



Oxford Times – July 2018 LMS Swingbridge.

As we all await news of the Oxford -Cambridge Expressway and the affect it will have on Oxford, whether north, south, east or west, I am drawn to earlier parallels and transport pressures from the past when the railways came in the mid-19th century. Sitting here at the centre of our country, two engineering giants Stephenson and Brunel were involved in a race, London & North Western Railway (LNWR) later London Midlands & Scottish Railway (LMS) competing against the Great Western Railway (GWR) crossing the country east-west v. north-south and with Oxford at its heart. No natural barrier was too great for them with their embankments, tunnels, and viaducts, so the crossing the Sheepwash Channel which links the River Thames and Oxford Canal was no obstacle. They needed to move quickly, so Robert Stephenson designed the Swingbridge as a low turning bridge, to be turned open and closed by a team of men. In the end not one, but two lines came into the city, with two stations built, both of which remained until 1999, when the rather magnificent Grade II* listed Crystal Palace-esque Rewley Road Station was moved to the Buckingham Railway Museum at Quainton to make way for the Said Business School. The LMS Swingbridge was left isolated, disconnected and in the words of Network Rail 'surplus to operational requirements'.

In this city of fine buildings and architects, which are the stuff of dreaming spires, our town heritage can be undervalued, something that I became aware of when restoring Oxford Castle and Prison a decade and more ago. With its now successful education and schools programme, opening up the site and its history for the first time in 1000 years and creating a better sense of pride in Oxford's town history, outside the university and colleges, it has allowed local people to understand, remember and be proud of their shared past.

But for a few true railway loving champions the LMS Swingbridge would have already been lost. Luckily today the significance of the LMS Swing Bridge is recognised nationally as a Scheduled Ancient Monument, the last large hand-operated swing bridge built, and one of only two turning bridges on the Thames, the other London's Tower Bridge. The Stephenson

designed turning mechanism remains intact, but at risk as its presence on the Historic England 'Buildings at Risk' register records. Oxford Preservation Trust is now doing something about it before it is too late, and the last chance it has got. Network Rail has agreed to help, with Historic England and the Railway Heritage Trust pledging substantial funds so that we can now move forward talking to the specialists who can make the original mechanism turn again.

But this now rusting structure is so much more than its physical fabric. It is an important part of our 'town's' history, and crucial to telling our transport history across the ages, from river, to canal, railway and road, and the significance it had on Oxford. There are all the people's stories woven into the fabric of the structure, great stories of the people involved in its construction, but also of those whose livelihoods came from the railways, those who turned the bridge to allow the trains and the boats to pass, and the histories of their families living in railway owned properties, and of those who used the lines for their work and pleasure.

This summer we submit a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund for the remaining monies needed to make this project happen. We will need to work with many partners and are already talking with the City Council about a Pocket Park and a link into their education work at the Museum of Oxford, which has its own successful project unfolding. And now we need other Oxford people to help. We not only need funding but to get the wider project right. There is little point in doing this simply to save it if we don't then share its stories and as widely as we can. We want to make it a real part of the City for people to visit, enjoy and understand, and we need you to tell us what you would like to see, how you would like to be involved, and to know what events, and what stories you would like us to tell. We have a survey on Facebook and at the OPT website running to the end of July with a £50.00 prize to win – please join in.

And so to the new Expressway – will it come and where? If it does it will bring new infrastructure, a little further out of the centre this time, but significant nevertheless. What legacy this will leave in future who knows, for what would our railway forefathers think of our interest in their mechanics and bridges of the past?