

BY THE MET. TO WATFORD

by Eric Stuart

BACKGROUND

The Metropolitan Railway is well-known for its 'main line' to the north – first to Chesham, then Aylesbury and beyond. But there are also the branches to Brill, Stanmore and Watford (Uxbridge is hardly a 'branch'!).

As the Metropolitan began its expansion into what became known as Metroland, it sought to tap all possible sources of traffic. In those days, a service to suburban areas was seen as bringing in regular passenger traffic, both peak and leisure. Also, freight business would come from materials for housing construction and, later, items such as coal and parcels for the occupants. Sometimes a line was a stratagem to block a rival. (It has been suggested that the LNWR branch to Croxley Green was built to try and block the Met!).

The area between Rickmansworth and Watford was one such area ripe for development, whilst the Metropolitan also seemed to think they could acquire a share of the traffic to and from the town centre. But the new line may have been a risky venture, as there was already an electrified line from Watford Junction to Rickmansworth¹ and another line from Watford to Croxley Green, the intermediate area to be served by the prospective branch².

HISTORY

The London & Birmingham Railway, which later became part of the London & North Western, had avoided Rickmansworth, which was a busy town. A company called the Watford & Rickmansworth Railway built a line from the Watford station now called Watford Junction to Rickmansworth, with an intermediate station at Watford High Street, opening on 1 October 1871. It was operated from the start by the London & North Western Railway (LNWR), later part of the London Midland & Scottish (LMS) following the Grouping. The Rickmansworth branch served the various industries by the rivers Gade, Colne and Chess³ and the Grand Union Canal.

Under the proposal to improve local service on the old London and Birmingham line, the LNWR built their 'New Line', opening just before the First World War, which effectively provided a fifth and sixth track from London to Watford, including a deviation to serve the Rickmansworth branch's High Street station.

On 15 June 1912, a further branch opened from the Rickmansworth branch to Croxley Green. High Street station was rebuilt with an island platform, to ease interchange, but there was also a chord, making a triangular junction, allowing direct trains to/from London, avoiding Watford High Street and Junction.

Following delays caused by the First World War, the New Line, together with the two branches, was electrified on the 3rd and 4th rail system, as standardised by the Underground, as joint services were operated – the New Line on 16 April 1917, and Croxley Green branch on 30 October 1922⁴, with that to Rickmansworth following on 26 September 1927.

Ironically, both these established branches failed to survive⁵ (despite the Croxley Green branch having through trains to both Euston and a City terminal at Broad Street), whilst the Metropolitan branch has continued, as we shall see.

The LNWR line to 'Ricky' ran further to the south, almost avoiding housing for much of the distance. By then, of course, the Met. & GC was providing a service to London and the north. The LNWR Croxley Green branch was closer to housing, but much of that only grew up later in its life. With its policy of encouraging housing development (such as Metropolitan Railway Country Estates), the Metropolitan was in an advantageous position.

¹ The LMS station was subsequently (25 September 1950) given the suffix 'Church Street'.

² Perhaps surprisingly, it was not until after Nationalisation that a decision was made to rename one of the two Croxley Green stations, the Met. branch station becoming simply Croxley from 23 May 1949. Ironically, it is much nearer the Green at Croxley than the LNWR station. But we were spared Croxley Green East and West!

³ The Three Rivers of the local authority's name.

⁴ In the mid-1980s, a shortage of EMUs caused the service to be occasionally operated by diesel units, as seen in the photograph on page 542.

⁵ Passenger service to Rickmansworth ended on 2 March 1952, whilst, after trials of an improved service, the Croxley Green branch was reduced to one (political) morning minibuses/taxi service, that ceasing on 29 September 2003.



Above: A three-car set of ex-LNWR 'Oerlikon' Stock at Rickmansworth after it had gained new signage and the suffix 'Church Street'. A new British Railways 'Totem' station sign can be seen to the left.

Left: The rural nature of the Rickmansworth branch line is obvious here on 4 July 1952 with the morning freight train from Rickmansworth Church Street to Watford, four months after passenger services ended but with current rails still in place.

Photos: Alan A. Jackson



Left: A rather poor but rare photograph of two 1920 Watford Joint Tube Stock trains in platforms 2 and 3 at Watford Junction at an unknown date in the 1930s. After withdrawal from Bakerloo Line service in 1930-31, three three-car sets were retained by the LMS for the Rickmansworth and Croxley Green shuttles, although they were inadequate for Saturday traffic and main line stock was often used instead.

Photo: Brian Hardy Collection

As with the Stanmore branch, the Watford branch was a fairly late arrival on the railway map. By that date, the Met's partner in the area was no longer the Great Central Railway, but its successor, the

London and North Eastern (LNER). (The LNER was not involved with the Stanmore branch). The Watford branch finally opened on 2 November 1925, after electrification of the Metropolitan had extended to Rickmansworth previously on 5 January 1925. Being a joint enterprise between the Met. and LNER, both companies operated services to London, with electric trains to Baker Street and the City, and steam trains to Marylebone respectively⁶. The area was still developing and the traffic on offer led the LNER to soon drop out⁷, leaving just the Met. service. The junction with the Metropolitan mainline was triangular, pointing both south towards London and north. Over the latter, the Met. operated a shuttle service between Rickmansworth and Watford until the end of 1933. After the shuttle had been withdrawn, this 'North Curve' was used for trains serving both Watford and Rickmansworth, such as ran on Sunday and Bank Holiday mornings for many years, for freight, empty stock movements and for occasional specials⁸.



However, there was a weakness in the Metropolitan's quest to reach Watford, as executed. They wished to reach Watford Town Centre, to compete more directly with the LMS branches. The Met. had purchased a site in Watford High Street (No.44 High Street) and constructed a station frontage there, which still exists, but never used for its intended purpose. But they were prevented from reaching the station site because they were unable to obtain land to enable them to complete the branch, thus leaving the actual terminus of the line in a prosperous area of West Watford, but a long walk from the town centre. For a while, this lack was remedied by a connecting bus service, but this gradually withered away over the years to just a few at extended intervals, making it almost useless! The Metropolitan's terminus thus remained some distance away from the centre.

Above: (Left) The Metropolitan Railway's station building in Watford High Street in c.1928/29 after sale by N-W L&T Co.

Photo:

Alan A. Jackson Collection

Left: The same building as seen on 30 March 2016.

Photo: Eric Stuart

THE PRESENT AND FUTURE

The above situation has existed for decades, severely limiting the branch's usefulness and the number of passengers carried on the final section from Croxley to Watford. However, a solution has been 'waiting in the wings' for many years. Even a casual view of a local map will show that the ex-LNWR

⁶ See following analysis of the service, as supplied by our Editor.

⁷ The General Strike of 1926 seems to have been the excuse.

⁸ A Football special for Aylesbury via the North Curve, with Dreadnaught coaches, is featured in the lower picture on page 59 of Clive Foxell's book, *Images of the 150 Years of the Metropolitan Railway*.

branch from Watford to Croxley Green ends a comparatively short distance from the Metropolitan branch. About 40 years ago, the local paper hinted at a plan to join the two lines in the vicinity. However, although the lines are very close, they are on different levels. The gradient should not pose too much of a problem for electric trains but, over the years, many houses have been built in the area and a large road roundabout is in the space to be covered by a prospective link.

None-the-less, the concept has taken hold over recent years and became known by the prosaic title of the 'Croxley Rail Link' (CRL), although 'Metropolitan Line Extension' is now used. Although this solution would not require any tunnelling, as had once been proposed, the spanning of the gap between the two lines will require a long, S-shaped viaduct (probably on a gradient) to be built at considerable cost. However, having crossed the roads there, the line can follow southward the existing track bed originally taken by the LNWR Croxley Green branch⁹, until it joins with the DC line (as the 'New Line' tends now to be known) from Euston, before entering Watford High Street station and continuing to Watford Junction. At the Metropolitan Line end of the viaduct, a new track bed will be necessary on a rising gradient to meet the existing line east of Croxley station.

Various discussions have been held about a future for the existing Watford station on the Met. branch: should there be any remaining train service, a peak-hour only service or would it become a stabling point? Most likely, this final section of line will close, rendering the present viaduct over the Colne Valley redundant. Open issues include the provision of any service directly between Rickmansworth and stations north thereof and Watford, although that is currently looking unlikely. Watford Met. station building is in an attractive 'Garden City' style, designed by Charles W. Clark, and is a Grade II listed building, so will hopefully survive.

The LNWR line had stations immediately south of the roundabout (Croxley Green) and another in west Watford, called (unsurprisingly) Watford West. There is also a station (more accurately, a halt) called Watford Stadium, but familiarly known as Hornets' Halt, after the nearby Watford Football club ground. It was built to avoid football match attendees passing through the town on match days, by utilising a shuttle service from Watford Junction, meeting trains bringing supporters, especially for 'away' teams. It was opened on 4 December 1982, but became unused after a comparatively short time.



Left: August 1987, with a two-coach DMU 'standing in' for an EMU passing Watford Stadium. One of the new CRL (MLE) stations will be sited near here. After the meagre service was finally withdrawn, the line and route soon fell into disrepair and became overgrown with vegetation, completely obliterating the track formation. However, this has now been cleared prior to work beginning and a photo of Watford Stadium can be seen on the back cover of the April 2016 *Underground News*

Photo: David Pearson

Watford Stadium halt is actually situated a short walk from the hospital and two new stations are planned to replace the original two and the halt, so serving the housing, hospital and local business park. Names currently proposed are Cassiobridge, nearer the old Croxley Green (LNWR) station, and Watford Vicarage Road, nearer the hospital and stadium. I saw the original plans for these stations and they were on a par with the recent Hillingdon station, with booking offices, and copious staff accommodation. With the new LUL staffing arrangements, I assume something much simpler will now be provided.

⁹ Although the branch was single line, the track bed and bridges were built for double track.

For those not familiar with Watford, a simple explanation. The retail town centre essentially consists of the High Street. What is known as the Lower High Street is at the southern end, including Watford High Street station. Nearby is the large and busy Harlequin shopping centre, which is near the theatre and will shortly have a multi-screen cinema. The Met's proposed central Watford station would have been approximately the same distance from the northern entrance to the Harlequin as High Street is to the south. The new line will thus serve the retail area, linking it with intermediate housing in the Harrow direction.

Another great gain will be the continuation over the present DC line to Watford Junction, opening up a wide range of onward travel possibilities for the West Midlands, the north and Scotland from many Met. stations. Some of these possibilities had previously been available by main line trains of the Great Central and its successors, some of which stopped at Harrow-on-the-Hill and Aylesbury, but denied since the last vestiges were withdrawn in the 1960s.

Despite repeated delays, the Extension does seem to be under way at last. The LNWR branch to Rickmansworth was lifted many years ago and is now a rural cycle/foot path, but most of the track on the Croxley Green line has remained as it was. Vegetation had overtaken much of the route, as one of the pictures will show, and clearance has been started. However, the construction of the connecting viaduct is the great engineering work to be done. A bridge over a new road that was pushed through the embankment south of Croxley Green station must also be built, but otherwise the work involves re-levelling the existing track bed, track-laying and the building of the two new stations.

The new service will be operated by London Underground and an extra S8 train has already been built to cover the service¹⁰. Of course, it will not be the first time LUL trains have served Watford High Street and Junction stations. Bakerloo Line (or their predecessors') trains operated from Queen's Park to Watford Junction from 1917 until 1982. And 'tube' stock was also used in the Watford Junction – Croxley Green and Rickmansworth LMS shuttle services for a while in the 1930s.

The electrification system of the remaining DC lines had been largely changed from 3rd and 4th rail to 3rd rail only from 2 August 1970 but, because of the joint operation of LUL and BR trains north of Queen's Park (and Kilburn High Road!), both 3rd and 4th rail operation had to be retained on some sections for LUL trains at different periods. This will be provided throughout the CRL into Watford Junction – and, presumably, the new Sub-surface signalling system will be extended throughout, as well. Watford Junction will thus be served by both LUL and London Overground trains as LOL is now the operator of the former LNWR electrified services that still exist. The station will once again be more worthy of its 'Junction' name than it has been for many years.



Above: (Left) Looking up Baldwins Lane. The 'Harvester' is on the left. The new line (according to documentation) will descend in front of the current Metropolitan Line on the embankment, cross the road (presumably at least 14ft 6ins above the road on a bridge or possibly the flyover will start there).

Above: (Right) The flyover will start beyond or to the left where the trees are (the Metropolitan Line is behind them, leading to the Colne Viaduct), then sweep on an S-curve, behind the roundabout and join the LNWR line a little south of the Croxley Green station site, just beyond the right side of the photograph.

Both photos: Eric Stuart

¹⁰ In fact, one of the S7+1 trains (with its all longitudinal seating) has been nominated as the 'Croxley' train and one extra S7 (Train 192) has been built to replace it.

THE FIRST MET. TIMETABLE SERVING WATFORD

With the branch to Watford opening on 2 November 1925, the service provision at first could be considered as 'over-generous', although it was probably such to try and encourage traffic. Passengers from Watford had a choice of three services:

- The Metropolitan to Baker Street and the City.
- The Metropolitan shuttle to Rickmansworth via the North Curve.
- The LNER to Marylebone.

SHUTTLING BETWEEN WATFORD AND RICKMANSWORTH

If we consider the shuttle service first, there were 42 round trips on weekdays¹¹ and 30 on Sundays. Service intervals were varied and were thus not regularly 'clock-face'. Travel time between Rickmansworth and Watford (and vice versa) was generally six minutes, although a few took seven minutes. One train was required for the shuttle service which originated from Neasden.

DEPARTURES FROM RICKMANSWORTH – WEEKDAYS

06.06	07.51	09.43	11.06	12.14	13.36	14.40	16.05	17.16	18.27	19.38	20.46	21.48	22.46
06.30	08.17	10.08	11.23	12.40	14.02	15.08	16.35	17.34	18.46	20.02	21.12	22.07	23.16
07.13	08.52	10.32	11.51	13.14	14.19	15.36	16.57	18.05	19.11	20.20	21.28	22.26	23.34

DEPARTURES FROM RICKMANSWORTH – SUNDAYS

08.15	09.56	11.20	12.56	14.15	15.44	17.23	19.11	20.20	21.34
08.45	10.28	11.56	13.24	14.44	16.22	17.56	19.39	20.48	22.16
09.16	10.54	12.21	13.56	15.22	16.56	18.33	19.56	21.08	22.42

DEPARTURES FROM WATFORD – WEEKDAYS

06.19	08.02	10.00	11.15	12.27	13.48	15.00	16.22	17.26	18.35	19.50	21.03	21.59	22.54
06.41	08.37	10.16	11.34	12.49	14.10	15.28	16.46	17.48	19.03	20.10	21.20	22.15	23.26
07.25	09.33	10.51	12.04	13.28	14.26	15.45	17.07	18.17	19.22	20.38	21.38	22.38	23.54

DEPARTURES FROM WATFORD – SUNDAYS

08.35	10.05	11.36	13.05	14.23	15.52	17.33	19.22	20.39	21.42
09.08	10.40	12.12	13.33	14.52	16.35	18.22	19.47	20.59	22.26
09.38	11.02	12.35	14.05	15.33	17.05	18.42	20.05	21.25	22.50

WATFORD TO BAKER STREET AND BEYOND

METROPOLITAN DEPARTURES TO LONDON – WEEKDAYS

All trains formed EMU stock unless noted otherwise (empty trains to Wembley/Neasden excluded).

06.07	A	10.02 †	A	14.13	BK	17.36	A	MF	19.44	BK	SO	
06.27	BK	10.49	BK	14.43	BK	17.43	BK	SO	20.14	BK		
07.01	A	11.13	BK	15.12	BK	17.45	BK	MF	20.43	BK		
07.21	LS	11.43	BK	MF	15.43	BK	17.57	BK	MF	21.13	BK	
07.42	BK	11.43	A	SO	16.13	A	MF	18.04	BK	MF	21.45	BK
08.06	LS	12.13	BK		16.13	BK	SO	18.16	BK	SO	22.12	BK
08.26	A	12.39	BK		16.43	A	MF	18.31	BK	MF	22.43	BK
08.54	A	13.13	BK		16.43	BK	SO	18.42	BK	SO	23.13	BK
09.23	BK	13.41	BK		17.13	BK	SO	19.11	BK		23.41	BK
09.35	BK	13.53	BK	SO	17.16	A	MF	19.33	BK	MF		

† This train composed of coaches and electric locomotive.

METROPOLITAN DEPARTURES TO LONDON – SUNDAYS

08.30	BK	12.00	BK	15.30	BK	18.58	BK	22.30	BK
09.00	BK	12.30	BK	16.00	BK	19.30	BK	23.00	BK
09.30	BK	13.00	BK	16.30	BK	20.00	BK	23.15	BK
10.00	BK	13.30	BK	17.00	BK	20.30	BK		
10.30	BK	14.00	BK	17.30	BK	21.01	BK		
10.58	BK	14.30	BK	18.00	BK	21.30	BK		
11.30	BK	15.00	BK	18.30	BK	22.00	BK		

LNER DEPARTURES TO MARYLEBONE

WEEKDAYS

06.50	09.04	13.21	16.27	20.31	23.30
07.11	09.47	14.02	17.28	21.05	

SUNDAYS

10.15	22.15
12.20	

¹¹ "Weekdays" at that time meant Mondays to Saturdays, as people worked six days a week then, there being a morning and midday peak on Saturdays. In current times, "weekdays" means Monday to Fridays.

07.33	10.18	14.17	SO	18.22	21.30	14.15
07.53	11.31	14.37	MF	18.40	MF 22.03	16.10
08.17	12.20	15.03		18.58	22.30	18.15
08.43	13.16	SO 15.33		19.47	23.03	20.10

A – Aldgate BK – Baker Street LS – Liverpool Street

In addition to the rather generous passenger service, freight trains also had to be fitted in which ran, as far as the Watford branch was concerned, Mondays to Saturdays.

Notes		Light engine Wembley to Harrow		Engine and brake only Neasden to Croxley		Engine and brake only Neasden to Croxley	
From		Harrow yard	Rick'worth	Neasden	Rick'worth	Neasden	Rick'worth
Day(s)		MF & SO	MF & SO	SO	SO	MF	MF
Croxley Yard	arr	04.47	07.38	14.48	16.19	18.07	18.54
	dep	05.00	07.50	14.51	16.54	18.33	19.55
Watford Yard	arr	05.06	07.55	14.56	16.58	18.38	20.00
	dep	06.02	09.37	16.00	18.24	19.58	22.17
To		Rick'worth	Harrow	Quinton Road	Harrow	Quinton Road	Harrow

MET NON-STOPPING

At this time, all Underground lines (sub-surface and the deep tube lines) operated some form of non-stopping. The Metropolitan was no exception and the complexities of it defy a detailed written description in the space we have available! Therefore, the trains from Watford (excluding the Rickmansworth shuttles) are shown below to show just how complex the stopping patterns were. The stock formations are also shown and they have been abbreviated as follows:

- SS – Steam Stock.
- S – 6-car 'Hustle Train' (which was not scheduled to serve Watford).
- V – 7-car Saloon Stock, which uncoupled to 3- and 4-cars off-peak. Shown as '3', '4' and '7' as appropriate.
- W – Ashbury compartment stock powered by Saloon Stock motor cars (5x8-car trains of 6 Ashbury's plus 2 Saloon motor cars).
- M – 2x7-coach Ashbury electric stock.
- N – 2x6-coach Ashbury electric stock.
- LNER – Main line train.



Above: Although we associate the trains on the Watford branch with what became T Stock, especially in the post-war period, prior to the Second World War, a variety of stock provided the service. One

such example is seen here at Watford with the surrounding area still rather rural looking, with a four-car set of 'Saloon' Stock. Part of the goods yard may be seen to the right. There were occasional services hauled by Metropolitan electric locomotives.

Photo: George Kerley Collection