EARLY DAYS ON THE LONDON & BIRMINGHAM RAILWAY -

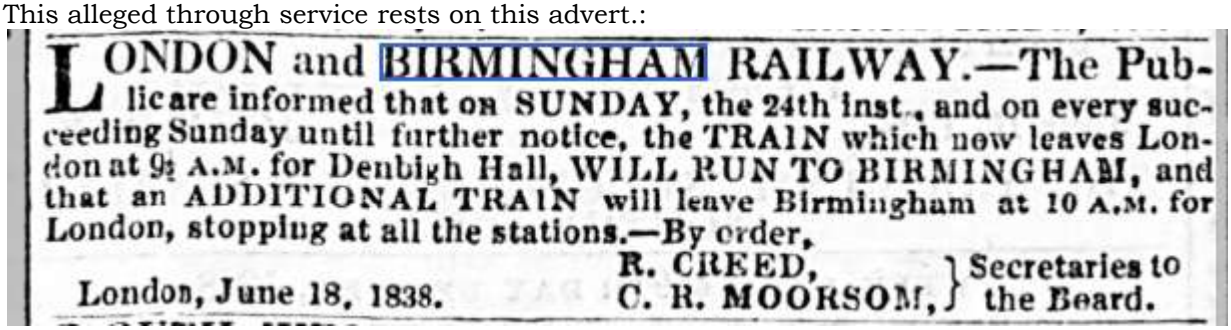
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The question of when the section between Denbigh Hall and Rugby opened for regular passenger traffic exercised the correspondence columns of RCHS *Journal* forty years ago, culminating in a letter under the heading *Kilsby Tunnel* from the late Guy Hemingway in the March 1981 issue (https://rchs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Journal-117-Mar-1981.pdf) which roundly saw off the assertion (espoused by the late Charles Clinker) that some limited passenger use had started from 24 June 1838. Hemingway concluded (p.22) with these assertions based on the newspaper references (principally Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire papers) that he had traced:

9 Apr 1838 - Public opening to Denbigh Hall and from Rugby to Birmingham. Through bookings between London and Birmingham.
24 Jun 1838 - An additional Sunday train over these sections, but continuing the coach-link, even with this train.
28 Jun 1838 - Laying of last brick in Kilsby Tunnel *(but see below)*.
2 Jul 1838 - Public opening (for Northampton traffic only) from Denbigh Hall to Roade; Birmingham traffic as before *(but see below)*.
18 Jul 1838 - A party travelled as far as Kilsby Town.
20 Jul 1838 – A baggage train (for Marshal Soult) *may* have traversed the whole line.
20 Aug 1838 - Directors' special train traversed the whole line.
17 Sep 1838 - Public opening throughout for regular passenger traffic.

Hemingway's contribution remains very cogent, although some points do arise from the more ready availability of newspaper archives (some of the papers Hemingway cited are not (yet) available online).

Did the Sunday service from 24 June 1838 really run through the tunnel?
This alleged through service rests on this advert.:


LONDON and BIRMINGHAM RAILWAY.—The Public are informed that on SUNDAY, the 24th inst., and on every succeeding Sunday until further notice, the TRAIN which now leaves London at 9½ A.M. for Denbigh Hall, WILL RUN TO BIRMINGHAM, and that an ADDITIONAL TRAIN will leave Birmingham at 10 A.M. for London, stopping at all the stations.—By order,
R. CREED, C. R. MOORSOM, } Secretaries to the Board.
London, June 18, 1838.

which appeared in the London and Liverpool press on 20 Jun (Hemingway asserts it also appeared in the *Derby Mercury* that day, too, but the online version does not show it). Clinker and others asserted that this represented the first booked service *through the tunnel* but that does not square with the following observations.

Laying the last brick in Kilsby Tunnel
This caused considerable confusion in the press of the time, with the date being widely misreported and being wrongly ascribed to the laying of the first brick on a viaduct over the River Avon near Rugby (even though the line through Brandon and Wolston was already in service....). Fortunately, the *Northampton Mercury* of 30 Jun definitively cleared up matters, confirming the date specifically as Thursday **21 Jun** (as opposed to "Thursday last" - but not the date Clinker and Hemingway had settled on) and that it really was the last brick being ceremonially laid in the tunnel!

Did services extend to Roade and did that station really open before 17 September 1838?
Hemingway cites a Derby paper to the effect that Northampton passengers would change at Roade (rather than Denbigh Hall) from 2 Jul 1838. At least two other papers reported the alleged new facility (both citing the *Northampton Herald*) - but could not agree whether the start had already occurred (*Leamington Spa Courier* of 23 Jun) or was to do so on 25 Jun (*Coventry Herald* and *Leicester Journal* of 22 Jun) rather than 2 Jul! Alas, the *Northampton Herald* is not available online, but such change was **not** reported by the *Northampton Mercury*. Anyway, connections continued to be made via Denbigh Hall - rather than Roade - as evidenced by two connecting

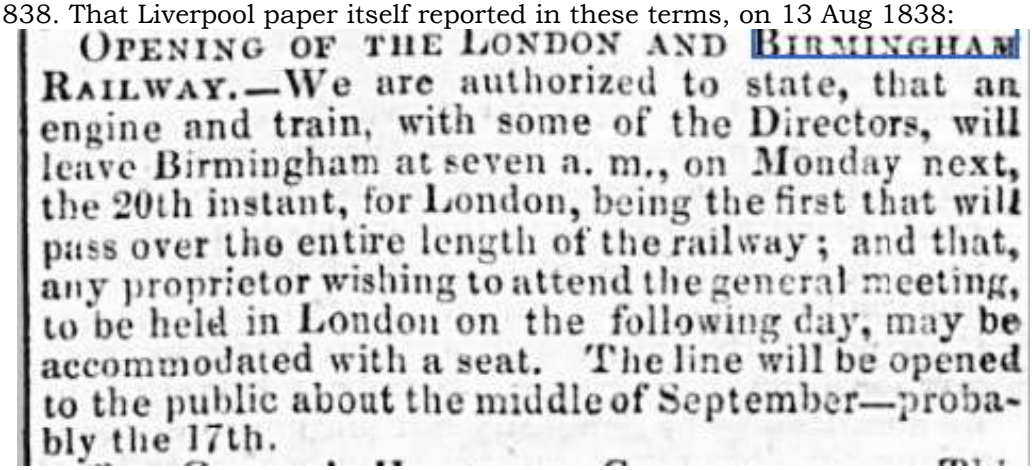
(road) coach operators' advertisements (e.g. 14 Jul in the *Mercury*) and by a long, aggrieved reader's letter in *The Times* of 12 Sep about an incident in August. Alas, I have been unable definitively to resolve the question, but very considerable doubt must surround the alleged early opening of Roade station. And even if it applied for a short term, who is to say what dates it started and finished?

The experimental journey to Kilsby town

The village of Kilsby is situate very close to the northern portal of Kilsby tunnel. The journey was an 'engineers' inspection' from Denbigh Hall through the tunnel to Kilsby. The *London Courier* of 19 Jul 1838 confirms the date as Wednesday 18 Jul.

"The first train that will pass over the entire length of the railway"

Hemingway cites the *Derby Mercury*, itself quoting *Liverpool Albion*, about the train on Monday 20 Aug 1838. That Liverpool paper itself reported in these terms, on 13 Aug 1838:

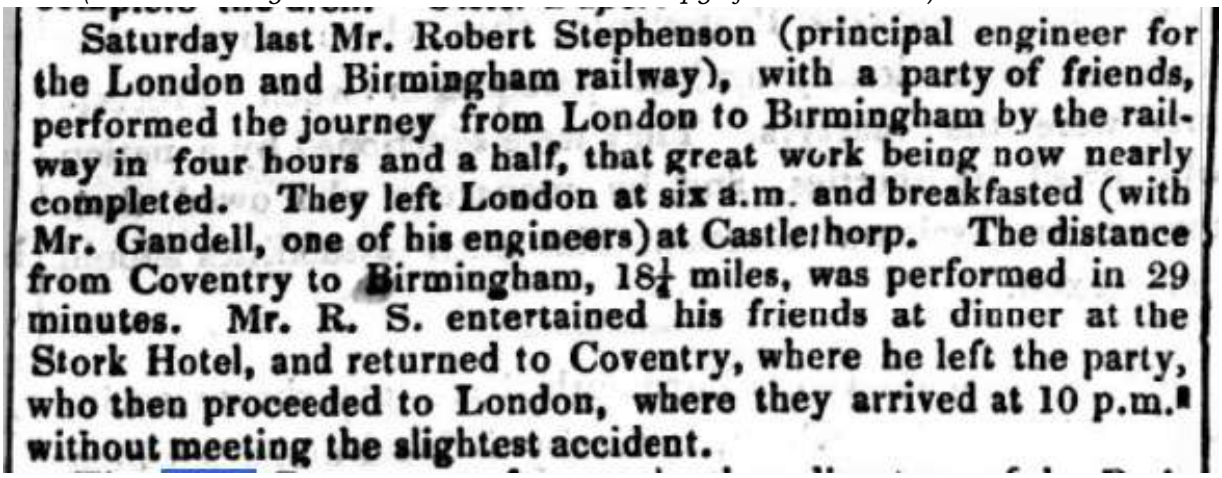


OPENING OF THE LONDON AND BIRMINGHAM RAILWAY.—We are authorized to state, that an engine and train, with some of the Directors, will leave Birmingham at seven a. m., on Monday next, the 20th instant, for London, being the first that will pass over the entire length of the railway; and that, any proprietor wishing to attend the general meeting, to be held in London on the following day, may be accommodated with a seat. The line will be opened to the public about the middle of September—probably the 17th.

Note the interesting rider: "... any proprietor [of L&B shares] wishing to attend the General meeting to be held in London on the following day may be accommodated with a seat." - so that first through passenger train was **not** limited to L&B directors. Note also the expected general public opening date.

Further devilling in the BNA online press archives gives two claimants to the "first train" **carrying passengers** between London and Birmingham:

Saturday 18 August 1838: a special train for Robert Stephenson (engineer to the L&B) from Euston to Birmingham, and back. The first traced press references were *The Standard* of Thursday evening 23 Aug (some will dub this *London Evening Standard* even though the paper itself then didn't). It was followed by *The Globe* (London) the following evening in the following terms *(rather more legible than the archived online copy of The Standard)*:

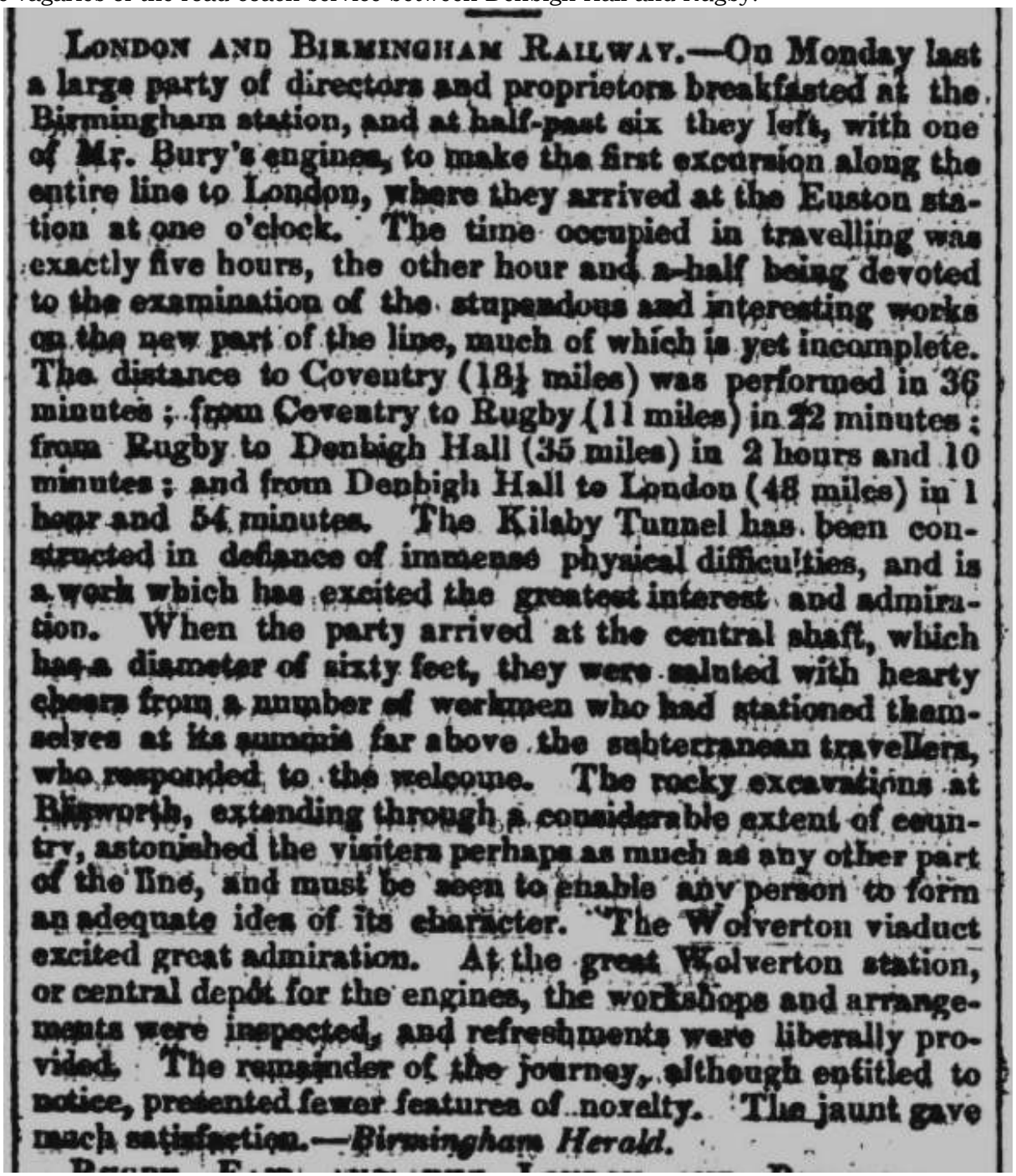


Saturday last Mr. Robert Stephenson (principal engineer for the London and Birmingham railway), with a party of friends, performed the journey from London to Birmingham by the railway in four hours and a half, that great work being now nearly completed. They left London at six a.m. and breakfasted (with Mr. Gandell, one of his engineers) at Castlethorp. The distance from Coventry to Birmingham, 18¼ miles, was performed in 29 minutes. Mr. R. S. entertained his friends at dinner at the Stork Hotel, and returned to Coventry, where he left the party, who then proceeded to London, where they arrived at 10 p.m. without meeting the slightest accident.

Other papers followed, all using the same 'narrative' (was this a L&B press release?). One paper gave the day as 'Monday' but that cannot be so as Stephenson would that day have been returning ***to*** London (not staying at Coventry) for the general meeting on Tuesday. This train was clearly not a "public" train in any sense – more (one feels) in the nature of an engineer's inspection, or perhaps something of a 'dry run' for the train two days later?

It's intriguing to note that breakfast was taken at Castlethorp(e) – which did not get a station until 1882!

Monday 20 August 1838: the special train for directors and shareholders from Birmingham to London, travelling for the L&B's half-yearly general meeting to be held at Euston on Tuesday. Of this, a full description (by a Cecil J Allen *wannabe*?) appeared in *Coventry Herald & Observer* of 24 Aug, appended to a full report of the L&B meeting. The paper credits the *Birmingham Herald* but that paper is not available in the online archive. There seems to be no indication of a return train after the meeting on Tuesday – perhaps the participants had to suffer the vagaries of the road coach service between Denbigh Hall and Rugby.



LONDON AND BIRMINGHAM RAILWAY.—On Monday last a large party of directors and proprietors breakfasted at the Birmingham station, and at half-past six they left, with one of Mr. Bury's engines, to make the first excursion along the entire line to London, where they arrived at the Euston station at one o'clock. The time occupied in travelling was exactly five hours, the other hour and a-half being devoted to the examination of the stupendous and interesting works on the new part of the line, much of which is yet incomplete. The distance to Coventry (18¼ miles) was performed in 36 minutes; from Coventry to Rugby (11 miles) in 22 minutes; from Rugby to Denbigh Hall (35 miles) in 2 hours and 10 minutes; and from Denbigh Hall to London (48 miles) in 1 hour and 54 minutes. The Kilsby Tunnel has been constructed in defiance of immense physical difficulties, and is a work which has excited the greatest interest and admiration. When the party arrived at the central shaft, which has a diameter of sixty feet, they were saluted with hearty cheers from a number of workmen who had stationed themselves at its summit far above the subterranean travellers, who responded to the welcome. The rocky excavations at Blisworth, extending through a considerable extent of country, astonished the visiters perhaps as much as any other part of the line, and must be seen to enable any person to form an adequate idea of its character. The Wolverton viaduct excited great admiration. At the great Wolverton station, or central depôt for the engines, the workshops and arrangements were inspected, and refreshments were liberally provided. The remainder of the journey, although entitled to notice, presented fewer features of novelty. The jaunt gave much satisfaction.—*Birmingham Herald.*

It clear enough that these were the first two passenger carrying trains over the complete line.

Public opening throughout for regular passenger traffic

The opening of the complete line for regular public passenger services through between Euston and Birmingham from 17 Sep 1838 is well attested, including *The Times* of the following day.

Richard Maund