

M&GN MEMORIES BY MICHAEL HUNT

The M&GN must have brought me to Norfolk in 1945 when my mother, baby sister and I came from North Nottinghamshire to join my father in Reepham. Initially, we all lived in my grandparents' small cottage in Hackford Vale, and there on the hillside, the other side of the vale, was the railway bank over which trains chuffed back and forth through all the magic days.

I was taken for E. Nesbit moments by the fence at the other side of the farm that spread four meadows and a field from the cottage garden to the actual line. Terrifyingly exciting, the just decelerating trains from Guestwick or the slower ones up from Whitwell, still building speed... And occasional goods trains that went on for ever and raised even more childish questions about the world beyond central Norfolk.

My father worked all over Norfolk from a base in Norwich and commuted there by car, but the rest of the family used the trains exclusively - day returns to the City station or more exotic trips the other way from Whitwell, to the seaside via Melton Constable or the North via Peterborough and Lincoln.

The walk from Hackford Vale to Whitwell Station entailed a leafy lane parallel to the railway line which emerged a hundred yards from the station entrance. Later, when the family moved to the new house in Broomhill Lane we used the main road but it wasn't so picturesque. Many folks had to rush themselves to catch their trains, and I recall being sent on ahead to ask the rail staff not to let the train go without us. Rail staff were always friendly and kind in my experience.

By the time I had to go by train to attend secondary school I was very familiar with the line to Norwich, but the daily 'commute' offered such delights for an eleven year old destined to become a lifelong, full-time student of human interaction and diversity (I worked as a psychologist for nearly forty years!) The steam train carriages with their snug compartments meant one could join different groupings of regular travellers or try to get into the small exclusive school pupil group with its range of ages and personalities. In the respect of the former option, I learned all about the lives of shop assistants, workers and managers as well as the latest lowdown on Norwich City Football Club from one of its junior players who regularly travelled for training. As regards the school pupil group, I had to endure a little putting-me-in-my-place, including being forced to ride on the luggage rack from Norwich to Lenwade, with five minutes to escape before getting to Whitwell. But they were all super young people, witty and bright and really very caring of each other.

The switch from steam to diesel made the trips less romantic but by that time efficiency was a more important requirement. We all wanted 'happy ever after', however, and the news of closure came as a rude shock, not the least because the trains were always chock full in the last weeks!

For some years after the closure we dreamed of a re-opening while getting used to rural bus travel. Returning home late on a Saturday by way of a county bus to Sparham Hill and a long walk in the dark I often used to look at the ghostly outline of Whitwell Station and think 'What a waste!' Later, when it joined the many shrines to the memory of Beeching victims it became a more acceptable site when I revisited Reepham from a new settlement in Bedfordshire. Your painting of it was lovely, by the way.



Whitwell Station, 1973 - David Burrows