

Leicestershire Landowners and the Railway: Resistance and Co-operation

by *Tim Warner*

On 19th May 1832 the Honourable Reverend Baptist Wriothsesley Noel, one of the Noels, Earls of Gainsborough of Exton Park, Rutland, wrote to his wife, Jane, describing his recent journey on the first railway to be powered entirely by steam locomotives. This was the Liverpool and Manchester Railway which had opened just two years earlier in 1830. His initial delight at travelling 'with the capacity of lightning' at 24 mph was short-lived as in his second paragraph he contemplates the abuse to which his fellow men were already subjecting this new form of transport in their lust for profit, and the diabolical spectacle it engendered:

'Waggons filled with cattle or piled up with pigs lying upon each other like bags of cotton, hurrying to the Manchester market: to them, poor things, that wrong might well be called the Dance of Death'.¹

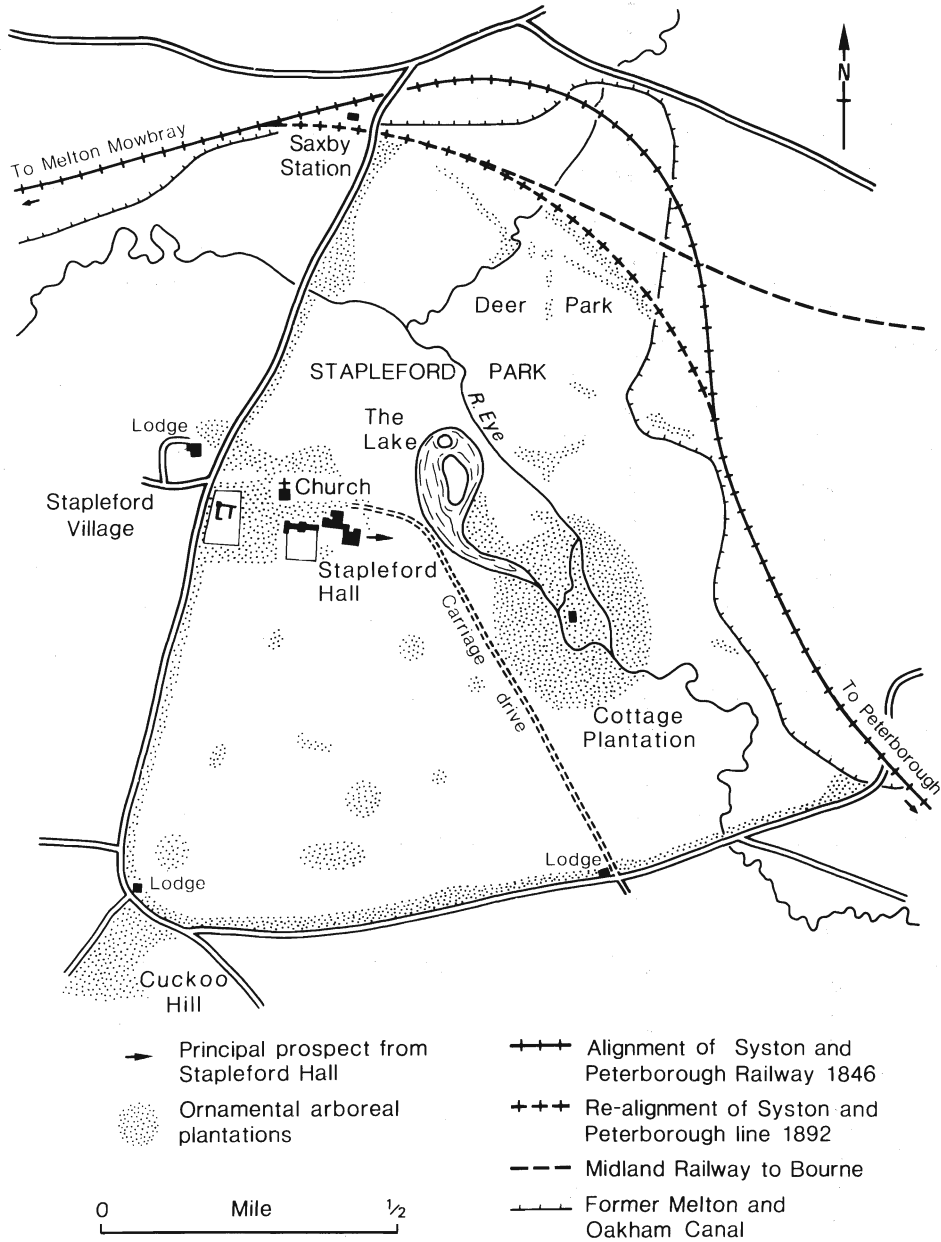
The Dance of Death, perhaps most famously depicted in a fifteenth century fresco, some 26m in length, in the Chaise Dieu Cathedral in France shows a seemingly endless collection of people — from the Emperor and Pope of the time, right down to villains and thieves — each led by a hideous skeletal incarnation of Death, 'dancing' in procession towards the grave. A powerful metaphor indeed to describe the new-fangled steam locomotive and its train of jolting, rattling carriages and trucks, but one which was not wholly without precedent at the time.²

In other quarters of polite society the railway was greeted no more enthusiastically. England's governing aristocracy believed the railway would promote insurrection amongst the lower orders once they were enabled to move around the country and congregate in politically sensitive areas. In his novel, *Sybil, or the two Nations* of 1845, Benjamin Disraeli, later to become Conservative Prime Minister, examined this aspect of railway development and considered the undesirable, not to say dangerous, 'levelling' effect it would have on society:

"'I fear it [the railway] has a dangerous tendency to equality'", said [Lord de Mowbray], shaking his head... "Equality...is not our metier. If we nobles do not make a stand against the levelling spirit of the age, I am at a loss to know who will fight the battle. You may depend upon it that these railroads are very dangerous things".³

Nowhere was the threat of the railway perceived more strongly than at the gates of the aristocracy's private parklands and pleasure grounds — perhaps the most visible and symbolic manifestation of their wealth and political power. At the time it must have seemed that the railways were almost unstoppable as estate after estate came under the threat by the projection of both trunk and branch lines.⁴ In Leicestershire we have one of the country's most celebrated examples of the lengths to which the aristocracy would go to prevent the desecration of their landscape parks by the railway. At Stapleford Park, five miles east of Melton Mowbray, the warning of Disraeli's fictional Lord de Mowbray appears to have been heeded most forcibly by the 6th Earl of Harborough who, quite

STAPLEFORD PARK, LEICESTERSHIRE :
RAILWAY INTRUSION, 1846-1892



Map 1

literally, took it upon himself to 'fight the battle' against 'the levelling spirit of the age'.

Between 1844 and 1846 the Earl of Harborough found that nothing short of physical violence would deter the surveyors of the Midland Railway who were intent upon laying out a section of the Syston-Peterborough line through his park. The resulting 'Battle of Saxby Bridge', in which the Earl's estate workers and gamekeepers, spurred on in true cavalry style by the Earl himself, was of such national significance as to warrant a lengthy report in *The Times*.⁵ The incident and eventual compromise has since received exhaustive documentation elsewhere and it is not necessary to repeat it here.⁶ However, it may be of interest to point out that today the rail traveller between Leicester and Peterborough can still experience the outcome of the 'battle' in travelling over 'Lord Harborough's Curve'. The line still skirts the eastern perimeter of Stapleford Park in a broad semi-circle, and Stapleford Hall may be plainly seen from the train through a thin belt of trees planted, unsuccessfully it would seem by the 6th Earl to screen the offensive railway from the windows of his mansion. (See Map 1.) In the interests of accuracy, however, it should be noted that the 'Lord Harborough's Curve' of today is much less pronounced, since in 1892 (fully 33 years after the Earl's death) a realignment was permitted to accommodate the express trains which now ran the route.

In the remainder of this article three other nineteenth century instances of railway projection through or near aristocratic landscaped parks in Leicestershire will be examined and the responses of their owners assessed.

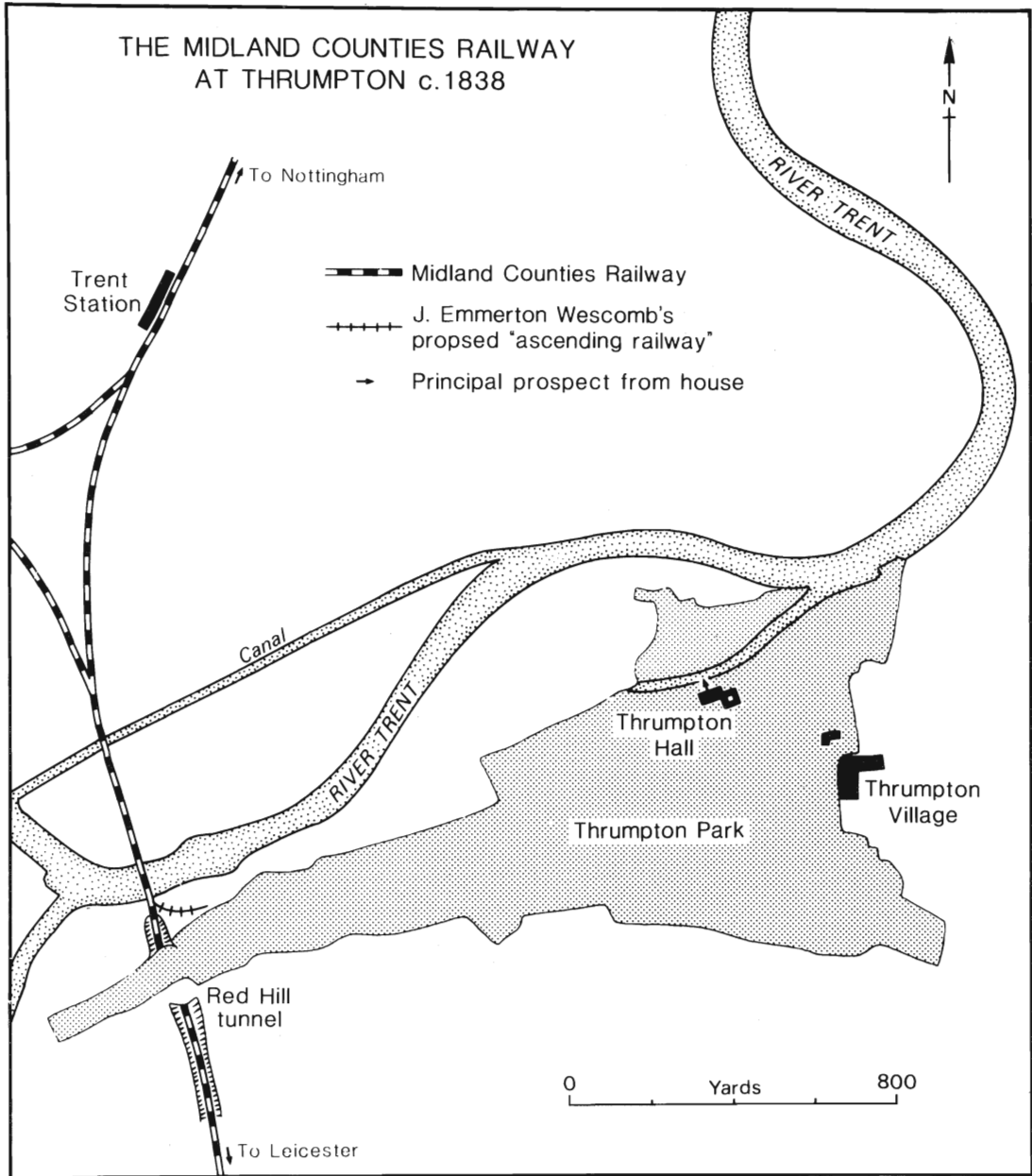
Although occurring sufficiently early in the 'Railway Age' to create something of a precedent,⁷ the Earl of Harborough's stand was by no means the first or the only one of its kind.

At Thrumpton, an estate on the Leicestershire-Nottinghamshire border, largely obscured today by the massive Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station, a most curious sequence of events was set in motion by the projection, in 1838, of the Midland Counties Railway through just under two acres of parkland belonging to J. Emmerton Wescomb, Esquire.⁸ (See Map 2.) He considered the taking of even this small amount of land to be symbolic of 'the breaking down [of] a barrier which secured his estate from unwelcome intruders', and that his greatest wish in obtaining just compensation was 'to have his property placed as near as circumstance [would] permit in as private and secure a state' as it had been before the railway was proposed.⁹

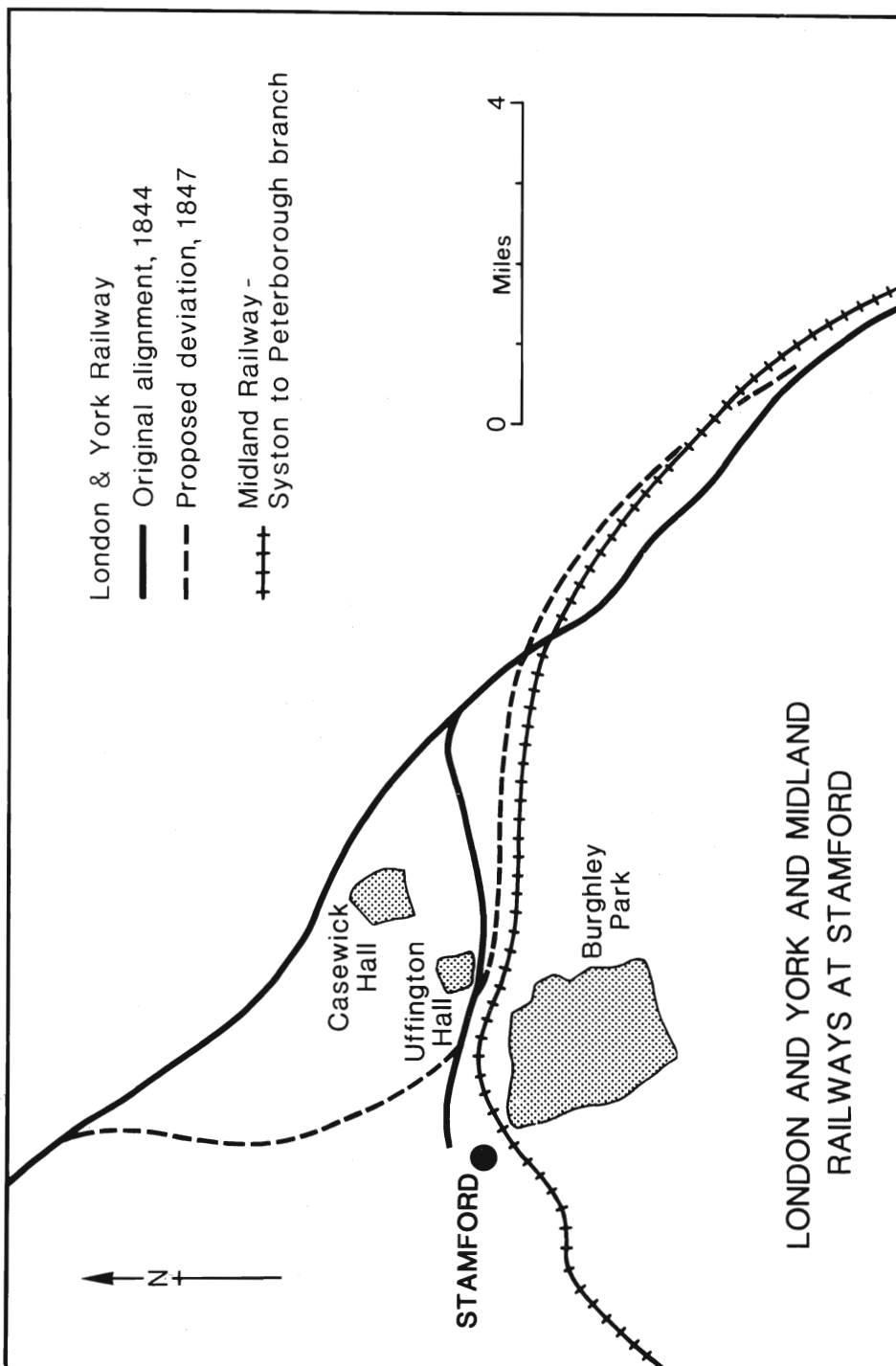
Thus far Wescomb's objections were very much akin to those of Lord Harborough. However, on 2nd June 1838 there was a distinct change of mood in his correspondence with the Railway Company. Suddenly he lifted his objections to the line and became instead, anxious to take full advantage of its proximity to Thrumpton Hall. First of all (through his solicitor) Wescomb requested that a private station be constructed for him south of the entrance to Red Hill Tunnel. Not surprisingly the Company did not agree to this as 'it would oblige [them] to stop trains at Thrumpton after having made a stoppage...not half a mile off at the North side of the Trent'.¹⁰ (i.e. at Trent Station).

By no means disheartened by this rebuff, Wescomb formulated a plan, which from our modern standpoint, appears remarkable, not to say dangerous. He announced that he wished to construct his own 'ascending railway out of his meadow on the south side of the bridge [over the Trent] so that [his carriage] could pass over the bridge to the [Trent] station'¹¹ and be attached to the London-bound train. Upon his return from the city, his carriage 'would be brought to the same station, and when the train ha[d] passed on, then for his carriage to be allowed to re-pass to the south side [of the Trent] into Mr Wescomb's own ground'.¹²

Sadly for Wescomb his plans came to nothing, although, optimistic as ever, in the last



Map 2



Map 3

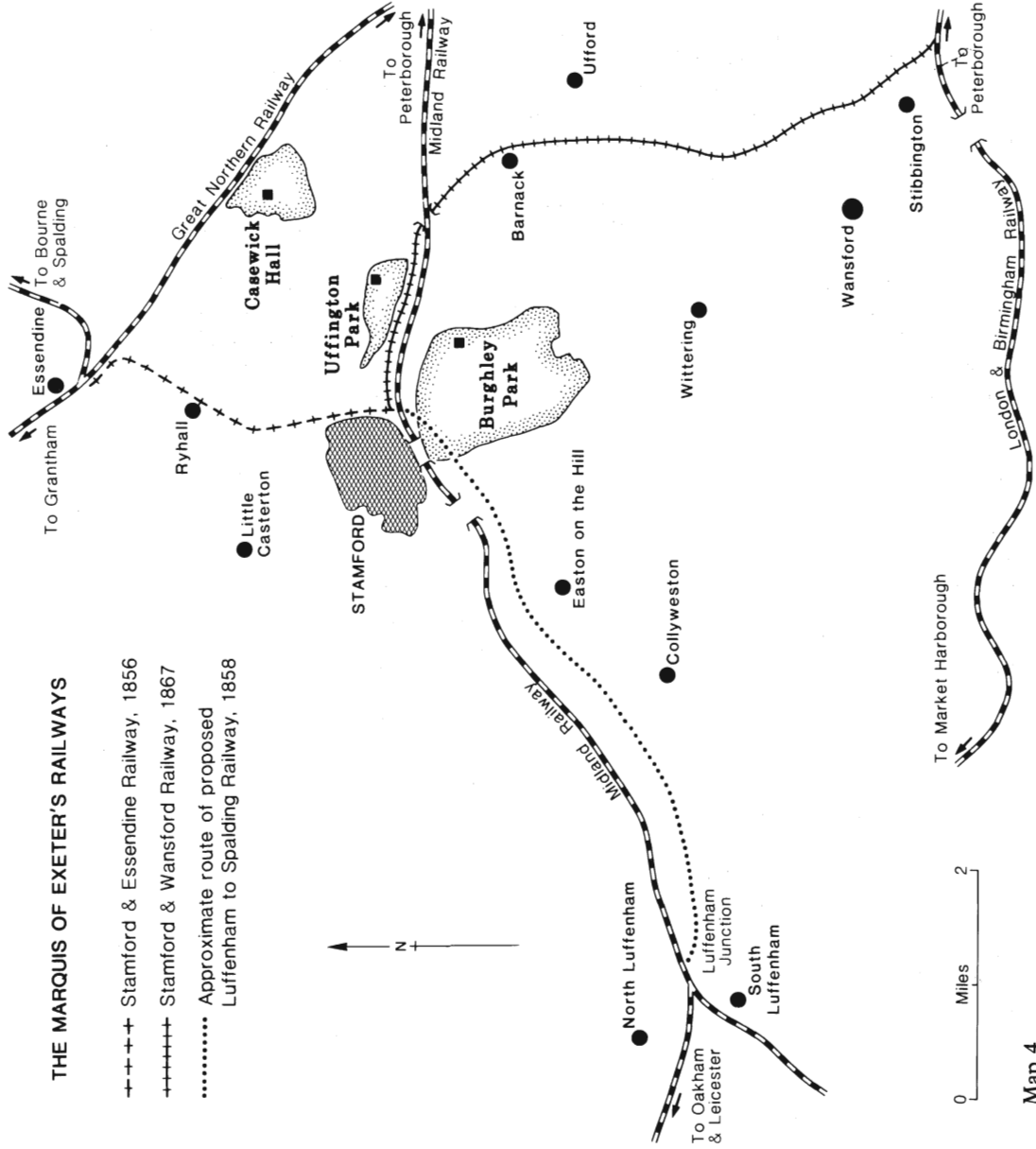
surviving letter of the series, he wrote that had he but the chance to speak to the railway's engineer in person, he felt sure he 'could have convinced him that it would be no inconvenience to the railway...[as he] would undertake to be at every expense'.¹³ Later that same month J. Emmerton Wescomb went abroad¹⁴ and, shortly thereafter died at the age of only 56.¹⁵

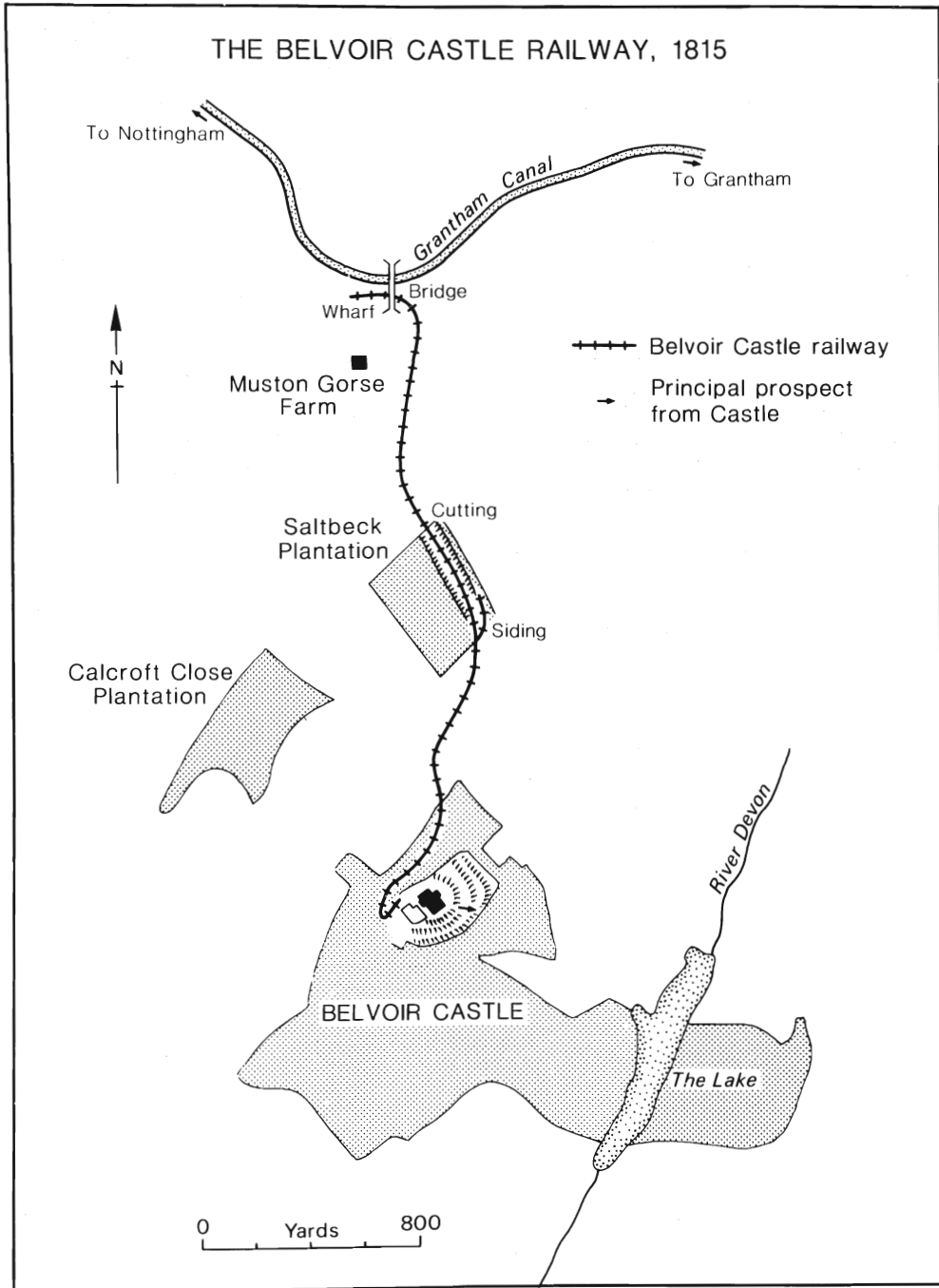
The delay in bringing the railway to Stamford is customarily blamed on the intransigence of the 2nd Marquis of Exeter in his fervent desire to preserve the quietude of Burghley House.¹⁶ The truth is, however, much more complex. Opposition to the railway in the 1840s was in fact presented by three landowners — the Marquis of Exeter of Burghley House, Lord Lindsey of Uffington Hall, and Sir John Trollope of Casewick Hall — and involved three railway companies — the London and York (later to become the Great Northern), the Direct York and the Midland. During the course of ensuing debates the London and York and the Direct York united, and will be considered as such hereafter. (See Map 3.)

In this short article it is not possible to give anything but the briefest of outlines of the numerous plans and oppositions brought forward for and against the various railway schemes, but it is hoped that the information presented will add weight to existing accounts.¹⁷ The London and York Railway Company initially proposed its line in April 1844, running a little way to the east of Stamford, the town being served only by a branch. The person most obviously affected by this alignment was Sir John Trollope of Casewick Hall who, in August of that year, wrote to Earl Fitzwilliam, a veteran of many parliamentary committees on railways, to ask him to use his influence in effecting a deviation of the main line away from the Casewick estate. Sir John's letter, headed 'Reasons for taking Peterborough in the line of the London and York Railway', lists nine advantages of the line being taken to that town and avoiding Stamford.¹⁸ His plea succeeded to the extent that the railway company did indeed alter its plans, but only to build the line further to the west, much closer to Stamford and Casewick Hall.¹⁹

It was at this point, seeing that their parks were now to be near the main line, that the Marquis of Exeter and Lord Lindsey registered their objections before a Commons Committee. From the Minutes of Evidence of this Committee²⁰ it is apparent that by far the most injured, and consequently most vociferous opponent of the scheme was Lord Lindsey: Uffington Park had, in one year alone, been threatened by no less than three separate railway schemes, and Lord Lindsey felt justified in speaking out strongly to protect his domain. The Marquis of Exeter, on the other hand, appears to have played a relatively minor role in presenting the case for the opposition, merely corroborating Lord Lindsey's evidence and adding that he, too, feared for the privacy of his own park at Burghley. As a result of their shared objections to the London and York Railway, Lord Lindsey and the Marquis joined in supporting the rival Midland scheme of connecting Stamford to its network via the branch line between Syston and Peterborough.²¹ Despite the fact that this line ran virtually parallel to the London and York's 1847 realignment, (and consequently affected Burghley and Uffington to no less an extent) their plea was accepted by the Commons Committee and the London and York scheme was rejected in favour of the Midland.²²

Although the above somewhat vindicates the Marquis of Exeter from his supposed 'crime', it was to the people of Stamford he was obliged to prove his 'innocence'. They strongly believed that, as principal landowner and MP, he was solely to blame for the failure of the London and York (by now the Great Northern) scheme to serve the town. It has been suggested that this is why the Marquis subsequently threw himself into making amends by forming a railway construction company and planning and promoting a series





Map 5

of branch lines connecting Stamford with direct rail routes to London — each of which, in an effort to secure the best levels, he unselfishly routed near or even through Burghley Park. These branch lines were the Stamford and Essendine Railway (1853) which connected with the Great Northern and the Stamford to Wansford Railway (1864) which connected with the London and Birmingham Railway.²³ Also, in 1858, the Marquis submitted plans for a line to connect Luffenham Junction near Stamford with Spalding.²⁴ (See Map 4.)

Thus it may be seen that by 1867 (when the Stamford and Wansford line was opened) Stamford, albeit indirectly, was connected with the three principal rail networks in the region — the Midland, the Great Northern and the London and Birmingham — through the sole efforts of the Marquis of Exeter.

At Belvoir Castle, a railway was built as early as 1815 by the 5th Duke of Rutland.²⁵ It ran northwards from the cellars of the Castle to a wharf on the Grantham Canal, its purpose being to ease the transport of coal. (See Map 5.) In this instance, therefore, far from protesting at the invasion of privacy by the railway, the 5th Duke built it right into the Castle grounds. Although, at this early date the line would not have been worked by steam locomotives but by horses, C.E. Lee maintains that the use of waggons with flanged wheels running on edge rails means that the Belvoir Castle railway must be considered a proper railway in every modern sense of the word.²⁶

The 5th Duke's successor proved himself to be equally well-disposed towards the laying of rails across his estate. Despite being a keen huntsman and owner of 33,000 acres of some of Leicestershire's best hunting country in the Vale of Belvoir, the 6th Duke took a contrary view to many of his sporting peers (who considered railways to be disruptive of runs and destructive of coverts²⁷) and actively promoted the line from Newark to Leicester in the early 1870s²⁸ and even laid out part of it. The importance of the influence of the Duke of Rutland in the projection of railways over the Belvoir estate can hardly be over-estimated. In many instances prior to 1870 he had strongly opposed the routing of railways across his land,²⁹ and had only changed his views when a project presented itself which 'would be beneficial to the district'.³⁰

Through his exalted status as principal resident and landowner in the county of Rutland, the Duke had almost *carte blanche* to authorise or prevent a railway passing through his property in the Vale of Belvoir. Nevertheless, south of Melton Mowbray the proposed line was heavily contested by other landowners whose houses and hunting country would be severely affected. Such a case was the opposition raised by a Mr Bradley, MP, tenant of Scraftoft Hall. Mr Bradley had, he said, settled in East Leicestershire some 25 years earlier, for no other reason than that to be able to hunt the Quorn's Friday Country³¹ — a pursuit he now saw as threatened by the proposed line. However, such was the weight of the railway company's case in Committee, backed most effectively by the 6th Duke of Rutland, that the line was pushed through in 1873 with only a minor deviation to the north of Scraftoft Hall.³²

The question which, in the light of the Earl of Harborough's early opposition, presents itself is what influenced the Dukes of Rutland, J. Emmerton Wescomb and the Marquis of Exeter to overcome their initial objections and subsequently welcome or even actively promote railway lines across their estates and parklands? Although, as indicated, in each case unique circumstances prevailed, it is possible to find some common ground between these people in their involvement in industrial, and in particular mining, enterprises on their estates.

Anderson has noted that the landscape around Stapleford Park was almost entirely agricultural and 'unblemished by the spoils of mining'.³³ Similarly, it would appear from

the (admittedly limited) surviving manuscript material concerning the 6th Earl of Harborough³⁴ that he had no involvement whatsoever in industry. He was a major shareholder in the Oakham Canal³⁵ which ran through his park, but this was merely a legacy from his predecessor (who had promoted the canal) and David Tew has forcefully illustrated that the canal was not at all welcome in the 6th Earl's purview.³⁶

In complete contrast, each of the other landowners mentioned was actively involved, often at first hand, with some form of industrial enterprise. The Marquis of Exeter is recorded as owning and operating ironstone pits on his Burghley estate (and possibly even within the park itself) in 1859, 1866, and between 1873 and 1878.³⁷ At Thrumpton, J.E. Wescomb's about-face in his attitude towards the Midland Counties railway coincides directly with the discovery by the railway engineers of large deposits of 'plaster' in the tunnel they were boring through Red Hill.³⁸ As these deposits were found on the Wescomb estate, all rights of exploitation and sale naturally fell to him. Also, Wescomb is known to have had substantial ironworks on his Irish estates.³⁹ The 6th Duke of Rutland, a staunch believer in the 'spirit of the age',⁴⁰ whose vast estates throughout the country yielded thousands of pounds in industrial revenue,⁴¹ conceived the idea of a railway through the Vale of Belvoir as a direct result of the discovery of considerable deposits of iron ore on his land at Waltham in 1870.⁴²

Hence, by way of conclusion, in these particular Leicestershire examples, it was the possession of industrial interests that separated the later co-operating landowners from the early opponents.

Notes

1. Leicester County Record Office, Noel collection. DE 1791/1.80/2
2. The author is currently working on a doctoral thesis which examines the various images and perceptions of the railway as a new feature in the English landscape
3. Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil, or the Two Nations*, 1845, pp.135-6 of Penguin English Library Edn, 1980
4. An illustration of how little prior warning it was legally necessary for a railway company to give of their intention to take land is given by Sir William Hodges in *The Law of Railways*, 1876, Chapter 4
5. *The Times*, 18th November 1844, p.5
6. C.E. Stretton, *The History of the Midland Railway, 1901*, pp.81-86; C.E. Stretton, 'The Battle of Saxby' in *The Rutland and County Historical Record*, Vol.5, 1911-12, pp.213-219. See also the numerous guide books to Stapleford Hall held in the Local Studies section of Leicester City Library and, in particular Charles Lines, *Stapleford Park*, c.1980
7. A comprehensive, nationwide study of such opposition and the considerable extent to which it influenced railway alignment is given by J.R. Hepple in *The influence of Landowners' attitudes on Railway alignment in nineteenth century England* unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Hull, 1974
8. Nottingham County Record Office, Seymour Collection. DD SY.58/2
9. *Ibid.*, DD SY.58/3
10. *Ibid.*, DD SY.58/18
11. *Ibid.*, DD SY.58/19
12. *Ibid.*, DD SY.58/20
13. *Ibid.*, DD SY.58/21
14. *Ibid.*, DD SY.58/21
15. George Fitzroy Seymour, *Thrumpton Hall: a short History*, (1956), p.5
16. This popular belief is recorded, though by no means perpetuated, by D.L. Franks in *The Stamford and Essendine Railway* (1971) Leeds: Turntable Press, pp.5-6
17. The most complete account of events to date appears in J.R. Hepple, *op.cit.*, pp.237-241, 248-250. See also J.M. Lee, 'Modern Stamford', pp.101-2 of Alan Rogers (ed.) *The Making of Stamford*, 1965
18. Sheffield City Library, Wentworth Woodhouse Collection, G54/3
19. House of Lords Record Office, HC *Minutes of Evidence* 1846, Vol.8, London & York Railway, 22 May, p.52
20. These *Minutes of Evidence* are preserved in the House of Lords Record Office and are referred to in detail in subsequent footnotes
21. HLRO, *Minutes of Evidence*, HC 1847, Vol.47, London & York Railway, 12 May, pp.123-31

22. *Ibid.*, pp.79-80, 138-40
23. Maps and an account of these railways may be found in F.G. Cockman, *Discovering Lost Railways*, 1973, pp.27-28
24. Rutland Local History Society *Railways in Rutland*, 1980
25. C.E. Lee 'The Belvoir Castle Railway', in *The Railway Magazine*, 1938, pp.391-394
26. *Ibid.*, p.392
27. See T.F. Dale, *The Belvoir Hunt*, 1899, p.180; Colin Ellis, *Leicestershire and the Quorn Hunt*, 1951, Chapter 11; W.C.A. Blew, *The Quorn Hunt and its Masters*, 1899, pp.234, 322
28. HLRO, *Minutes of Evidence*, HC 1872, Vol.50, Newark, Melton and Leicester Railway, 10 June, p.157
29. For example, an earlier line through the Vale of Belvoir, proposed by his own steward. HLRO *Minutes of Evidence* HC 1872, Vol.50, Newark, Melton and Leicester Railway, 10 June, pp.133-5
30. *Ibid.*, pp.136-7
31. *Ibid.*, 12 June, p.175
32. HLRO *Minutes of Evidence* HC 1873, Vol.19, Newark Melton and Leicester Railway, 31 March, p.223
33. P. Howard Anderson, *Forgotten Railways: the East Midlands*, 1973, p.64
34. Leicester CRO, Sherard Collection, reference DG 40
35. P. Howard Anderson, *op.cit.*, p.65
36. David Tew, *The Melton to Oakham Canal*, 1984, Chapter 2; See also the Minute Books of the Oakham Canal Co deposited at the Leicester CRO ref. DE 2792/6 and DE 2792/7
37. Eric S. Tonks, *The Ironstone Railways and Tramways of the Midlands*, 1959, no page numbers
38. Nottingham CRO, Seymour Collection, DD SY.58/15
39. Introduction to the Thrumpton catalogue in Nottingham Local Studies Library
40. *Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire and Rutland: some of their Social and Political Leaders*, 1895, p.1
41. Notably through the exploitation of lead. See J.T. Ward 'Landowners and Mining' p.88 of J.T. Ward and R.G. Wilson (eds), *Land and Industry*, 1971
42. J.R. Hepple, *op.cit.*, p.314