

*THORNE'S FIRST
RAILWAY*

JOHN B PLATT

Thorne Local History Society

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Thorne's First Railway

Thorne flourished as an inland port during the latter part of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries. Although the population of the town was small (about 3000), it was at that time the only community of any significance between Sheffield, Rotherham, Doncaster and the Humber. Moreover, it was located at the highest point on the river Don to which coastal vessels could regularly navigate, and thus became an important centre for the transfer of cargoes into the sailing – and early steam-ships which made connection between these important manufacturing centres and London. This trade was diverted to some extent by the emergence of Goole as a port from 1826, but even more so by the introduction of railway services in the area.

Thorne's first railway connection was laid in 1855, and the passenger train service commenced in 1856. Other towns and villages in the area had fared rather better. Selby station opened in 1834 and by 1848 Goole and the villages of Rawcliffe and

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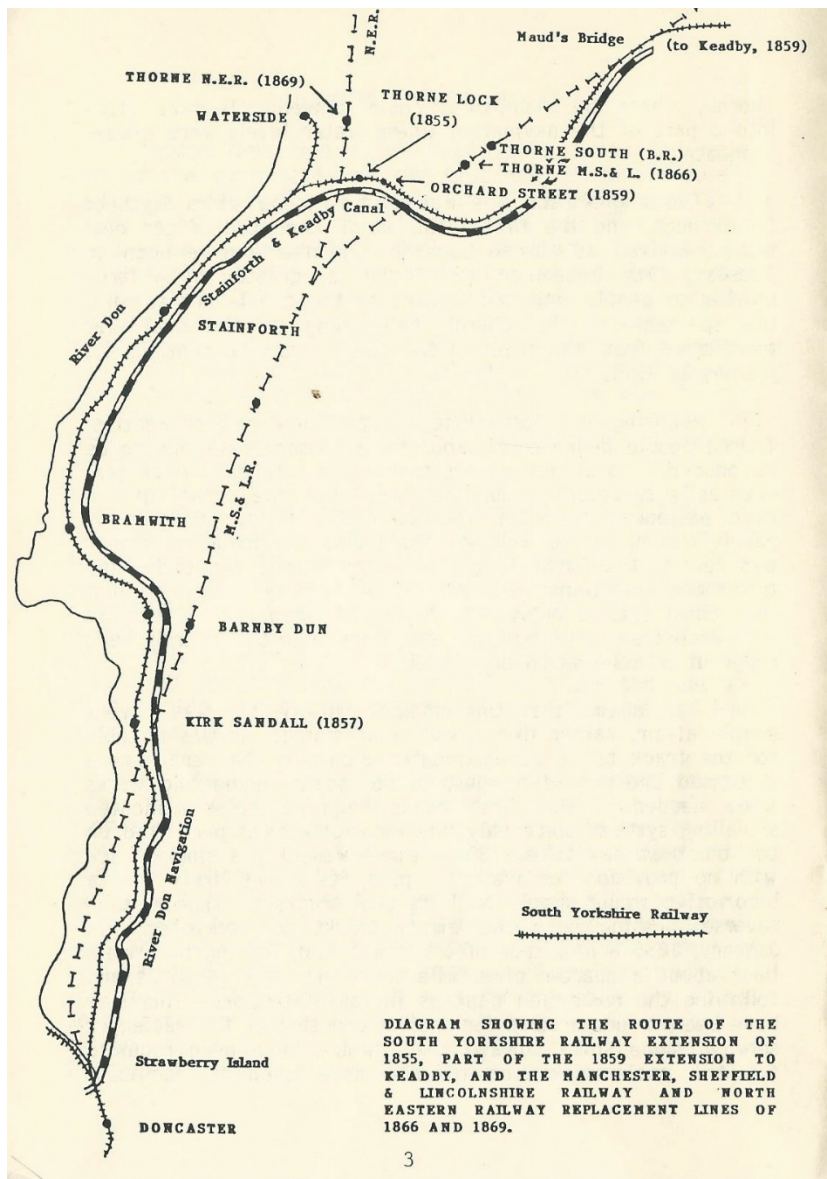
Snaith had a passenger train service. Doncaster had a railway service to London, York and Leeds from 1849. Even when the railway came to Thorne it was not originally intended to provide a passenger service, although this soon became established after the line had been opened for goods traffic.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the amount of coal being transported from the Barnsley area to Hull was considerable. Some of it was for export, and the rest for local use. Rail transport was used between the collieries and Doncaster, where the coal was transferred into vessels which navigated the river Don, the Stainforth to Keadby canal and from thence to Hull by way of the rivers Trent and Humber. Very shallow water in the Doncaster to Stainforth section of this waterway often made the passage of vessels impossible, and costly delays ensued. It was for this reason that the South Yorkshire Railway and River Don Company decided to extend its rail link from Strawberry Island, north of Doncaster, along the tow path of its own canal as far as

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Thorne, where trans-shipment could
conveniently take place into

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a part of the navigation where water levels were always adequate.

The single-track line was built by contractors Blyth of Conisbrough, and the first train, which consisted of ten coal trucks, arrived at Thorne Lock shortly after twelve noon on Tuesday, 11th December, 1855. It was greeted by a large number of people who had flocked to the canal bank to view the spectacle. The church bells rang as the coal was transferred from the train to the canal vessel to continue its journey to Hull.

Realising the possibilities of this new rail connection, Thorne people began to clamour for a passenger service to be introduced. Local newspapers took up the appeal, which was eventually successful. July 1st, 1856 saw the arrival of the first passenger train in Thorne. This time, hundreds of people turned out to welcome the train. An inaugural dinner was held in the Canal Tavern at which Thorne dignitaries and tradesmen entertained officials of the railway company whilst the crowd outside enjoyed a display of

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fireworks. The town was decorated with bunting and flags and the church bells rang out in celebration once again.

It seems that this original railway line was a very simple affair, rather like a very long siding. It was possible for the track to be accommodated alongside the canal where it passed under road bridges, so no major engineering works were needed. The first trains required no complicated signalling system, since only one locomotive was permitted on the track at any time. Since there was only a single track with no provision for trains to pass, it seems likely that a locomotive would simply haul its coal trucks to Thorne, then reverse, pushing back the empty trucks to Doncaster. In January, 1856 a new spur of track was laid, leaving the 'main line' about a quarter of a mile from the Lock terminus and following the river Don bank as far as Waterside. This may have been in preparation for the introduction of the passenger service, since some storage space would have been required for the coal trucks, or it may have

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been to facilitate delivery of coal to Waterside, possibly for transfer to vessels on the river. Later maps indicate that signals and a turntable for locomotives were provided on this spur, but it is not easy to determine at what stage they were added. However, in order to deal with passenger trains at the Lock, a passing loop would be required, so that locomotives could be moved from one end of their trains to the other. Before the service could commence, it was necessary for an inspection of the railway installation to be carried out by the Board of Trade.

Arrangements were made for the inspection but at the last moment it was realised that the additional track had not been laid. A cunning plan was therefore devised, which appears to have worked perfectly. Several coal trucks, filled with navvies resplendent in white smocks, were attached to the Inspector's train. It appeared that these navvies were intended to represent a celebratory "guard of honour". On arrival in Thorne, the unsuspecting officer, Lieutenant

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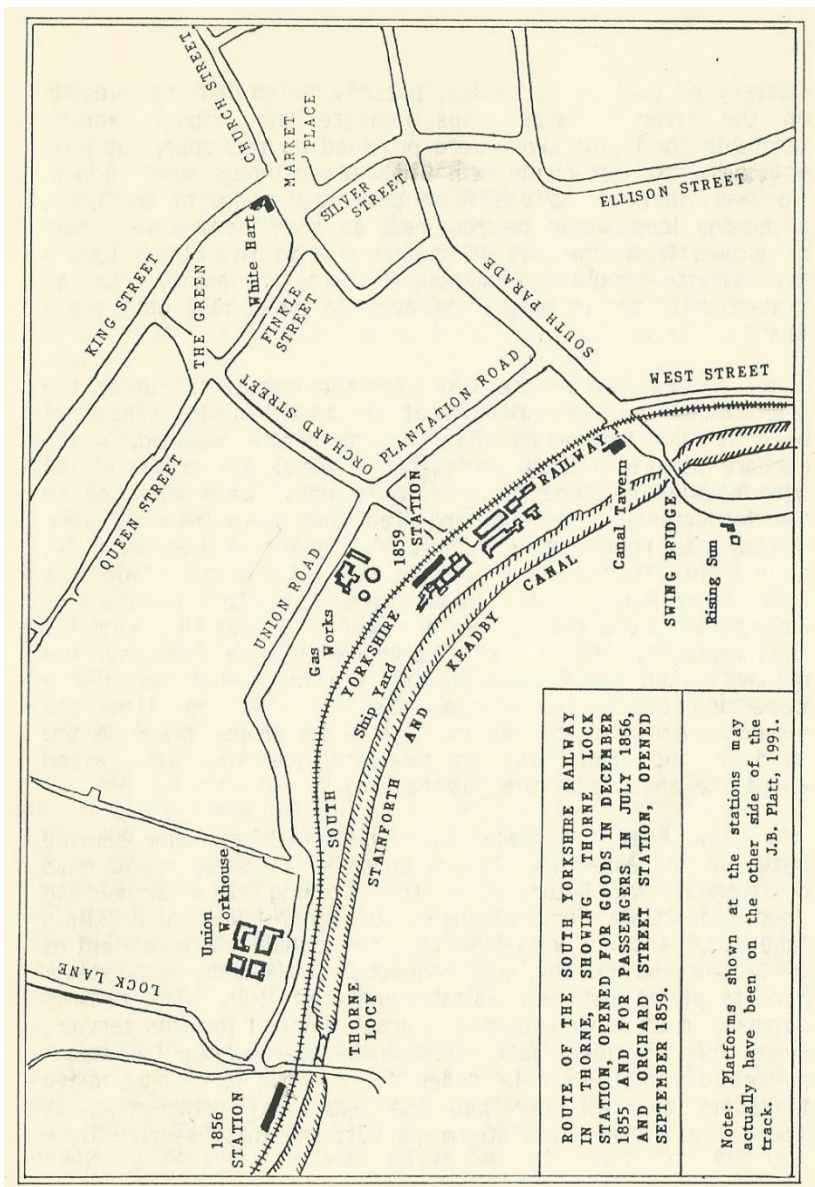
Colonel Yolland, R.E, was persuaded to partake of refreshment at a nearby inn, and whilst he was thus enjoying the hospitality of the South Yorkshire Railway Company, the navvies lifted the locomotive off the track and pushed the inspection coach and wagons past it. By the time the inspector emerged, the engine was in its proper place at the head of the train, and no awkward questions were asked about the absence of the passing loop.

The 1856 timetable shows that the passenger service between Doncaster and Thorne consisted of three round trips on Mondays to Saturdays. The morning train arrived in Thorne in time for passengers to catch Captain Jacklin's 'aquabus', a canal vessel serving the canal-side communities of Crowle and Keadby with steam packets plying between Gainsborough and Hull. The railway company must have expected a great demand for this service, since they decided soon afterwards to purchase a steam packet of their own in order to operate it. Prospective travellers to Hull also

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had the option of transferring at Thorne to a river Don steam packet, the daily service from Waterside to

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Hull by way of the Don, Dutch River, Ouse and Humber.

An intermediate train left Thorne for Doncaster upon the arrival of the steam packet from Hull – times varied according to the state of the tides – and there was an evening train arriving in Thorne about 6.30pm and leaving for Doncaster at 6.50pm. Additionally, on Saturdays only, the railway operated a 'market service', a train from Thorne to Doncaster at 10am, returning at 3pm.

The journey time between Thorne and Doncaster was said to be thirty minutes, giving an average speed of twenty miles per hour. However, since there were intermediate stops at Stainforth, Bramwith and Barnby Dun, it seems unlikely that the trains would have been able to maintain these timetables and also comply with the maximum speed limit of 20mph. This speed limit was a safety precaution. Since the railway was built alongside the canal tow path, it followed the tortuous route of the canal itself, a route dictated to some extent

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by the winding river Don which flows in close proximity to it along part of its length. Any excessive speed on these curving sections of railway brought with it not only the danger of derailment, but the likelihood that the train would end up in the canal.

John Tomlinson, a journalist and author who travelled on this line, described it as 'one of the most singularly contorted and dangerous lines in England'. Indeed, disaster struck on at least one occasion. In September 1861, a train came to grief near Kirk Sandall Bridge when the locomotive left the track and plunged into the canal. The driver, Robert Bell, upon being hauled out, examined his tobacco box and remarked, 'I wouldn't have minded if it hadn't wet me 'bacca!'

Driver Bell must have been an eccentric character. It is also reported of him that he was in the habit of giving his employers a couple of days' notice before going on sick leave and getting away with it. Another famous railway personality of the time was Joshua Slowen. Born in Leeds in 1830, he

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was stolen away from home by an elder brother at the age of eight and taken to work as a beer-boy (tea-boy) on the Lancaster and Carlisle Railway, where the elder brother was navvying. Joshua was working on the formation of the South Yorkshire Railway at Mexborough when the line opened and got a job with the new line in 1849. He became a driver in 1852, worked on the Thorne extension when it opened and did not retire from the footplate until 1903, at the age of 73. Nine years later he was once again serving his company, accompanying a group of South Yorkshire Railway veterans to London to give evidence in a legal matter.

Thorne Lock station was located in part of what later became Staniland's Boat Yard. It was the first of Thorne's remarkable total of five railway stations, but remained in operation for barely three years. In 1859, an extension of the railway was built, once again on the canal tow path, eastwards to Keadby. This was a further ten miles of track, built by Waring of Conisbrough for

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what was even then a bargain price of £30,000. It enabled the coal traffic to be transferred directly into the larger vessels which navigated the Trent and Humber. Work began at Thorne on the 2nd December, 1858 and was reported complete on the 11th June, 1859.

The passenger service was also extended to Keadby, driver Slowen being in charge of the first train to use these metals. Since the extended railway passed closer to the centre of Thorne, it became possible to build a new station at a more convenient location. This was constructed at the end of Orchard Street, close to the present fire station and between the canal and the gasworks which formerly occupied that site. Little evidence of the railway remains in that area today, except that the stationmaster's house, now a private residence, can still be seen. The station itself must have been quite a primitive arrangement. The South Yorkshire Railway Company was renowned for the lack of passenger amenities at its stations. A minute of the Board of Directors dated

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31st December, 1859 states: 'Complaints having been made as to station arrangements at Thorne and Crowle, the Board ordered water closets to be substituted in lieu of the present accommodation'.

The new extension was soon to involve the South Yorkshire Railway in a legal battle. It crossed the Bawtry to Selby road in Thorne at South Parade on a level crossing situated beneath the modern canal bridge. An injunction was filed against the Company for obstructing the turnpike road. The railway company had also been advised that although they were at liberty to build the railway extension on their own property (i.e the canal bank), there was some doubt as to whether they could legally charge fares or tolls for people to use it. In consequence they applied for and obtained an Act of Parliament authorising the line. In the event, the nuisance of the railway level crossing was to be short-lived. The railway was replaced by an entirely new line, that which still exists today, in 1866. The wooden canal

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swing bridge, and the structure which later replaced it were, on the other hand, to remain an obstacle to road traffic for a further hundred years.

Initially there was no Sunday service on the South Yorkshire Railway. Sunday trains were first operated in June 1860. During that summer, the South Yorkshire Railway also advertised a seven-day excursion ticket from Doncaster to Hull and Bridlington. The details were as follows: travel by train from Doncaster to Keadby, by packet boat to Hull and by steam ship for the sea journey to Bridlington. The fares were seven shillings to Hull and ten shillings to Bridlington, including first class rail travel and best cabin on the steamers, or four shillings to Hull and six shillings to Bridlington for covered carriages on the trains and fore cabins on the ships.

The original intention of the South Yorkshire Company, outlined in a Parliamentary plan of 1855, had been to construct the railway as far as Crowle, and from Crowle to Bole, south of Gainsborough, where it was

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planned that a junction would be made with the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway. When this plan was abandoned, the continuation to Keadby was considered. Here, the railway met with the daunting obstacle of the River Trent, and here, until 1866, it terminated.

In October 1869, Bradshaw's Railway Guide shows an extra train working each way on Saturdays. At this time, the railway began to be operated on a different system called the staff and ticket system. The line was divided into two sections, Doncaster to Thorne and Thorne to Keadby. A red staff was used for the first section and a blue staff for the second. Trains could not enter either section unless they were carrying the appropriate staff. The South Yorkshire Railway's public timetable for September, 1861 included the following instruction: "On Saturdays the station master must keep No. 53 Up Goods Train at Thorne, to allow No. 60 Market Train to pass down, and No. 54 passenger train up."

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In June of 1863, the shareholders of the South Yorkshire Railway heard that a proposal to straighten the line between Doncaster and Thorne had been approved by Parliament. Other changes were foreshadowed too. An excursion to Thorne (for the fair) on June 15th 1864 was publicised under the heading of 'South Yorkshire Railway'. A few weeks later, another excursion from South Yorkshire stations, this time to Manchester, was headed 'M. S. & L.' – the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway. It was one of the first indications that the S.Y.R. was about to be extinguished as a separate entity. In the event, the South Yorkshire Railway Company was not formally merged with the M. S. & L. until 1874, but by the time Thorne's replacement station was opened, the new line has already been designated the M. S. & L. title.

The new station was opened initially for trains to Doncaster races in September 1866, and the full service between Doncaster and Grimsby became operational

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in October of that year. Driver Joshua Slowen made history once again by driving the last train along the old route into the Keadby terminus. Three years later, in 1869, Thorne's forth railway station opened, introducing a service between Doncaster and Hull provided jointly by the M. S. & L. R. and a newcomer to the town, the North Eastern Railway Company. As for the old railway line, much of the track in the Thorne area must have been lifted fairly soon after the introduction of the new services. Certainly, there is no evidence of a railway near the canal on the Ordnance Survey map of 1906, except for a short spur extending from Maud's Bridge back towards Thorne between the canal and High Bridge Road, almost as far as Orchard Farm. This remained in existence until the 1960's, and deserves some mention since its moment of glory came a century after the rest of the line had closed. Shortly before it was lifted, this section of track was used as an overnight parking place for the Royal Train when the Queen visited Doncaster races.

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John B. Platt, 1991.

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