	43	Loading Gauge
38	43	Signal Centre
38	44	Signal box north side
38	44	Fog hut, centre
38	45	ground frame, s side
		four aspect colour signals xx (up relief) and R41 (up main)
38	47	Tilehurst station up end
38	48	Site of GWR atc ramp (removed circa 1974)
38	52	Tilehurst station footbridge passes over
38	55	Tilehurst station down end
38	57	Site of junction between up relief and up refuge
38	58	Site of signal in centre
38	59	Junction of engine spur and down main
38	60	MP 38-3
38	60	Three aspect colour signals DR38 and DM38
38	72	Site of end of up refuge line.
38	73	Roebuck footbridge passes over
38	79	Permanent way hut to north
39	00	MP 39
39	08	Permanent way hut to south
		Marina to north
39	20	MP 39-1
39	28	Purley Park tunnel passes beneath
39	22	Site of Tilehurst distants
39	24	Site of fog hut
39	40	MP39-2
39		IRJs for DM and DR
39	46	New Hill bridge passes over
		IRJs for UM and UR
39	61	Purley Lane bridge passes over
39	63	Gangers hut on northern cutting bank with path leading to line
39	74	Purveys Lane bridge passes over

40	00	MP40
40	00	GWR Boundary marker on footpath to north
		BR aws ramp
40	02	GWR boundary marker on footpath to north
40	07	Site of Purley intermediate semaphore block signals for DM and DR (both between DR and DM)
40	06	GWR boundary marker on footpath to north
		IRJ and control box on DR and UR
40	06	3 aspect colour signals DM40 and DR40
40	11	Westbury Lane Bridge passes over
		Footpath for gangers leads from north west corner of Bridge to line level
40	07	3 aspect colour signals UR and UM
40	14	site of Purley intermediate blocks UM and UR
40	16	site of gangers hut and oil store to north
		site of gritting hopper to south
40	40	MP40-2
40	45	Fiddlers bridge over farm track
		site of GWR atc ramp
40	60	MP 40-3
		HT electric lines pass over
		gantry passes over (site of former Pangbourne distants for DM and DR)
40	63	Bridge over Sul Brook
41	00	MP 41
		playing fields to north
41	20	MP 41-1
41	21	Thames Avenue to north
41	28	Whitchurch Road bridge
41	37	Station Road bridge
41	38	Pangbourne station starts
41	40	MP 41-2

Railway Associations with Purley

Many railwaymen have made their homes in Purley including a number of fairly senior people. Sidney Newey, later to become General Manager of the Western Region and then Director of Provincial Services lived in Nursery Gardens, as did Dan Forsythe who served as Personnel Director until his retirement around 1982.

Mike Woodbridge of Cecil Aldin Drive was a Rail Freight manager at Paddington and narrowly escaped death in the Ealing train crash of 1975(?)

John Chapman also of Cecil Aldin Drive was appointed to the Transport Users Consultative Committee by the Minister of Transport in 1984 and became Deputy Chairman in 1988. This body

acts as the Government’?s watchdog on railways and represents consumer interests to British Rail. His term of office ended in August 1998.

Gerald Schofield who lived on Purley Rise served in the legal department of the GWR and the Western Region of British Railways for many years.

Ian Nash of Bourne Road worked on the line as a ganger and a welder. He was also a keen photographer, taking many photos in the area. His father who lived in Glebe Road worked all his life on the railway as a ganger.

Oswald Willey of Glebe Road also worked all his life on the railway being chief ganger for the Purley section for many years.

A further association was to be found on Purley River estate where many old railway vehicles were adapted as dwellings after the war. One in particular turned out to be a vintage broad gauge carriage and was bought by the Great Western Society at Didcot where it has been restored to working order and will form part of the demonstration broad gauge railway there.

Purvey's Railway

In the 1920s John Purvey and Sons had a yard which ran from the Oxford Road to the Railway and between what is now the Garden House and Glebe Road, they ran a road maintenance business which was mainly contracting to the County Council. They kept supplies of roadstone and other materials there as well as providing a base for their lorries and steam rollers.

Two projects came up which required the transportation of a lot of gravel. These were: the construction of the new Caversham Bridge in Reading and the building of the Purley Rise estate, ie what is now Glebe Road, Purley Rise, Westbury Lane and Beech Road. To provide this gravel a new gravel pit was dug about 100 yards from the river Thames and a light railway constructed which could transport the gravel from the pit up to the Oxford Road or down to the river to be loaded into barges from a landing stage built on the south bank.

The railway was built as a 2'0" gauge industrial railway using Decauville track which had been much favoured during the First World War for laying down temporary railways to carry ammunition to the front lines. Undoubtedly there was plenty of track and waggons going for a song in the early 1920s and it seems as if Purveys bought some from the Government. They had to negotiate a way-leave from the Great Western Railway in order to allow their trains to cross the main lines over the bridge built to carry cattle from Belleisle Farm to the pastures on the north of the railway. This was signed on 28th March 1925, although one would suspect that the railway had been there for a while before the GWR had caught up with the Purvey's.

There is no evidence that a locomotive was ever used on the line and it is assumed that the waggons were drawn by horses. The agreement with the GWR was a temporary one which expired 31st December 1926, however the contracts had been completed well before that date and the line was closed by the 24th June. The waggons and a substantial amount of track lasted until the Second World War however they were soon removed. Fragments of the track remained in place near to the river until recent times and today three posts in the river adjacent to the south bank about 200 yards upstream of the lock are made of this track. Also a bridge of the West Brook at Westbury Farm was made from a complete section of track although it has now been removed. (ref 13)

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