

WAS KINGSTON UPON THAMES ANTI-RAILWAY IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY? A NOTE ON THE POSSIBLE ORIGIN OF THE TRADITION.

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ABSTRACT

The tradition of Kingston Council's opposition to the London and Southampton Railway, that led to it being routed through Surbiton in the early 1830s, was started by William Downing Biden in 1852. Shaan Butters attributed the opposition to Lord Cottenham who wished to safeguard his estates in Wimbledon, through which the original route was planned. Evidence recently was found that in 1843-1844, about eight years after the railway came to Surbiton, Kingston Council actively did oppose a plan by the embryo Middlesex and Surrey Grand Junction Railway Company for a line that would pass through the town. This posed the question whether the tradition arose because Biden used unreliable hearsay as his source and confused events of the early 1830s with those of the early 1840s?

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INTRODUCTION

Shaan Butters, 2013, reported a tradition that Kingston was anti-railway in the 1830s, and fought off the idea of a station of the new London and Southampton Railway in, or nearer to, the town, with a consequence that the line was routed through Surbiton and a station was installed there. She attributed the tradition to Biden's publication of 1852, which thereafter became the accepted version of events, repeated by Merryweather, 1887, and Richardson, 1888.¹ Biden, who said that his book was "*compiled from the most authentic documents*", gave no references for the part on Surbiton.² Shaan Butters, concluded that Charles Pepys, later Lord Cottenham, Solicitor General in 1834, was more likely to have been influential in opposing the original route because it ran through his Wimbledon estates. Furthermore, she noted that Kingston Council's Minute Book was missing for the crucial period ending September 1831 to December 1834 when the London and Southampton Railway Company's plans were drawn up and discussed. Moreover, the Surrey Comet newspaper was not yet in existence to record

public opinion.³ Thus, in her view, as original records were not available for research on the tradition, its origin could not be explored further.

RESEARCH

A Council Minute Book that covered some of 1834 to 1859 was examined for evidence of Kingston Council's attitudes to railways after the station at New Kingston [modern-day Surbiton] opened in May 1838. The first relevant entry was on 4 December 1843, when it was recorded that there was a plan for a new railway, from the Birmingham line to the Dover and Brighton line at Merstham, which would pass through the town of Kingston. The whole of the Council set itself up as a committee to take the subject into consideration and to watch the proceedings.⁴

The route of the new railway was proposed by the embryo Middlesex and Surrey Grand Junction Railway Company. The Railway Times, in 1843, provided more information about the route, as follows. *"The main line continues its course from Worton Lane, Isleworth, follows the bend of the millstream and passing through the west of Twickenham, near Fullwell Lodge, leaves Teddington to the east, and skirting Bushy Park at the Upper Lodge, passes the park entrance and the entrance of the Grand Avenue to Hampton Court. From this important place the line is carried over the Thames below Kingston Bridge, sweeping round the town to the east, and crosses the South Western Railway at the Kingston Station, proceeding to Kingston Common, near Tolworth Court, skirting Ewell, to the west and Epsom to the east, crosses Warren Farm. From that place, it proceeds in a serpentine direction to Garratt's, Read's Rest, Rumbow Castle and Rease's Farm and terminates at the southern extremity of the town of Merstham, joining there the London and Brighton Railway."*⁵

On 5 January 1844, the Minute Book recorded that a circular of the provisional company indicated that the line would go along the towing path of the Thames and that the consent of the Council, as owners of the towing path, and as Lords of the Manor, would be needed for this. Accordingly, it was resolved that a letter should be written to the secretary of the provisional company pointing this out. On 22 January 1844, it was recorded that the proposed line of a new railway bridge would be injurious to the interests of Kingston Bridge. In the light of this, the Town Clerk was asked to write to

Surrey County Members of Parliament asking them to oppose the intended Bill for an enabling Act.

On 28 February 1844, it was recorded that there was a Bill before the House of Commons for a branch railway from Epsom to the South Western Railway. It was agreed that a committee should be set up to get the proposed line diverted so as to form the junction with Kingston Station [on the site of today's Surbiton Station] instead of at Norbiton Common, as was proposed. On 30 October 1845 it was recorded that the Kingston Bridge issue was resolved and that the Council approved the line of the railway that was shown on a plan, which unfortunately was not found. Furthermore, it was recorded that thanks were due to the provisional committee and directors of the intended railway company for the attention and courtesy that they had shown on behalf of the inhabitants of the town in altering the intended line of the railway. It appeared that the planned new line came to nothing and it was not until 1863 that a railway came into the old town of Kingston.⁶

CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSION

This brief episode in Kingston's history demonstrated that while earlier it may not have been anti-railway, in 1843-1844, the Council actively did oppose a railway line that would require a new bridge across the Thames which "*would be injurious to the interests of Kingston Bridge*" and persuaded the provisional committee and directors of the Middlesex and Surrey Grand Junction Railway Company to alter the proposed line of the railway through the town. As this happened only about eight years before Biden's book was published, it was tempting to think that this was in his mind when he wrote that the directors of the railway "*compelled by the opposition of the town of Kingston*", diverted their intended line and cut through the hill at Surbiton.⁷ In other words, it was possible that Biden, writing in 1852, mistakenly may have attributed the diversion of the London and Southampton Railway line, in the early 1830s, to Kingston Council after hearing that it had been successful in its opposition to the railway proposal of the early 1840s. John Tosh cautioned, "*Where a document takes the form of a report of what has been seen, heard or said, we need to ask whether the writer was in a position to give a faithful account. Was he or she actually present and in a tranquil and attentive frame of mind? If the information was learned at second hand, was it anything more than*

gossip?”⁸ Biden would have been aged fourteen at the time of the London and Southampton Railway Act of 1834 and was most unlikely to have been privy to any of the relevant deliberations.⁹ How did he learn the version of past events that led to his statement in his book of 1852; and from whom, or from what written, but un-referenced, record? Did the tradition arise because Biden used unreliable hearsay as his source?

NOTES

¹ Shaan Butters, 2013, *That famous place. A history of Kingston upon Thames*, Kingston, Kingston University Press, pp. 210-215. William Downing Biden, 1852, *The history and antiquities of the ancient and royal town of Kingston-upon-Thames*, Kingston, William Lindsey, pp. 102-103. Frederick Somner Merryweather, 1887, *Half a century of Kingston History*, Kingston, G. Phillipson. p. 5. Rowley W. C. Richardson, 1888, *Surbiton. Thirty two years of local self-government, 1855-1887*, Surbiton, Bull & Sons.

² Biden, 1852, frontispiece.

³ Butters, 2013, pp. 210-211. An Act for making a railway from London to Southampton, 25 July 1834 [Local Acts, 4&5 William IV, 1834, Volume 3, Cap. 88. National Archives, B 168] stated, at Clause XII, Certain lands not to be taken without consent, includes “*the cottages and garden of Charles Christopher Pepys, occupied by Edward Giles and George Heath, situate in the Parish of Wimbledon*”.

⁴ Kingston Council Minute Book, KB1/6, 1834-1859.
http://www.kingston.gov.uk/info/200239/museum_and_history_centre/548/visit_kingston_history_centre

⁵ The Railway Times, 1843, Volume 6, page 1278, downloaded from play.google.com, 3 June 2016.

⁶ Kingston Council Minute Book, KB1/6, 1834-1859. Butters, 2013, p. 215.

⁷ Biden, 1852, p.103.

⁸ John Tosh, 2006, *The pursuit of history*, Harlow, Pearson, pp. 96-97.

⁹ 1851 Census, Kingston upon Thames. Sourced through “Ancestry”.
<http://home.ancestry.co.uk> See note 3.