

Lychgate Tunnel

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You had to be careful where you went afterwards, and choose a railway pub, or anyway one near a former station or big yard, because it was all too common to get sneered at as anoraks. At the end of one day about a year ago, Charlie Maguire had been peaceably typing up his day's log into his laptop computer when some berk who'd had a couple too many called him a "sad anorak." Charlie, short tempered at the best of times and pretty much soaked through after a day of heavy rain, put him on his back with a straight left, and only escaped more trouble because the jobbo was not only the village prat, but well overdue for it, according to the landlord.

We ended up in the Duke of Monmouth's Arms at Lychgate, and found no trouble there, because it was right next to where the old LNER station had been and even had some models of locomotives in glass cases, and pictures from the steam era hanging up there on the walls. It had been the classic 'railway hotel' in bygone days, but now it was just a pub. We ordered food and drinks and gathered in a half-circle by the roaring fire.

I don't recall exactly what comment triggered it off, but whilst we were waiting for the orders to arrive, someone mentioned Lychgate Tunnel, which had been the subject of many a railway story. Jack Harris, who was the best and most reliable source of railway history in the group, said that it was all a myth, and that the tunnel had been a rumour started during the War, to fool German intelligence into thinking that valuables were stored there. That explained, he went on, why there was no trace of it after about 1945, despite it being shown on some old OS maps and not others.

Then why, asked Vic Thomas, was there no trace of it at all on the ground?

This discussion was an old one, and centred around a portion of the old LNER line which branched off for no apparent reason into Lower Lychgate and then terminated in a small yard on the outskirts of the village, apparently going nowhere, doing nothing and considerably overgrown. Nobody was able to account for it being built, or what purpose it had served, and yet there was evidence to suggest that it had at one time been the main line, rather than the gently curving electrified track which now ran through Lychgate proper, over what was today an automated level crossing and through the remains of the defunct station.

When the subject had been hacked to death, there was a pause in the flow of conversation as pints were raised to thirsty throats. In the ensuing silence, a voice from the other side of the public bar said, quite conversationally, "I can tell you all about Lychgate Tunnel."

We turned to look and there in the corner was an elderly chap, dressed on farmer's clothing, about 80 years old. He had a walking-stick propped up beside him, but his eyes were bright and clear.

"Come over and tell us then," said Jack, and we parted ranks to allow the chap some space. He lifted his stick, walked over to us, sat down, accepted Jack's offer of a pint, and started to talk.

"I started work here in 1945," he said, his eyes flashing from one of us to the next. "I was on the railway all my life, signalman or Bobby in the main, although I did travel the tracks as a

guard from time to time. Yes, you're right, the main line well before those days didn't follow the way the new one does." He nodded at Vic. "There's a good reason for it, I can tell you.

"I was apprenticed to old Fred Towler, the signalman, who'd worked the railways man and boy all over this region for fifty years, and he told me about Lychgate Tunnel. Oh yes, there used to be a tunnel, only a mile or two south of here. You won't find it there now. They removed it."

Removed it? we asked. How can you remove a tunnel?

"Well, remove it they did, and that's why you can't find it now. Yes, yes, it's on some old maps, but not many."

Why not? we asked. Was it dangerous?

He laughed. "Dangerous! Yes, dangerous, but not in the way you might think. It was old Fred Towler told me the story, and I'll tell it to you.

"When the railway was first proposed to be extended to here from the London line, it would be about 1920, they surveyed the area of course and decided that it was less trouble to build a tunnel through Lychgate Hill than it was to make two or three bridges over the river and another two or three level crossings. The extension was planned to link five or six villages and of course Dewkeston, which is about 35 miles north of here. Fred always said that the engineer claimed he wanted to build a tunnel just because he liked tunnels and wanted to show off, but I can't vouch for that. Anyway, once the surveying was done, they dug out the permanent way, ran the tunnel through Lychgate Hill, and it ended up as a fairish size - about five hundred yards long - and built a signal box about a quarter of a mile further down, where the track to Dewkeston ran off from the London line.

"As you probably know, Dewkeston Quarry produced a lot of gravel in those days and much of the traffic on that part of the line was goods trucks and locomotives, that made the Quarry owners very happy as they'd been using horses and carts, and more recently motor lorries, to transport the gravel; but the railway made things much easier for them. They paid to have the trackway extended right into the Quarry yards, and had their own little set of sidings and points, plus the necessary loading bays and so on. It all made a big difference to them.

"Old Fred was in the signal box a lot, dealing with the railway traffic, and he told me story in bits and pieces over the years he was teaching me the business of working the box. As you lads will know, that's a rare skill and one you can't rush into.

"Fred used to lean out of the signal box window, look a hundred yards or so down the line and see the gaping mouth of that tunnel; and he knew as soon as it was built that it was a bad place. It was on a slight curve, and you couldn't see either entrance from the other end. He used to mutter about it in the pub, but nobody paid him any attention. The railway was bringing jobs to the villages, especially as the Quarry expanded production and took on more local people; and that was good for everyone.

"Some of the village lads would walk or run through the tunnel for a dare or devilment, and this was dangerous as of course you didn't get much warning of a train coming, although if you were caught inside you could get yourself into one of the safety recesses in the blue brick wall. But then one lad was caught unexpectedly as a train came through. He was killed, and afterwards they built a stout fence round the line where it joined the tunnel mouths and that pretty much stopped it.

“One afternoon when it was hot and sticky, it would be after the war started, early summer 1940, Fred was on duty in the box and he gets the signal that a goods shipment is coming along, out of the quarry, onto the local loop and then through the tunnel and onto the London line. This was scheduled and expected, and it was nothing unusual. Fred set the signals and points and heard the signal bell as the locomotive came onto the line. He knew from long experience that two and a half minutes later he would be able to look down the track and see the loco emerge from his end of the tunnel. He knew all the drivers, you see, and they’d grin and wave at one another as the loco went puffing by.

He sets the kettle to boil on the gas ring and by the time it’s whistling, there’s no sign of the train. This did happen from time to time if there was a problem with the shunting or one of the trucks, but he rings through to the quarry, and they tell him that the loco left on time and appeared to be running normally.

“After another couple of minutes there’s still no sign of it, so thinking it’s broken down in between the quarry and here, Fred sets the signal to Danger to stop the driver before he reaches the main line, and phones the quarry again to get them to send someone to take a walk down the line and find out what’s gone wrong.

“A half hour or so later, he sees a quarryman come out of the tunnel mouth and this chap walks up to the box. Fred opens the window, leans out and shouts, a bit sarky, where’s the train then, have you lost it?

“The quarryman says, shaken, that there’s no sign of the train. Fred looks sideways at the bloke and takes this a joke, saying I didn’t know it was April the First, but the man’s adamant. Then a couple more figures come out of the tunnel mouth and Fred sees Bill Crowther, who’s the Quarry Foreman, and Bill’s the man Fred plays darts with in the village team. So when he looks white and shaken and confirms that there is neither sight nor sound of the train, Fred has to take it seriously, and he remembers that he always thought the tunnel was kind of bad.

“You might think, maybe the driver was crazy, or the points were wrong, and the train’s gone off in the opposite direction? But that was impossible, as the points at the Quarry Loop only allowed traffic onto the main line in the direction of the tunnel, and it was physically impossible to go in the other direction.

“So there you have a locomotive and driver, a driver’s mate, twenty or so waggons filled with gravel, a guard’s van and a guard, vanished into thin air. It caused a real stir in the village I can tell you, but it never made the news because of what was going on in France, as the enemy advanced and our boys were being first of all driven back to Dunkirk and then evacuated back over the Channel as the German Army closed in.

“Fred and Bill Crowther set all the signals to “Stop” and walked the line right back to the quarry. There was one place where the quarry loop passed close to a small lake and some of the excavated gravel pits and associated workings, and a landslip there might have caused the train to crash. But there was nothing, not a sausage. They took lanterns and checked every inch of that tunnel and everything was in apple-pie order. But Fred said, “I knew that somehow the tunnel had had the train and the men on it, it was black and dark and sinister in there no matter how many lanterns we had. You expect tunnels to be dank and cold, but this one was plain bloody freezing. And as we got about half way through, I could feel that tunnel laughing at me, every step I took.”

“Bill Crowther never said nothing about it, but later on his wife let slip that his laundry showed how scared he had been down that brick hole.

“It was all hushed up, the driver, his mate and the guard’s wives all got pensions, and the men were officially killed in an accident. There was talk of a strike when the next train was due to go though, but the Quarry Director himself rode on the footplate of the first train, which arrived quite safely, and after that things quietened down and pretty soon life got back to normal.

“Then in 1942 it happened again.

“By now, Fred was less worried about the tunnel although he would never walk through it and preferred a mile detour if he had to go down the track for any reason. But one blue-sky summer afternoon, an excursion train was running from London to Shallowford-on-Sea with a factory works outing going for a day by the seaside. It ran into the tunnel at 45 miles per hour from the London end, the driver blowing his whistle, and it never came out again.

“Fred set the signals to Stop and with another man they walked down the track and into the tunnel, Fred remembering only too well how he had felt things last time, and so he had the cold sweat running off his face and the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. He and his mate, he told me, touched every brick between the two ends of the tunnel, but they found no trace of the locomotive or the fifty-eight people on board. You’ve heard of this,” he said directly to Jack Harris, “but you don’t know what really happened.”

Food and a further round of drinks arrived at this point and there was a short interval whilst the portions and pints were assigned, and during that time you could see Jack’s brain going into search mode. “Summer 1942?” he asked. The old man nodded. Jack thought for a short while, put down his knife and fork and said that the only serious incident around that time that he knew of was the Pletchworth Disaster of July 1942. One of our bomber aircraft, he said, had been badly hit by flak over enemy territory and was trying to make it back to base. It had been a dark, cloudy moonless night and the crew got lost; when they ran out of petrol they baled out, with the aircraft subsequently crashing onto a passenger train.

The old man shook his head. “Like I said, you don’t know the real story. Men from London came up here. They took some old carriages, crashed them, set a petrol tanker against it and set fire to it all, and then let it burn so that there was nothing left. The official word was that it was all due to that aircraft crash, but it was faked. The coffins were filled with sandbags, and sealed. People wondered why some of them were too heavy or too light.”

More than one pint glass hit the table with a thud. You’d never get away with it, someone said in disbelief.

“Well, get away with it they did, especially in wartime, when you weren’t encouraged to ask questions if something strange was going on. That’s why the so-called victims were buried in a communal grave, anyone who asked too closely was told that the fire had been so bad that nothing was recognisable. Anyway things quietened down again and life went on.

“In late spring 1944, a platoon of the Home Guard, a Lieutenant, his Sergeant and five soldiers, took an inspection trolley, one of those pump-handled waggons, along the loop and through the tunnel, because there was a report of a German fighter plane shot down in the area by our boys, and they were searching for the enemy pilot, who had been seen to bale out and be parachuting down.

“Fred tried to tell the officer that he thought it was a seriously bad idea to take the men down the tunnel, but the officer was a know-it-all type and he made Fred set the signals and points whilst he had his men took the waggon down the track and into the tunnel mouth. Fred said he wasn’t the only one surprised when they never came out again at the other end, and yet another search failed to find any trace of them.

“This time Fred didn’t volunteer to go down the tunnel with the search party, because, he said, he’d done it twice before and wouldn’t do it again to prove it. The only good thing about it was that another Home Guard platoon did find the German pilot, who was holed up in a barn about a mile away.

“Despite the war effort, it was arranged for one of our heavy bombers to ‘accidentally’ drop a big bomb on the hillside, right over the tunnel. Military engineers were sent up, declared that it was all unsafe as a result of the explosion, and they manufactured a collapse of earth and bricks about half way along the tunnel. Then the regular railway engineers rebuilt and moved the permanent way to where you see it today. They just boarded up the tunnel, took away the rails and sleepers, and left it. Soon after that it was D-Day and the news was all about what was going on in France as our blokes advanced, so the whole episode was overshadowed by the Invasion. In a few years it was so overgrown, you had trouble finding it, even if you knew where it was.

“A year or so after the war was finished, the story finally came to the top of somebody’s in tray, and they brought up mechanical diggers and navvies and simply filled in the tunnel from the top downwards until there was nothing left, nothing at all.

“Some of the local lads claim that if you ferret around up there on the hillside, you can get down an old ventilation shaft and into a short length of the tunnel that somehow survived being filled in. But I never saw that myself, I only heard about it.

“And that’s Lychgate Tunnel for you.”

What happened to Fred Towler? we asked. The old man pondered. “He is supposed to have retired afterwards,” he said. “But when he heard that the tunnel was going to be filled in, he was determined to try and find out what happened to the goods train, the soldiers and the holiday excursion, before it was all too late. So he took a lantern, a pick to sound the walls, told his wife he’d be back for supper, and set off down the track.”

There were several gentle thuds as pint pots went down onto the tables. All eyes were on him, but none of us spoke.

“Of course,” said the old man, “as you might expect, nobody ever saw him again.”