

# The Railway That Never Was

The REV. S.J. STREEK discovers why Holmfirth was always the end of the line...and why folk there should be thankful today!

During the time when Britain was madly tearing up her railways one of the lines broken up was the branch line from Huddersfield to Holmfirth. Built to be an artery affording a two-way connection with the rest of the country it was highly valued until 'personal transport' came within reach virtually of everyone. Then it was no longer wanted.

Little evidence of it now remains, or of the station and its hotel. Newcomers to the valley ('comers-in') will never suspect that we once had that link with our "beyond"; but how many locals know that eighty years ago Holmfirth UDC together with local manufacturers and "the larger tradesmen" were putting up a strategic fight to get their line extended first to Holmbridge, then "through the hill" to Stalybridge, which would have given them a through line to Manchester and Liverpool, important to textile manufacturers?

In the documentation of this struggle a local committee plays an important role. Formed to conduct negotiations, it researched the project thoroughly before asking the directors of the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway Company to receive a deputation. Many such proposals were being submitted to railway companies at that time and not surprisingly they refused to meet the Holmfirth deputation. The committee drew up a statement, which was a detailed argument for the case. They had it printed and widely circulated.

The Clerk to the Holmfirth council issued a circular letter inviting support. It was an invitation to meet the committee for a full discussion. In it, he stated that the L & Y Directors "would neither see a deputation nor could they see their way to constructing the proposed line"; but they had "given instructions for the preparation of plans for improving accommodation at Holmfirth Station", about which the committee had complained in passing.

The statement recalls that "Powers were originally obtained to take the existing line to Holmbridge", but that the intention was defeated "because of

the opposition of local landowners, manufacturers and tradesmen".

Some directors of L & Y seemed to favour the project. One went so far as to observe that "if the line had been taken to Holmbridge in 1851, it would before 1873 have been through the hill" (i.e. extended to Stalybridge). How much do we owe to that original opposition. The preservation of the Valley's natural features and the deflection of spoilation by industrial development is impressed on one when comparing it with its sister valley of the Colne, now highly industrialised as a result of its through line to Manchester.

As far back as 1881, the company had been urged to extend their line through the hill, for which the local committee spent much time collecting information. A careful survey was made under their direction and at their expense, but on a change in the company's directorship (a drastic change) the whole project had been shelved. In 1896 however, in the opinion of the committee, circumstances had "changed for the better in several ways".

These included lower interest rates favouring the company on its outlay; increase of traffic (detailed) and improved rolling stock. Nor was the committee "slow to play off one railway company against another in order to convince the L & Y that the advantage lay with them. It made a good case for showing how the project could help to integrate the surrounding system, gather and channel more traffic, provide an alternative and preferable route for much of that traffic, and in particular "improve the position of your company in dealing with the output of the South Yorks coal field".

Local traffic was dealt with in a separate section and included detailed comparisons of the population figures and rateable values in the Holmfirth area and upper Colne Valley. These showed the former to have been far more prosperous of the two until the Colne had the advantage of a through-line railway. Then their fortunes changed round completely, the one advancing, the other declining. Their argument was that an extended line would revitalise the valley.



But now comes the touch of local pride, for the statement continues: "Holmfirth has lost none of its natural advantages. At present it has a better supply of suitable water for manufacturing purposes than perhaps any other valley in the West Riding. And Holmfirth men have not lost their skill in the industry. In nearly every mill in Huddersfield, in the Colne Valley or the heavy woollen district, there will be found in positions of responsibility, as foremen, managers or masters men from Holmfirth. There are many also in Halifax, Bradford and Leeds, and there are some in almost every place where woollen cloth is made".

Their final attempt to win the company's approval was to assert that "the prosperity of other railway companies in the area (was) at the expense of the L & Y, a defect which would immediately be rectified by the proposed extension".

But it was not to be. Possibly they pushed their case a little too hard. They may also have damaged it by letting it be known that they had approached the Great Northern Company who at the time were developing their new station in Manchester at very great cost.

So we never had the line through Holmbridge, but neither had we the shame and dereliction of a dismantled line nor all the grime that follows a railway, nor the foreign industry. True, the mills are thinner on the ground than formerly, as is the case throughout the Yorkshire textile area. But having escaped one source of spoilation, is the valley succumbing to another — that of dense overbuilding with housing in a style alien to the valley? ■