

## **The Wokingham Society**

### **Wokingham and Its Railway**

**A talk by Jack Meacher**

**To the Wokingham Society's Annual General Meeting on**

**Wednesday, November 16<sup>th</sup> 2011**

Jack Meacher, a well-known local authority on the history of railway development in Wokingham from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century until the present day, gave an informative and very interesting talk to the Wokingham Society after its Annual General Meeting.

The topic was of particular significance at the current time because of the plans by Network Rail to redevelop Wokingham station and Mr Meacher focussed his attention on the history of the station itself.

He explained how the railway came to Wokingham in 1849, eventually known as the South-eastern and Reigate Railway, and he pointed out that the town was strategically significant not only in providing a southern link between Reading and London but also in creating a direct link with the Channel ports, most importantly Dover. The line carried freight and fresh produce and was used to carry coal in particular from the Welsh coalfields. Stock yards were built to accommodate the different varieties of freight and a station was obviously required to accommodate private passengers as well as freight trains.

The location of the station was of primary importance and its position provided the key to many of the problems facing the Town today. At first it was thought it would be necessary to have two level crossings, but, in order to avoid doing this, the current Oxford Road and Wellington Road, which were formerly one straight road, were created and the level crossing was put where it is today, thus causing the congestion currently experienced at crucial times.

Although consideration was given to building a bridge over the railway, the Railway Board decided it would be too expensive to build because the gradient required to build the bridge would take up too much land and would involve the demolition of many buildings. Then as now the prime consideration of the Railway Authorities was cost. Corners were cut wherever possible and safety matters were given little consideration. The barriers used today were not put in place until 1976.

In the 1890's a large number of local dignitaries signed a petition to the Railway Board demanding effective safety measures, but the Board only gave way after a child was seriously injured on the line and other people lost their lives. The unique footbridge by the level crossing, recently awarded a blue plaque by the Wokingham Society, was built in 1886, but according to Mr.

Meatcher, it is in urgent need of renovation. He said it is of great historical significance and it would be a great pity if it were allowed to fall into a state of total disrepair.

Originally the station platforms were staggered and this was finally changed after further protests from the influential local residents and a new station house was built. This building on the south-eastern-bound platform housed the station master and his family and there were separate heated waiting rooms for the different classes of passengers. There was a brick bookstall on the Reading-bound platform but this was eventually replaced by a timber lean-to on the south-eastern platform. Throughout the twentieth century the station buildings were neglected to the point that they were barely fit for purpose, and in the early 1970s the brick constructions were demolished and a new station was built, described by Mr Meatcher as being like a series of boxes. In the 1980s the Reading-bound platform was increased in length and that was the last change of any significance until the present day.

In the course of his talk Mr Meatcher showed a number of very revealing and fascinating illustrations from maps and other local public archives and this gave the audience a clear impression of the growth of the railway and the problems faced by the local community in the past and in the present day. He also showed photographs of the Railway Hotel which became the Molly Millar public house, the modern features largely disfiguring the outline of the original building. Images of the former Railway Tap were also shown where the less affluent member of the local community gathered. Finally he gave a very interesting insight into the lifestyle of the crossing keeper who lived with his family in a tiny three-roomed house before the new signal box was built and the keeper was moved to a council house with his family. The crossing was then operated from the signal box as it is today.

The audience were fully engaged by this insight into a vitally important aspect of Wokingham's past and present, and it is to be hoped that the plans for the new station will be more sympathetic to the needs and wishes of the people of Wokingham and that Network Rail and the local Councils will be able to learn from the past and create a station which will bring positive benefits to the long-suffering commuter and other users of the line from Wokingham to Reading, Waterloo and Gatwick.

At the conclusion of his talk Peter Must, Chairman of the Society, thanked Mr Meatcher on behalf of the Society and presented him with a token of appreciation. Mr Meatcher was warmly applauded and the audience left far better informed than they were when they arrived. Mr Meatcher's enthusiasm and the quality of his research were greatly appreciated.