The Main Line

Top quality alignment and firmness resulted on the Main Line extension from a visit by a BR tamping/lining machine in August 1986, seen here next to the foundation of the new station platform.

The new extension of No. 8 Road, which now completed we must all officially call 'The Main Line', has been key to the development of the north east quarter of our site. For those working at the north end of the site in 1983 on a painstakingly accurate reconstruction of the Great Western's broad gauge, the threat of being seriously outflanked by the Narrow Gauge Party served to focus minds. How, when the new line and its station eventually arrived, should it be set out so as not to detract from the broad gauge set piece? A scheme had to be devised and sold to the powers that were before anyone else thought to do any planning! Far more effort would be needed later to counter appealing but poorly thought out proposals than to ensure then that they remained still born. It was called taking the initiative.

Three principles lay behind the first plan for a station layout submitted in September 1983:

*that the Main Line part of this part of the site be developed simply but to a high standard.

*that the space beside the Transfer Shed was too small to lay out even the tiniest station.

*that the station should be a self contained set piece but still be complementary to the set pieces of the Transfer Shed and its contents and of the broad gauge layout.

The actual design centred around the idea of a shared area between a loading bank, next to the Broad Gauge Project sidings, and the road side of a station building serving the 'Main Line'. It would be shared in the sense that it played two separate roles—if the visitor stood in it facing the sidings they would be in a goods yard area but face round 180° and they would be in the public approach to the station building. This dual role of the space, not normally found on the railway system but perhaps acceptable in a museum where one set piece scene might flow into another, could overcome the chronic space shortage in railway terms in this part of the site without pushing the Main Line station too far along from the Transfer Shed. A visual screen to separate people in this space and people on the Transfer Shed platform could be made by vans stabled in the intervening loading bank siding.

The name 'Oxford Road' was selected to title this plan. This seemed to have a number of advantages—'Road' often formed part of station names in early railway days and it would be especially appropriate if a Brunel type building was eventually erected to complement the Broad Gauge Project. The 'Oxford' bit was geographically OK for this part of the site, might be especially memorable for passing travellers on the Avoiding Line who noted such things, and would make a link with one of the most famous tourist spots in the world. As the Society's official name for this station it looks as if it might stick.

The Council consulted on this first plan and drew quite a response from various Groups and individuals, all broadly agreeing with the idea and many suggesting additions or improvements.

However the proposal that emerged just over a year later took matters a long way further forward for in the meantime the prospect of a grant from Oxford County Council for landscaping trees and shrubs had arisen. It was quickly realised that to make the most of this opportunity to give the Site wider public appeal, a comprehensive look had to be taken at the whole area from the carriage shed northwards.

While the Oxford Road idea was being circulated, thought had also been given by others to the ultimate track access needs for the carriage shed when it was eventually enlarged and more stock was in use. The original 10 Year Plan of 1977 had indicated possible access from the Transfer Shed area, via a ladder of pointwork, to supplement the traverser access at the other end. However the appearance of the Broad Gauge Project had cut down the amount of land available for an adequate layout and the open land it would have occupied now boasted enough vegetation to be worth turning into a feature in its own right complementary to the Branch and Main Lines. By providing extra access to the traverser end of the carriage shed to meet operational stock shunting needs—the traverser-only served lines in the shed being for vehicles in store—the area north of the carriage shed would be available to be incorporated into a landscaped station scheme. There was just enough space and greenery to create an 'out in the country' character for this end of the Site to contrast with the railway sheds and yards atmosphere of the 'old' Site centred on the engine shed.

The most significant additions and improvements suggested for the Oxford Road scheme had been a loop at the London end of the proposed platform, with a short kick back into a bay, and the incorporation of a stone station building which had recently been offered to the Society. The revised Oxford Road proposal was

The space on the right, between the broad gauge and the site fence, has to accommodate a forecourt, station building, Main Line platform and the track itself—just possible by careful attention to layout and levels.

consequently drawn up to include these items together with the ultimate carriage shed extension so that the original motive of a complete landscaping scheme could be met and the grant applicaton submitted to Oxford County Council.

Our application for just over 300 plants comprising Ash, Birch, Field Maple, Rowan, Blackthorn, Hawthorn and Holly was accepted. They arrived and were duly planted out according to the plan largely in March 1985 (much to the rabbits' delight until we got wise!).

The Oxford Road landscape scheme built on previous amenity planting grants we had received from the County Council during the last 10 years. Although our ground is poor, causing slow growth, the earlier plantings are starting to make a big difference now. With careful management through selective coppicing we shall have an excellent and pleasant rural setting for our trains and trackside scenes.

A supplementary scheme is being supported this year by the County Council to strengthen the planting still further in some of the areas and to promote natural generation. The Site has already been noted for a range of over 60 plant species and in time it would be appropriate to build a pond in the carriage shed/ Oxford Road area to add an aquatic dimension to a rich insect and flora stock once common beside railway lines but declining in the surrounding countryside.

But to return to the Oxford Road plan. This revised scheme was displayed at the AGM in 1985 and has been adopted in principle by the Society's Management Council. It took account of all the suggestions made about the original layout proposal of Sept. '83. At its hub remains the shared forecourt idea. The station building originally anticipated for the Main Line side of this area was to have been as small as possible consistent with being a structure with facilities

A visit to Heyford after the Society AGM on 14th July 1984. This building was dismantled by Society members in 1985/6. Careful siting and screening will ensure that when rebuilt, complete with restored all-round canopy, it does not overpower the northern part of the Didcot site.

rather than just a shelter. A space 15' by 50' had been suggested. A new building made as a fascimile of a typical early GW style seemed to be the only answer until the Society was offered, quite by chance, the stone building from the Down side platform at Heyford, north of Oxford. There were advantages—it looked Brunelian, contained the waiting and offices accommodation we wanted in this farflung part of the Site and the offer carried a peppercorn purchase price. There were disadvantages! First we would have to do the dismantling work and take it away when we already had plenty else to do. Second, for the tiny space we had available, it was too big—18' wide, an enormous 70' long and seemingly very high and bulky. This time the adage 'don't look a gift horse in the mouth, was very relevant. This was a very high class horse.

Much pressure was applied to the design team and much midnight oil burnt juggling on paper with the forecourt, the building position and the ground levels. An arrangement was eventually devised that would prevent this building from overpowering the forecourt and, when the planting was mature, absorb its bulk by only enabling it to be viewed obliquely or end on—a factor that disguises the true size of many railway buildings to the railway traveller.

To do this it was positioned so that it abutted one corner of the original forecourt space, a narrow strip of extra forecourt being provided alongside it for access. Tall planting between this strip and the path through the Site past the Broad Gauge would prevent the visitor from seeing the building until they had reached the main forecourt, by which time they would have gone past the overdominating broadside view of the whole building.

The exact position of the Heyford building then fixed the platform. This had to be long enough for an engine, a three coach train and a bit extra to make the stopping point less critical and allow visitors to photograph the engine from the platform while it stood in the station. It will be 315' long plus ramps, will extend 80' on the London side of the building and consequently leave 100' clear between the platform and the stop block at the Oxford end as an overrun—an allowance of only 35' here being criticised as too small in the original proposal.

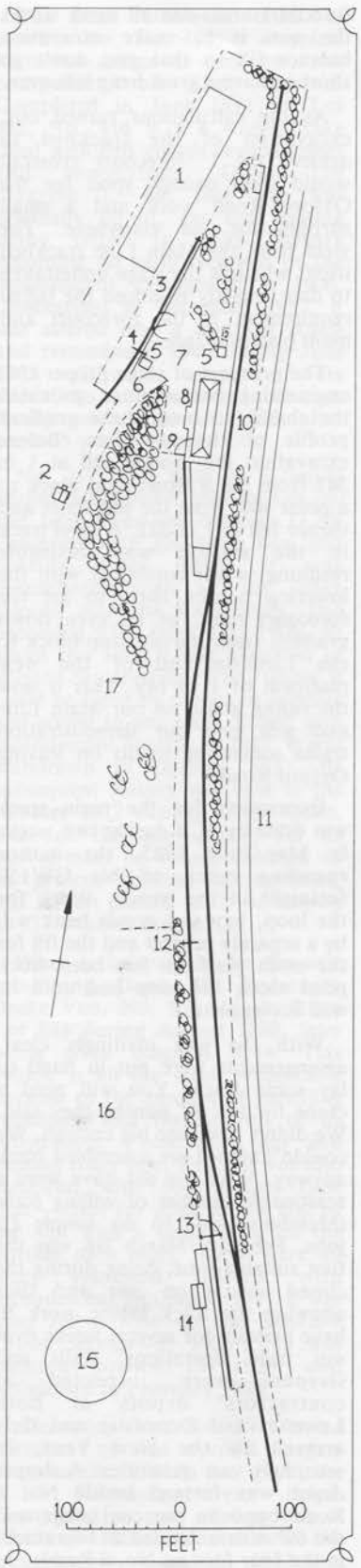
In turn, the London end of the platform fixed with starting point of the loop. The requirement for this to accept an engine and three coaches (our normal Main Demonstration Line passenger train length) dictated the site of the exit crossover. Kick backs off this loop into a short bay at the station and to a goods dock opposite the turntable will enhance interest and flexibility, although neither these nor the loop line will be for passenger use.

One other factor was crucial to the success of the scheme—that of relative ground levels. First, the station building had to be set as low as possible to minimise the height of plant growth required and to stop the building from towering above the site. The model railway problem of everything being built up on a single level baseboard had to be overcome. Second, it was also necessary to avoid a steep fall across the forecourt from the Main Line platform to the Broad Gauge loading bank where ground levels were lower. Laying of the Main line track straight on the ground would have created a height difference across the forecourt of 2' 3" which was far too much for the width available, although some slope was desirable for surface drainage.

Given a forecourt area 60' wide, a fall across it of 1' was felt to be the maximum slope that people would find comfortable to move around on. Some excavation of the trackbed was necessary to secure this and, in any case, a considerable volume of fill would be needed to make up the new platform and

OXFORD ROAD

1. Existing Transfer Shed
2. Existing Broad Gauge hut
3. Goods loading bank equipped with second Transfer Shed crane
4. Loading gauge (timber type)
5. Huts
6. Station entrance gate
7. Forecourt
8. Station building from Heyford
9. End loading ramp with gate on to forecourt
10. Station garden
11. BR Avoiding Lines
12. Loading gauge
13. Private siding gate
14. Goods dock (photographic platform) with small lock-up
15. Existing locomotive turntable
16. Existing picnic area
17. Principle landscaping area—no public access



forecourt areas—in all earth works the aim is to make excavation balance fill so that you don't go short or have a great heap left over.

As the calculations turned out, excavation of the trackbed to achieve the 1' forecourt crossfall would yield enough spoil for the Oxford Road work and a small surplus for use elsewhere. The yield from the Main Line trackbed itself, which is the stage undertaken to date, exactly balanced the initial requirement in the forecourt and main platform face.

The prospect of some proper civil engineering preparations provided the chance to modify the gradient profile of the new line. Before excavation the ground fell at 1 in 347 from the 8 Road stop block to a point 400' from the end fence and thence fell at 1 in 222. A level track in the station was desirable resulting, when combined with the lowering needed there to get the forecourt right, of an even down gradient from the old stop block to the London end of the new platform of 1 in 149. This is now the ruling grade on our Main Line and will give our demonstration trains something to do on leaving Oxford Road!

Excavation for the main track was done by JCB during two weeks in May/June 1985, the author spending much of his GW150 fortnight in the trench. Work for the loop, bay and goods bank will be a separate project and the fill for the main platform has been stock piled along the loop bed until its wall is complete.

With the way invitingly clear, arrangements were put in hand to lay some track. You will need a crane for the 60' panels, they said. We didn't have one big enough. We couldn't afford pre-assembled track anyway. What we did have were a reasonable number of willing souls (Members) able to do simple (!) jobs. February/March '86 was the first suitable time, being during the closed season on Site and thus allowing the track laying work to have priority for several weeks over our train operations. Rails and sleepers were inspected at contractors' depots at both Leicester and Doncaster and duly arrived in the New Year, in seemingly vast quantities. A sleeper depot was formed beside No. 6 Road opposite the coal stage and the 60' rails unloaded in two stacks in the four foot on No. 8 Road.

A bitterly cold Saturday 15th. February 1986 saw work commence. The task that weekend was to dig out and slew the last 300' of 8 Road into the curved alignment necessary to continue the line down the site. The ground was frozen all weekend but a good turnout of people on both days still achieved the target. In addition there was sufficient strength to sort out the new rails into pairs along the four foot further back and to lay the first 20' of new track using 10' service rails. These were replaced in due course by 60's as the work later progressed every time enough sleepers had been placed. Track laying was completed on 22nd of March ahead of schedule.

Tuesday 20th May saw ballast unloading. The stone came in hopper wagons which we learnt to empty two at a time as our diesel shunter hauled each pair along the new line. We became quite expert at working the hopper doors and judged the spread pretty well, although the last wagon or two completed their trips along an overburden of stone rather than on rails! We needed this quantity because of the full depth of ballast we wanted underneath the sleepers when the job was finished. Selective hand packing followed, during the hot part of the year, to take out the worst dips, and in August a BR tamping/lining machine and a ballast regulator did their stuff. The ballast disappeared under the sleepers like magic and when they left the track fully merited its new name—Main Line.

A final sweep of the Main Line extension by the BR ballast regulator in August 1986 makes for a perfect job.