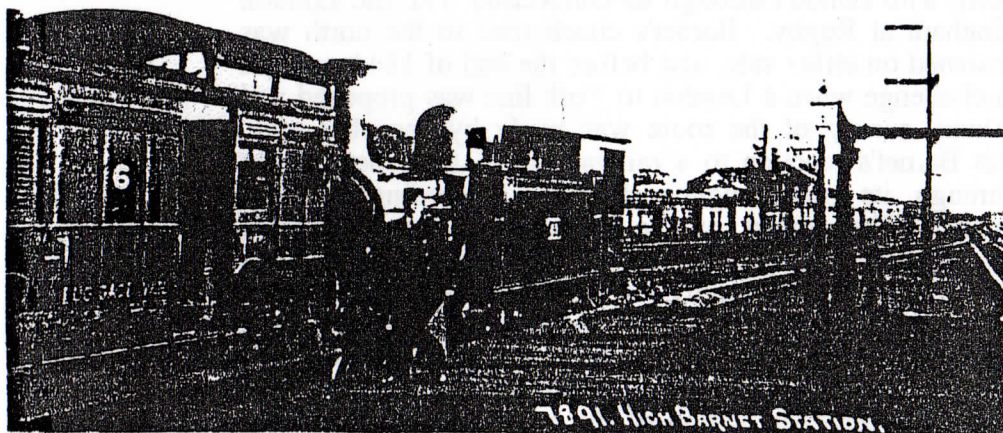


Barnet & District Local History Society

HOW BARNET GOT ITS RAILWAYS

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M.A. Rose

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At the beginning of the 19th century Chipping Barnet was well satisfied with life. The scientific improvement of roads and the development of coaching had put the town at the end of the first stage of 10 miles which could be reached by coaches coming out of London on the road to the north. As a result inns and taverns jostled each other along the top of the Hill and the rest of the High Street, ready to offer guests refreshment and lodging, while 800 horses kept grooms and ostlers busy and provided the neighbouring farmers with manure which assured the bumper crops of hay needed in the stables. So when in 1826 Telford's new road came into use, bringing Barnet Hill up on an embankment in a straighter line and on a less steep gradient, all those in the town connected with the coaching business in the Whetstone & Highgate Turnpike Trust which had financed the building of the road looked forward to a good return on their shares. News of an

experiment made in the previous year between Stockton and Darlington with a form of locomotion powered by steam had made little impression on affluent Barnet.

It was in 1838, when steam locomotion came south, that the blow fell. In this year the London to Birmingham railway was opened with its splendid terminus at Euston, and at once the tolls which the Turnpike Trust collected at Whetstone fell from £7,530 to £1,300. It was a speedy revelation of what sort of competition the horse-drawn coach now had to face. By 1843 an Eastern Counties railway was running from Shoreditch to Colchester and in the next year the Midland railway linked the Midlands and parts of the north with London through its connection with the London to Birmingham at Rugby. Barnet's coach road to the north was now threatened on either side, and before the end of 1844 came, a head-on challenge when a London to York line was proposed and a preliminary survey of the route was made by Joseph Locke. What was Barnet's reaction to a railway which must necessarily come through its own neighbourhood? According to S.H. Widdicombe, "The advent of the railway ... was vigorously opposed, and consequently it was not taken as near the old town as it might have been". Naturally enough there must have been people who felt that if two railways at some distance had already done so much damage to the profitable horse traffic through the town, another railway in the vicinity would have completely fatal effects. Yet a fresh examination of the evidence demands some modification of this view.

In the first place, the fact that the line was sited away from the town seems to have been a straightforward question of engineering. Trains leaving London would have a steep climb as far as Potters Bar so any unnecessary gradients were to be avoided. In Joseph Locke's own words, "From London to Hitchin where the works are heavy, I have been influenced almost entirely by Engineering considerations, and have endeavoured to obtain a line best adapted to the surface of the country".

In the second place there is evidence that a considerable body of opinion in Barnet was in favour of having a link with the new railway system. The Directors of the London to York Railway Company found six willing witnesses to testify in favour of their project before a Select Committee of the House of Commons in 1845; their views on this subject are noteworthy. The men concerned were, Captain Strong, a farmer of Hadley, William Baldock, a printer, John Hopwell, a grocer, John Duckworth, an

agent and surveyor, James Buckland, an ironmonger, and the Reverend John Edward Kemp, curate of Chipping Barnet Parish Church, a varied and representative group. Their testimony showed that the cost of transport between Barnet and London had created many problems. For one thing, it discouraged new residents from coming into the town, so that the value of property there had greatly depreciated. Further, it put up the cost of goods which shopkeepers had to fetch from town and the increase which it entailed on the price of coal inflicted a heavy burden of the poor. But the biggest difficulty was being encountered by the local farmers who, because of the decline in the number of coach horses now kept in Barnet (only 40), were forced to send their hay to the cattle market at Smithfield and to bring back the manure they needed from London, both journeys adding greatly to their costs. All the witnesses were therefore convinced that the advent of an accessible, cheap mode of transport by rail would bring a speedy solution of their problems. Rather naturally, the prospect of all the manure journeying back to Barnet by train rather disturbed the members of the Select Committee who felt dubious about the witnesses' grasp of the hard facts of railway travel. Indeed this doubt was confirmed in 1846 when Captain Strong was recalled to give testimony before a Select Committee of the House of Lords; he then revealed that he looked forward to putting his hay carts with their horses and drivers all into railway trucks to be transported to Kings Cross and for his carts full of manure, similarly accompanied, to be brought back to Barnet. However, he had remarked in 1845, with disarming candour, "I am not accustomed to Railroads."

Another scheme to interest the railway-minded people of Barnet was brought forward in 1845 by the Eastern Counties Railway Company; it was to build a branch line to Barnet from the Eastern Railway's station at Tottenham. But as this Bill was thrown out before it reached the Select Committee, no evidence was taken as to what Barnet folk thought about it.

Barnet had, however, something more local and exciting to think about. One of the strongest arguments in support of the view that many of its inhabitants favoured the advent of a railway is that Barnet produced a plan of its own for putting itself on the railway map.

The Barnet & North London Metropolitan Junction Railway published its prospectus at the beginning of September, 1845. On its Provisional Committee was Sir Henry Richardson, Lord of the

Manor of Barnet (then residing near Southampton) together with a large number of other gentlemen many of whom were already Directors of various regional railway lines. The capital of the proposed line was given as £400,000 to be subscribed in 20,000 shares of £20 each. The plan was to run a railway from Barnet along the valley of the river Brent as far as the Decoy Farm (near Brent Street, Hendon) where it would be joined by a line coming west from Tottenham on the Eastern Counties Railway through Stamford Hill, Highgate and Golders Green; from this junction the line would continue south through Neasden to join the London to Birmingham line at Willesden. Thus, it was declared:- *"The ancient, populous and once flourishing town of Barnet will now have a railway communication of its own, without depending upon the caprice or uncertain good nature of any company who may hold out the prospect of a branch in future times from some of the trunk lines now contemplated."*

Interest in this scheme was quickly aroused and, at the signed request of numerous Barnet residents, a public meeting to discuss the proposal was advertised and duly held on 17th September 1845 at the Victoria Hall in Union Street. Here the Chairman of the new Company, the Hon. F.H.F. Berkeley, M.P., together with his Deputy Chairman and Civil Engineer, explained the plans for the proposed line so convincingly that the meeting ended by carrying a resolution to petition Parliament in favour of the scheme, asserting that it:- *will afford to the town greater advantages than any line of railway hitherto proposed to come into the vicinity of Barnet, it being the only one which will afford to the residents of the town the advantage of a station, and that it deserves the support of the inhabitants, and all others having an interest in Barnet and its vicinity."*

Considerable opposition to such views was, however, expressed at a turbulent meeting held at the Queens Head Inn in Finchley on 1st November. Here the scheme was denounced as "nothing but a job" and "trick on the public intended to put money into the hands of the projectors" and a good deal of scorn was poured on the circuitous nature of the proposed route - "Why don't you go round to London by the moon?". Some of the objections came understandably from shareholders in the Turnpike Trust. Yet even at the end of this noisy occasion a motion to oppose the scheme was lost, to the vociferous applause of the friends of the line.

But the Barnet & North Metropolitan Junction Railway never

HOW BARNET GOT ITS RAILWAYS References :-

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10. The Railways in Finchley. G.F.A. Wilmot. Page 7.
11. The Barnet Press 25th January 1862. Barnet Museum.
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15. H.C.R.O. Minutes of Evidence. H.C. vol. 19 and Plans.
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17. H.L.R.O. Minutes of Evidence. H.C. vol.9, G.N.R. (Additional Powers) Bill
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19. Annals of the Parish & Township of Chipping Barnet. B.R. Leftwich, page 126.
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A CONJECTURAL MAP OF THE FIRST BARNET & NORTH METROPOLITAN JUNCTION RAILWAY PLAN 1845

Based on information and the following details of
distances given in the Prospectus:-

Barnet to Euston Station, 15 miles.
 Main Line from junction at Tottenham to London &
 Birmingham Railway, 11 miles.
 Branch line to Barnet, 4½ miles.
 From junctions with Birmingham Railway to Chipping
 Barnet, 9½ miles.
 From the Decoy (near Brent Street, Hendon on proposed
 Railway to Northern & Eastern Counties Railway by
 Stamford Hill, 6¾ miles.

Note: The Decoy was a farm.

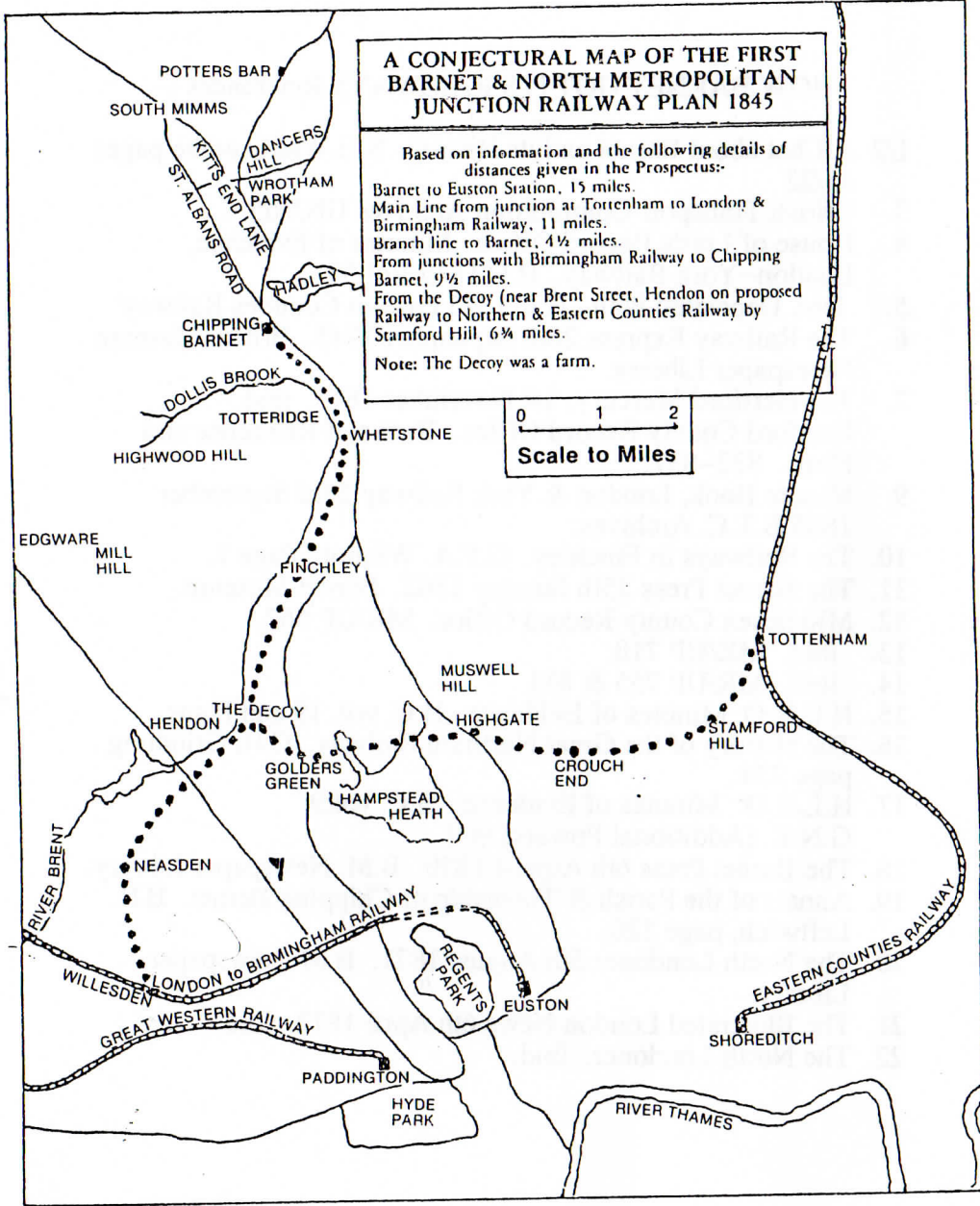
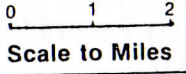


Fig.1

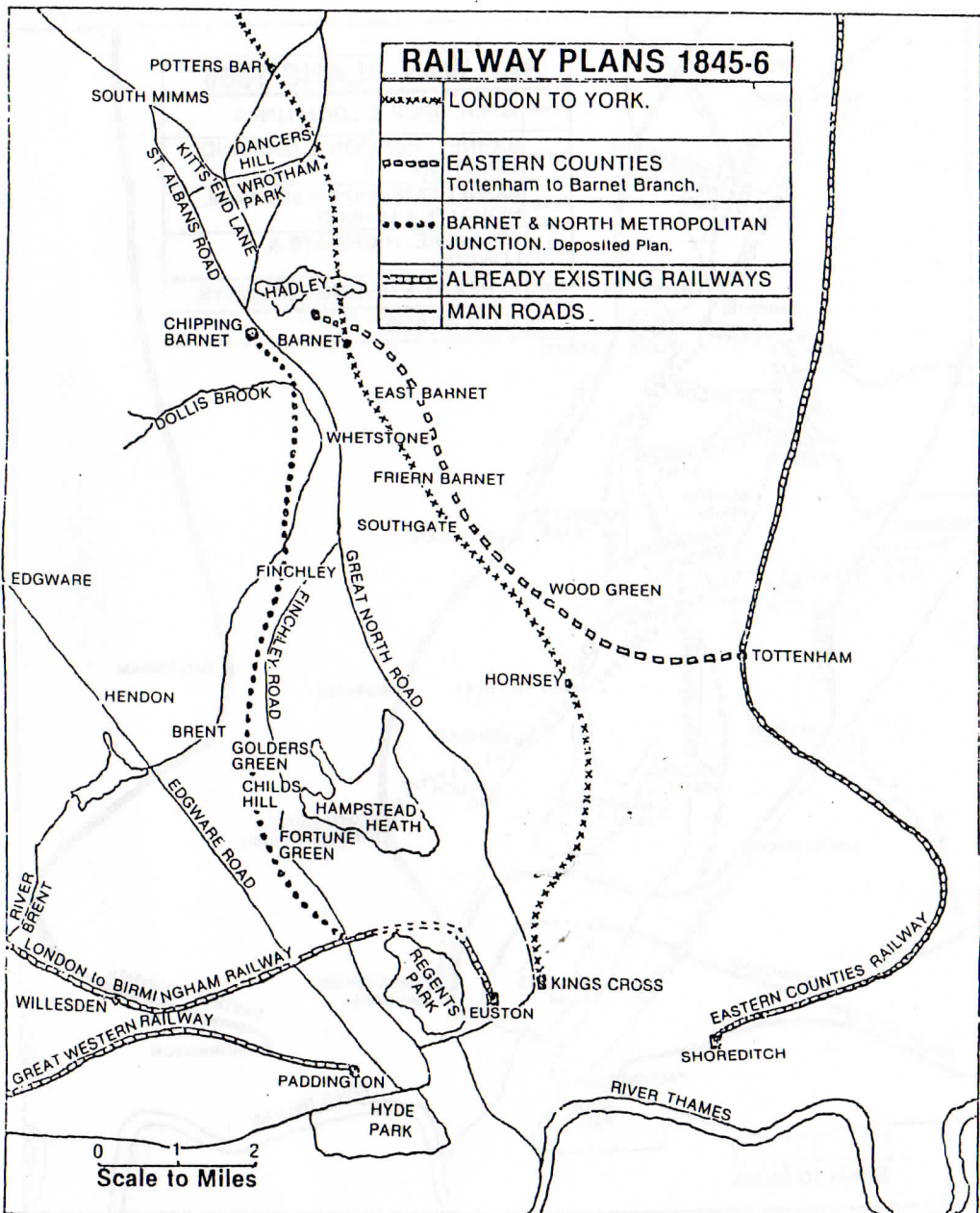


Fig.2

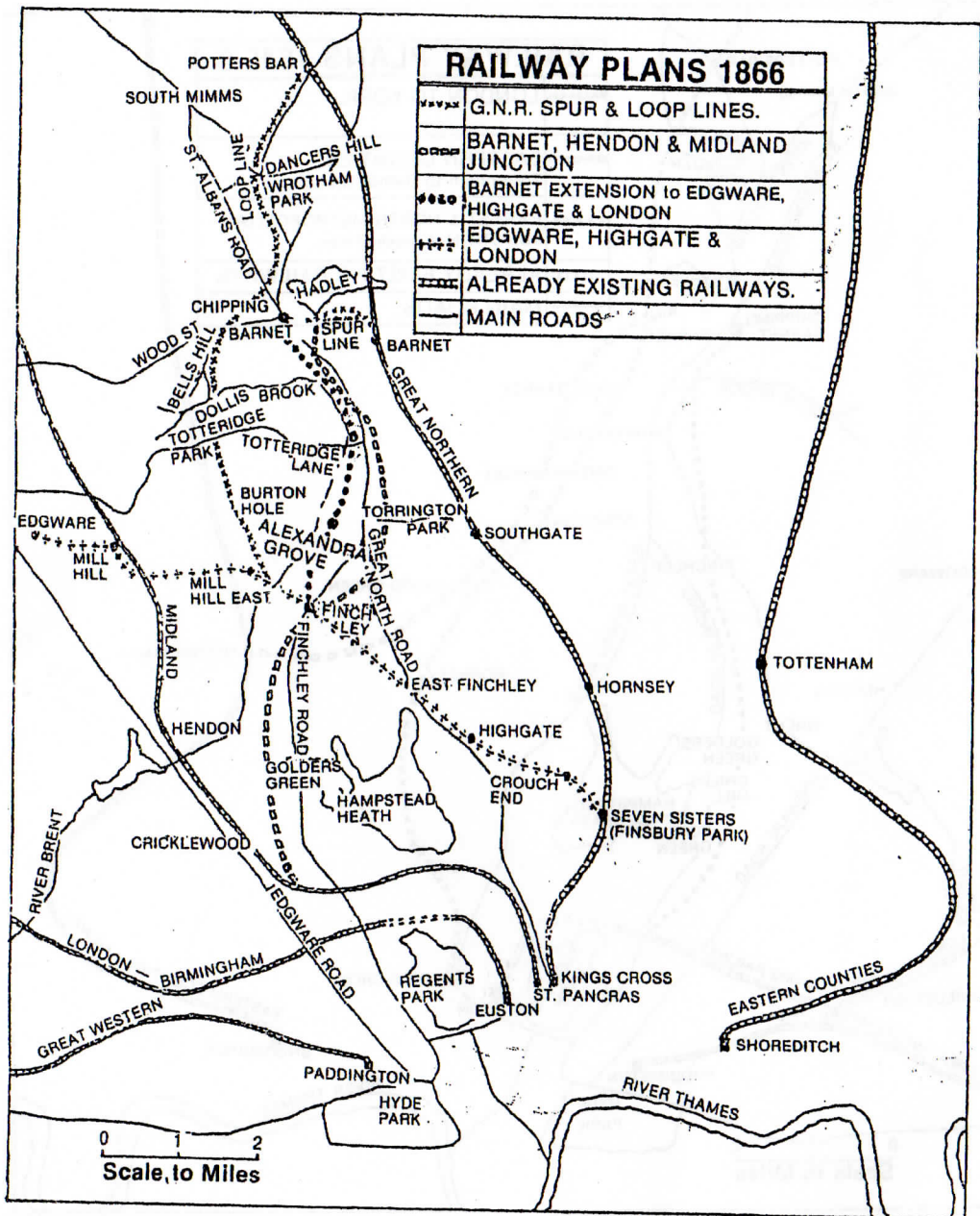


Fig.3