

The evolution of Barby, Crick and Kilsby, 1750-1900 (Part 3)

Continuing our exploration of the factors affecting social growth and development in our local villages, we turn our attention in this issue to the arrival of rail transport, and its competition with the turnpike roads and canals.

In 1821 an Act was passed for the Stockton and Darlington Railway. It was the distant tolling of a bell destined to ring in change throughout Britain – and nowhere was more affected than Rugby and Kilsby. By 1831 plans were afoot to construct a railway from London to Birmingham, which provoked a frightened response from the turnpike owners:

Northampton Mercury – 5th February 1831

A Meeting of the Trustees of the Turnpike Road from Dunchurch to Hillmorton in Warwickshire to Duston Northamptonshire will be held at the Fox and Hounds, at Harleston, Northamptonshire, on 14th February, to consider objecting to the projected Railway from London to Birmingham and adopting such measures as may appear expedient — Also of considering the best mode of paying off the sum of £1200, secured by mortgage of the Tolls arising on the said Road, the same having been called in.

In the 1820s, the Trustees of the Northampton-Dunchurch Turnpike had taken out a mortgage of £1200 on the turnpike tolls – probably to cover the unforeseen costs of macadamising, which they had been forced to do in order to compete with the canals. In 1831 this mortgage was suddenly called in by the lenders (fearing the demise of the toll road system due to the increasing threats from canals and railroads, and realising that unless they foreclosed the mortgage they would lose their money).

Livestock transport via canal and railway

The rising competition between turnpike, canal and railway can be judged from reports such as these:

Northampton Mercury - Saturday 24 July 1847

A truck, carrying a bull to the show, took fire in consequence of a cinder from the engine falling upon straw litter that had been placed in the box, contrary to the rules. The accident occurred in Kilsby Tunnel. The poor animal was roasted alive, and a boy in the truck narrowly escaped the same fate.

Leicester Journal - 4 April 1851

THE GRAND JUNCTION CANAL COMPANY, adding to their business the conveyance of cattle to London, are prepared to convey sheep, lambs, swine and calves from the wharves and loading-places on the Grand Union Canal to London or the neighbourhood. Stock will be taken on board the boats at any canal wharves, and at the stations of the Midland Railway. The Grand Junction Canal Company guarantee the safe delivery of cattle thus conveyed, charges for conveyance far below the cost of driving by road, while the time for the canal journey will be under a third of that for driving.

Northampton Mercury - Saturday 28 August 1852

On Wednesday morning, a luggage train entered Kilsby tunnel on its way to London. Some beast trucks were attached, and one of the beasts got out of a truck. Three or four trucks passed over it and cut it in several pieces.

The loser in this battle was the turnpike roads – priced out by cheaper and faster transport via canal and rail, the income from the turnpikes steadily dwindled after the 1840s, and in the 1870s the Turnpike Trusts were dissolved and their tollgates and fencing were sold at auction, mostly to local farmers.

The battle for livestock transport between canal and railway continued for some time, but the canal continued to offer the best solution. The effects were felt in terms of reduced numbers of sheep and cattle travelling by road – and village inns that had prospered from drovers' traffic began to suffer.

The social effect of railways

Access to railway stations provided villagers with rapid and cheap access to towns and cities. In general, the effect of this on village shops and businesses was positive; exposure to new fashions led to demand for all kinds of goods, and the number of village shops increased significantly during the mid-1800s – particularly in Crick, which had the double benefit of easy canal access and a choice of two nearby railway stations, initially at Welton and subsequently at Crick and Kilsby station.

Between 1835 and 1838, the construction of Kilsby railway tunnel had a massive effect on Kilsby village. Over 1250 navvies were quartered in and around the village, and alehouses and shops flourished. The immediate effect was to create scores of lodging-houses through the village, and every available room became a source of income – but this was short-lived, and by the 1840s the railway was running through the tunnel, but Kilsby itself had no station. It was not until the opening of the Northampton line in the 1870s that Kilsby finally gained access to the railway, via Crick and Kilsby Station at the A5/A428 junction. In retrospect, we can see that Kilsby failed to capitalise on its early links with the railway.

Excursion trips became increasingly popular during the later 1800s – special trains were organised to horse-race meetings and other events, and travel to seaside destinations became a popular function for church and chapel outings. For village folk, such occasions provided much-needed variety from the close routine of village life.

The decision to develop Rugby into a major railway junction had far-reaching effects. From a population of 1500 in 1800, Rugby doubled in size every twenty years, reaching 25,000 by 1921. This led to Rugby becoming an industrial centre, and by the early 1900s several major electrical and mechanical engineering works were based in the town.

This in turn led, in the period 1910-1930, to many skilled farm-labourers being attracted to work in the new factories by the offer of better pay; this did not go down well with the local farmers, who lost many of their most reliable workers – and Kilsby was certainly one community in which this effect was keenly felt.

Persistence of weavers in Crick

The parish registers reveal that many local communities of cottage-based weavers lost their livelihoods in the 1790s, undercut by the new factories of the Industrial Revolution. In Kilsby, for example, the registers record dozens of pauper deaths among weavers in the period 1790-1810.

Strangely, the census returns show that there was still a large community of weavers in Crick in the late 1800s – somehow, they had escaped the fate that destroyed the similar communities in Barby and Kilsby a century earlier.

There is no obvious explanation for this anomaly – the most likely interpretation is, that Crick had managed to flourish thanks to its links by road and canal and rail, and that the relative affluence of the village somehow acted to support this community of artisans.

Summary

Over the last three issues, I have used newspaper reports as a major tool for exploring the different ways in which social growth occurred in Barby, Crick and Kilsby during the period from the mid-1700s to the early 1900s. It is clear that study of these early news media is a valuable tool for social research – and I have no doubt that other historians will carry out similar studies on their local communities in years to come.

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