

## The Windsor and Ascot Railway

It may seem strange nowadays, but the area between Windsor, Ascot and Aldershot was once a fiercely contested area for railway promoters. A principal reason for this in the early days of railways was the desire to link the northern main lines to the South Coast, but, once these lines were established by other routes, the perceived need to serve the local area became more important. The main source of traffic in the area was Ascot race course which could provide irregular, but highly lucrative, business.

Ascot race course was established in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and the meetings were an important social occasion, patronised by royalty and therefore the 'place to be' for the upper classes. The first time when rail travel could be used to reach the races was in 1838 when the newly opened London & Southampton Railway ran special trains from Nine Elms to Woking, from where there was a long carriage journey to Ascot.

The railway finally reached Ascot in 1856 the L&SW worked Staines, Wokingham & Woking Junction Railway opened. This gave the company a monopoly of the rail traffic to the race course, which it retained despite numerous attempts to build other lines to the area. There were nine projected lines between Windsor, Ascot and Aldershot between 187-83, all of which failed to either reach parliament for authorisation, or were rejected by the House of Commons. The inspiration for these attempts to reach Ascot was the GWR, which found itself unable to share in the valuable traffic.

The GWR could only get race course business by means of road transport from Windsor. An old photograph shows carriages and London horse buses in use for ferrying racegoers from Windsor to the course. In 1898 the GWR supported a private company, the Windsor & Ascot Railway, which proposed to link these two places and also give through running to Aldershot over the L&SW's Ascot-Frimley line.

This line was proposed to leave Windsor to the west, and cross Winkfield Plain before passing under Fernbank Road, crossing the Reading Road at Englemere Pond and the L&SW line to Reading, before joining the Frimley branch with a triangular junction. A short branch would run direct to the Royal Ascot Hotel (at the present Heatherwood Roundabout), and a new road would link north and south Ascot, crossing the L&SW line west of its station. The company sought running powers over the L&SW to Aldershot.

The L&SW naturally opposed this scheme, and the promoters, fearing defeat, agreed to abandon all lines south of the Reading Road and the running powers, while the L&SW agreed to build the new road. The L&SW worked cleverly, getting the support of local inhabitants who wanted the road but not the railways bisecting their village. This also had the useful result (for the L&SW) of making the line far less appealing to speculators and the GWR, now that it would no longer offer a through route to Aldershot and the south.

The Windsor & Ascot Light Railway Act was passed on 12<sup>th</sup> August 1898, authorising a line ending north of the Reading Road and confirming that the GWR would work and manage it. Land was marked out and the site of Ascot station purchased, but shortage of capital (investors were no longer interested in a mere branch line) meant that nothing was done, and the powers lapsed in the 1900's. On 9<sup>th</sup> August 1899 the L&SW obtained powers for a new road to link Ascot station (L&SW) to South Ascot, and this became Brockenhurst Road (the modern A330) when opened in 1901, passing under the London line east of Ascot station.

The 1904 25in OS map shows the land which was purchased for the Ascot station, at the foot of the hill leading to the Royal Ascot Hotel. The station area would have had about two platforms and storage sidings, terminating at right angles to the main road, the line curving slightly to the west to pass under Fernbank Road. The station site was purchased by the W&A company and remained undeveloped until the 1970's when a new housing estate was built. OS 2.5in and 6in maps in subsequent years to 1904 show the boundaries of the station, still clearly defined.

If it had been built, Ascot GWR would have probably had standard brick station buildings like those at many other stations of the 1900's, eg Lambourn. On race days, it would have been busy, with special trains occupying the platforms and sidings, but for the rest of the year there would be little business. The area the line crossed was thinly populated and would produce little traffic. Bus competition in the 1920's and '30's would probably have seen the line close before 1939. Nothing apparently remains on the ground of this abortive Victorian scheme.

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