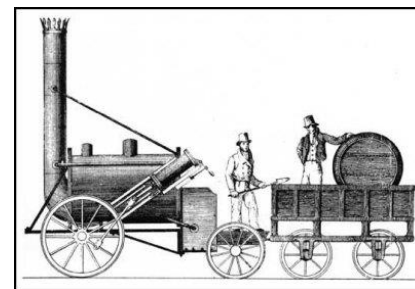

Mike Royden's Local History Pages

'What made the development of the Liverpool & Manchester Railway possible?'

Neville King

Introduction

On the 15th September 1830 the first true passenger* train steamed from Liverpool to Manchester to inaugurate what was to become an extensive network of railways all over Britain and be a development adopted all over the world within a very short time. It was also to be the occasion of the first accident on Britain's railways with the death of William Huskisson, MP for Liverpool, under the wheels of the 'Rocket' - a foretaste of things to come.



Much has been written about the construction of the railway, the trials at Rainhill, and that inaugural day with the presence of the Prime Minister, the Duke of Wellington, and Fanny Kemble, a famous actress of the day. But what had happened during the years before in Liverpool and South west Lancashire to make this area suitable for such a bold and costly 'experiment'? To answer this question, we must look at the preceding hundred years in terms of political and economic development, geographic location, the attraction of entrepreneurs, who became men of great wealth, and the growth in population in terms of the 'working classes' who were needed to sustain this development.

18th century growth of trade & population

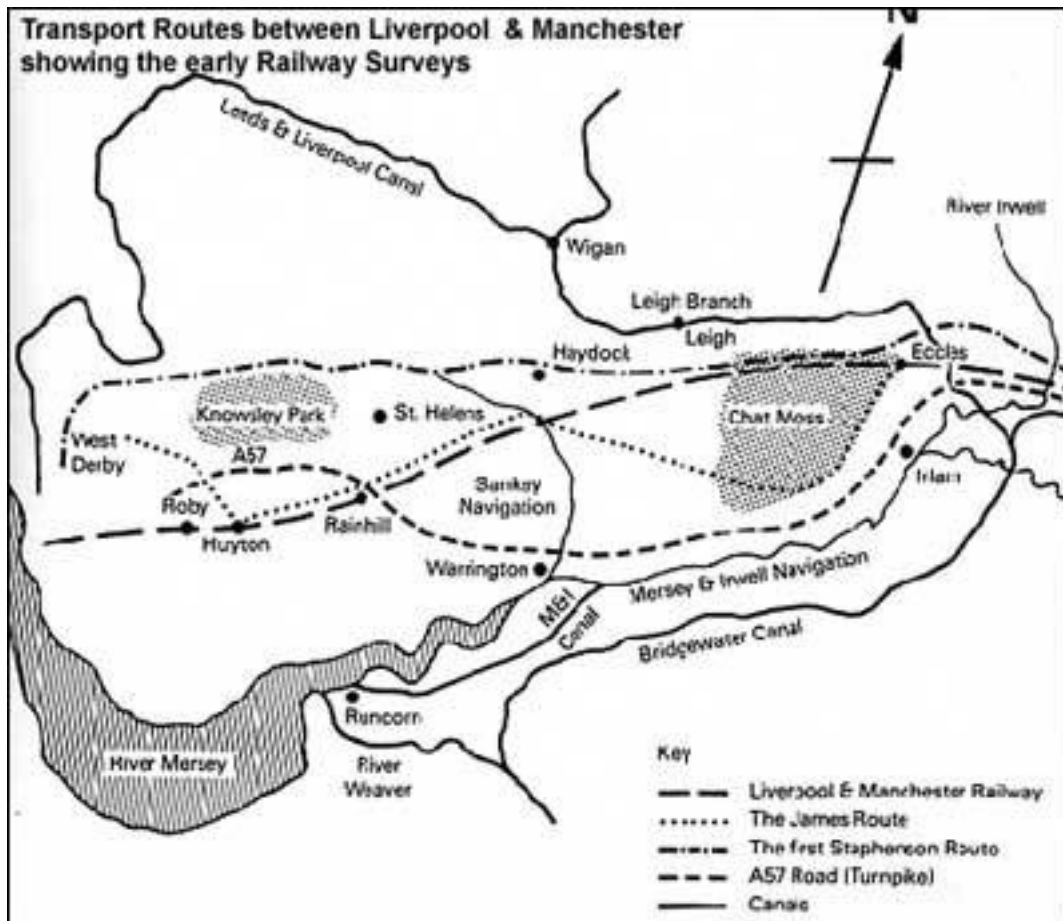
From the granting of its charter in 1207 up until the beginning of the 18th century, 500 years later, Liverpool was a small town of less than 2000 people located on the banks of the Mersey and 'the pool'. By 1700 it had already developed small industries such as shipbuilding, salt boiling, sugar refining and fishing but its prime asset was its location on the Mersey which enabled Liverpool to develop trade with Ireland and the west coast of Britain.

However, the great leap forward came with the development of the 'triangle' trade - manufactured goods to Africa; slaves to the West Indies and America; sugar, rum and, eventually, cotton to Liverpool. It is generally recognised Liverpool became involved in the slave trade around 1715 and from this point the population increased dramatically. In 1708 the number has been estimated at 7,000; by 1766 at 30,000; by 1800 at 80,000, and by the eve of the railway age the population was an incredible 200,000.

But in this analysis of the events leading to the development of the Liverpool to Manchester railway we need to consider also the development of the hinterland. Manchester, from early days as a Roman town, had developed to become the hub of an area renowned for manufacturing metal goods and textiles. With the development of the 'triangular trade' there was an outlet for these goods and with the influx of cotton from America the textile business

boomed. The population growth was equal to if not greater than Liverpool's. Where did they come from? The 'masses' came from agricultural communities across the mainland and across the sea from Ireland. The entrepreneurs were attracted from London and other centre of commerce.

But transport has always been the limiting factor in the exploitation of inland resources and the development of trade. People could travel by foot, horseback, cart or, in some cases, by water, but it was the salt, the coal, and other minerals which presented a problem as did the manufactured goods such as pottery and in due course, the food to feed the increasing concentrations of people.



Development of roads & canals

From early times goods had been transported on the backs of men and horses. A network of packhorse tracks was developed across Britain and some of the packhorse bridges necessary to cross the numerous watercourses, can still be seen today. Horse drawn carts, some very large, were the next development but unlike the tracks for horses they required a more substantial roadway.

By the beginning of the 18th century the state of many of these was so deplorable that they became impassable in the winter months. The idea of turnpike roads (actually first introduced in the 17th cent.) became popular for improving and, in some cases, building new roads to a higher standard. Turnpike trusts were set up by groups of individuals to raise finance, employ surveyors and be responsible for building and maintaining the highway (previously this had been the responsibility of the parish). In return they collected the tolls levied.

As with the future railway, Liverpool was in the forefront in Lancashire with the developed the first turnpike between Liverpool and Prescot in 1726. The prime object was to allow greater quantities of coal to be carried from Prescot's pits to meet the increasing demand in the rapidly growing town.

The turnpike was extended to St Helens and to Warrington from where another turnpike went to Manchester. This was the first properly developed transport rout between the two towns. Around the same time water transport was being developed for conveying rock salt from Cheshire (Weaver navigation) to the refineries in Liverpool and, in the 1750s, the construction of the Sankey canal enabled ever increasing quantities of coal to be brought to Liverpool using water transport.

In Manchester's case, the Duke of Bridgewater, promoted the Bridgewater canal to bring coal from his pits at Worsley to the river Mersey and then onto Liverpool where a substantial quantity was exported by ship. The Liverpool to Wigan end of the Leeds-Liverpool was opened in 1770s to bring coal from the Orrell coalfields. Josiah Wedgwood, a frequent visitor to Liverpool, was a leading figure in the development of the Trent-Mersey to enable his pottery to be carried, unbroken, for export through Liverpool. The 'canal mania' was at its height and would continue for another 50 years. But events were then to take an irreversible turn.

The situation in 1821

The latest advancement of the 'industrial revolution' was outstripping the available 'infrastructure'. The time was right for new ideas and new technology. Canals were ideal for carrying bulky goods and sometimes even passengers, but the pace was slow and the increasing demand was creating congestion. If growth was to be sustained a new form of transport would be needed, no more so than in the concentration of industrial and trade development in Southwest and Southeast Lancashire. The stage was set for another revolution - this time it would be the railways.

The entrepreneurs and the money

But first who were the men behind the growth of Liverpool and its transport system? In the 17th century it was, no doubt men from the small town of Liverpool itself and the surrounding areas who developed the businesses and trade, but increasingly, Liverpool's businessmen would be drawn from far and wide. (e.g. it was a London sugar refiner, Allyn Smith, who introduced the business to the town in 1673). Many of their Liverpool born descendants would be responsible for continuing the increasing prosperity of Liverpool up to WW1.

Bearing this proviso in mind I would claim it was 'Liverpool men' who were, primarily, the driving force in most of the enterprises.

The turnpike road has already been mentioned. The Sankey canal was a Liverpool idea and the town made available Thomas Steers to advise on the engineering. Steers, a Kent engineer, had been invited by Richard Norris to Liverpool to design and construct the first dry dock in 'the pool', opened in 1715. He continued in the employ of Corporation to build further docks. Here we find another reason behind the success of Liverpool businessmen - they had knowledge of developments elsewhere and selected the best expertise available. It is no wonder then that when it came to 'a railway' they should choose George Stephenson, the celebrated locomotive engineer of the Stockton & Darlington railway, and his civil engineer son, Robert.

In 1770 it was Liverpool and Bradford men who promoted the Leeds-Liverpool canal. The Liverpool end was promoted by William Earle and by Jonathan Blundell, who bought the coal mines at Orrell, near Wigan. He was the Liverpool born son of Bryan Blundell, the slave captain, who built the Bluecoat school.

Money was available in Liverpool. It was accumulated as vast profits from the slave trade and, after abolition in 1807, the subsequent expansion of trade with America and the rest of the world. When the railway age arrived, it was available for a new enterprise.

In his book on the Orrell coalfield, Donald Anderson gives, perhaps, one of the most important reasons for Liverpool's success when he states: 'Its corporation pursued a very enlightened policy and this was said to be one of the chief sources of the town's prosperity'. This is not surprising as the businessmen and landowners were 'the corporation'!

Development of technology

The last factor to make possible the building of a railway between Liverpool and Manchester at this moment in time was the state of technological development.

Railroads had existed for hundreds of years - i.e. wagons running on 'rails'. The rails had originally been of wood, then iron and the haulage by manpower and horse. But it was the development of the steam engine in the early 18th century which enabled cable hauled wagons possible. Its adaptation in the early 19th century to power a wheeled vehicle was a leap forward. Early experiments by Trevithick in 1804 and Blenkinsop in 1811 were precursors to those of William Hedley who 'discovered and demonstrated the efficiency for traction of smooth wheels on smooth rails' in 1812, but the development of the idea fell to George Stephenson, a self-taught mechanic from Tyneside. It was his engine for the Stockton to Darlington railway that foreshadowed the railway age.

The proposed 30 miles of railway between the Liverpool and Manchester was not just a track but would involve immense civil engineering works. But this was not a problem. The canal era had been faced with the same sort of obstacles and now the expertise, engineers, craftsmen and labour force were available for the new task.

Cable haulage was still considered a possibility as the reliability and performance on gradients of the 'new-fangled locomotive' was in doubt. However, the Rainhill trials would sort that out! However, there was still a political and perception problem to overcome.

The last hurdle to the railway

I believe it was the Duke of Wellington who said that the railway would enable the 'lower classes to needlessly travel about'. Some feared the excessive speed would be fatal to the travellers apart from terrorising horses and cattle alongside the line causing them to die of fright! The engines would cause fires in the crops and buildings alongside the track.

However, the greatest opposition came from the landowners alongside the proposed line, such as the Earls of Derby and Sefton. In fact, the first submission of the Bill in 1825 was thrown out of Parliament. This was much due to the poor presentation by George Stephenson who was sparsely educated and poor in delivery and argument. A new survey (avoiding the two earls' lands) was carried out and an improved presentation was successful the following year.



The rest is history. Although the line was primarily constructed for the carriage of goods, passenger traffic increased rapidly and the Duke's fears were realised!

Conclusion

'The time was right' - The need, the will, the money, the technology and the men to make it happen - all came together to give birth to the railway age in this Southwest corner of Lancashire. It was the start of an enterprise which few could have foreseen would develop into 'railway mania' within 15 years and, unlike the canals, continue, with a few stumbles on the way, for 170 years up to the year 2000.

As the third millennium starts it seems the railways are taking a new step forward in popularity and, hopefully, investment. They have suffered neglect in WW1, enforced grouping in the 1920s, the ravishes of WW2, nationalisation in the 1940s, the Beeching axe of the 1960s and re-privatisation in the 1990s.

Today Liverpool and Merseyside has an integrated rail network in which that first railway line still figures and Greater Manchester has a similar network now being supplemented by an extension to its rapid transit system. The possibility of a similar system in Liverpool has already been studied.

Whatever the future holds it will be thanks to those men of vision and enterprise of the early 19th century who took risks and made it happen.

Neville King (Feb 2000)

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