

## Rearsby and the Syston & Peterborough Railway.

During the first half of the nineteenth century Rearsby was a bustling and thriving community which was predominately involved with arable farming, but there was a range of livestock as well. The fields produced large crops of wheat, rye, barley, oats, potatoes, beans and turnips. The village was able to supply most of its needs from its inhabitants and there were several shops and a smithy, and different tradesmen plied their businesses mainly from home. The Melton Navigation exported produce and imported heavy goods like coal, stone, timber and lime. The turnpike from Leicester to Melton was a busy thoroughfare and apart from local traffic supported the passage of well over two thousand stage coaches each year. Several times a day teams of horses would enter the village in both directions and stop at one of three coach houses, often to change horses, and to load and unload passengers, goods and service the daily mail.

The first Rearsby bypass happened in the 1830s because the then existing route, turning down Brook Street and then along Brookside, had two dangerous bends that presented real problems for horse drawn carriages and locals alike. The diversion meant that by the late 1830s transport would travel straight through the village following the route of the A607.

The coming of the railway meant that life would change in Rearsby and the future was greatly influenced by its presence. The Syston & Peterborough railway line was planned soon after the Midland Railway Company came into being and designed to counter territorial advances by rival concerns, in this case the London & York, which materialised as the Great Northern Railway. It was built during a period of rapid expansion of the Midland Railway and provided an East West link across the Midlands.

In 1844 the proposed route was surveyed, and it became apparent that 63 separate pieces of land would have to be purchased in the parish of Rearsby in order to construct the line. Land was bought from the following landowners: Angus Williamson, Mary Kilby, the executors of John Woodhouse Simpson, Joseph Haines, John Breedon, William Ann Pochin, Wells Orton Charlton, William Benskin, John Beasby, Richard Benskin, and the rector, Nathaniel Morgan. An Act of Parliament was obtained on 30 June 1845 to build the Syston & Peterborough line, and precisely 14 months later the line was opened as far as Melton. However, although locomotives now steamed along the iron way through Rearsby's fields, the village itself was unable to benefit for another 2 years. It was in 1848 that the station was completed and opened.

Some of the earliest surviving railway stations in Leicestershire are on the Syston & Peterborough branch of the Midlands Railway. The stations along this line have always been well known among students of railway architecture for their charm and, above all, variety. Of the stations in Leicestershire, no two are alike, although Rearsby and the now demolished Asfordby were mirror images. Two architects worked on the branch: William Parsons, the Leicestershire county surveyor, and Sancton Wood, well known for his railway buildings in East Anglia. (William Parson's other designs also included Melton Station, The Theatre Royal, Leicester Goal and Belgrave Packhorse Bridge). Rearsby and Asfordby were an attractive pair of buildings, with the steeply pitched gables, decorated barge boards, and tall chimneys derived from the Victorian manner. The Contractors, Messrs Norman and Gimson, undertook to build them for £744 8s 6d each.



With the railway came the electric telegraph and improved mail services, and Rearsby's links with the outside world were further consolidated. In the 1870s Samuel Lane was postmaster. He ran the Post, Money Order and Telegraph Office and Savings Bank. Letters were received (via Leicester) at 8 a.m. and dispatched at 6 p.m. Rearsby was changing. The trend in farming moved from arable to pastoral. Leicestershire industries were developing rapidly and it was increasingly normal for villagers to make use of improved transportation to earn their living outwith the village.

The need for stage coaches declined. Figures for Rearsby Station show that the yearly average bookings from 1872 to 1880 on the railway averaged around ten thousand passenger bookings while the number stage coaches declined to under 500. As a comparison in the same period Melton Mowbray Station averaged sixty thousand bookings and ten thousand coaches. These figures show the popularity of Melton Mowbray at this time when it was a top attraction for the rich and famous to partake in fox hunting in the surrounding area.

Rearsby was a tight-knit and busy community early in the twentieth century, and an expression of the community feeling was its approach to the building of the village hall in 1924, which was funded mainly by money raised through village events. The popularity of excursions that were first championed by Thomas Cook in the late nineteenth century grew and grew. The village people began to get about more. They went to the Syston and Leicester shows. A group took a day-trip to Hunstanton in 1905, leaving at 5 a.m. and not getting home until midnight. Some families spent holidays at Yarmouth or Cleethorpes. Today we look upon these excursions and travel as being straightforward and routine but when you consider in that era there was no electricity and no mains water it puts early travel into context. The day trip to Hunstanton meant getting to and from Rearsby Station and returning home in total darkness...The excellent rail service early in the century (some 33 passenger trains passed through Rearsby each weekday in 1911) helped to expand people's horizons. More villagers began to work outside the village, several commuting daily to Leicester.

The bus service, begun by W. Smith of Thurmaston in 1924, encouraged this trend. In fact, during the General Strike of 1926 when the trains ceased to run, the bus attracted a large number of commuters whom the railway never managed to entice back. Road transport grew. By 1931, the level of traffic flowing through Rearsby reached a level where the residents first started making representations for a second Rearsby bypass to be built. However the lack of funding and resources available meant that such a major project was not feasible at the time.

With the increase of road traffic came the decline of the railway. Rearsby was never a goods station and passenger traffic became less and less. The Station Master role at Rearsby Station became hard

to justify and from c1928 there were joint Station Masters of Rearsby and Brooksby Stations. Inevitably, due to lack of passengers, Rearsby Station closed in 1951 prior to the fall of the Beeching axe.

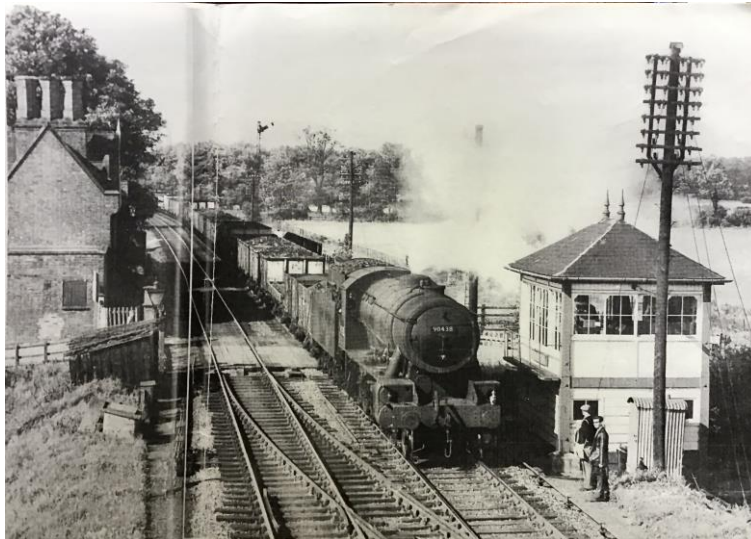
Records show that there are records of six Station Masters at Rearsby between its inception in 1848 and 1928, with the first master being in place for forty years.

- Thomas Sharp ca. 1849 - 1889
- William Sugars 1889 - 1895 (afterwards station master at Tibshelf)
- A.W. Kingdom 1895 - 1897 (formerly station master at Little Eaton)
- John Lewis Shannon 1897 - 1900 (afterwards station master at Ashwell, Kegworth, assistant station master at Derby, then station master at Nottingham, Sheffield and finally London St Pancras)
- Frederick H. Shelton 1900 - ca. 1911
- M. Shilion ca. 1914 - 1928

From its early days to 1879 the Syston & Peterborough Railway settled down to a fairly uneventful existence as a useful but by no means over busy cross country route, important to the towns and villages it served but not generating huge amounts of traffic. In 1879 all changed when the Melton to Manton section found itself as part of the London to Scotland main line that now included the incredible Harringworth Viaduct. This avoided the major mainline bottleneck that Leicester had become. The two extremities of the Syston and Peterborough suffered by comparison but remained an important East West route to the extent that they escaped the Beeching cut. Lots of smaller stations were closed and they have largely retained their ordinal character.

Although Rearsby Station closed in 1951, the Syston & Peterborough railway lives on. A regular passenger train service remains between the major towns en route, and it is the link between Birmingham and Stansted Airports. The railway is also becoming increasingly more important for freight traffic. The section through to Melton Mowbray is also quite often used for diverting main line traffic at weekends so that maintenance can be carried out. An added bonus for Rearsby villagers is that modern excursion steam trains travelling from London to the North are sometimes routed over the Harringworth Viaduct and onwards through Melton and Rearsby. Locals can witness classic steam locomotives of a past generation trundling through the village as they did in times gone by.....

Locomotive 8F 'WD' 2-8-0 No 90438 steams through the closed Rearsby Station in 1962. It was one of 935 Austerity Class engines built for the Army and was scrapped in 1965 at Drapers of Hull. Note the signal box is still in place as are the crossover rails and points that once brought Melton bound trains onto the station platform.



**Gordon Sobey**