

Last Train

At the November meeting of the Highworth Historical Society, Mr Colin Dawson gave a most interesting and informative talk on the Highworth and Swindon Light Railway.

Before the railway came to Highworth the town was in a very depressed state, as the market was declining and there was very little work. People were drifting away to work in the Swindon railway works; farm work being very spasmodic and poorly paid. Thomas Angel Smith brought work to Highworth when he began the Mat factory and he needed a rail link to bring in raw materials and ship out the finished products.



After many negotiations it was decided to build a light railway which followed the contours of the land, instead of one which would have involved big engineering works with cuttings and large bridges in order to make the more normal straighter line. After many set backs and money problems the railway failed the first inspection. More money had to be raised, which proved to be impossible; and so they had to sell out to the Great Western Railway. The line was finally opened in 1883.

The trains were made up of carriages and freight cars which had to fit under a special height gauge, thus enabling them to pass under the low bridges. Milk churns were picked up at each of the stations and loaded from special hand carts on to flatbed trucks

with open sides.

There were some unfortunate accidents at the level crossing near Hannington. On one occasion the crossing keeper heard a carriage coming, which had become separated from the train. It had passengers on board and was running backwards down the one in forty four incline up to Highworth. The crossing keeper was able to open the gates in time, allowing it through; no one was hurt although the passengers were very frightened.

The line was closed for passengers in 1953 but continued for freight; the very last train in 1962 being a private train for the Swindon workmen.

Colin, a very knowledgeable speaker, gave a fascinating talk, packed with anecdotes and information about the trains, the architecture of the buildings, the engineering of the tracks and bridges, and the people who built and ran the railway. His talk was interspersed with many lovely pictures from the pre-Beeching days of Sir John Betjeman's favourite branch line.

Mair Huband.

