

## When the Railway Came to North Rode.

On 13<sup>th</sup> January 1835, an alliance of potters, coal owners and iron founders held a meeting in the Swan Inn, Hanley, to propose the formation of a Potteries Railway Committee. The committee resolved to invite the great railway builder George Stephenson to survey a line from the Grand Junction Railway at Norton Bridge, through the Potteries and Congleton, towards Manchester.

Work on the N.S.R. commenced almost immediately, with the ceremonial cutting of the first sod at Stoke on 21<sup>st</sup> September, 1846. In January, 1847, there was a similar ceremony at North Rode.

The contract for the main line from Macclesfield to Norton Bridge and Colwich was awarded to Thomas Brassey, perhaps one of the greatest of all railway contractors. In turn, Brassey sub-contracted some of the work to John Ward, of Congleton. Ward was a giant of a man standing some 6ft.5ins. tall. He scoured the locality for labour, and when the mill owners protested at his poaching, he replied that he needed them, too.

With stick in hand, he strode among the navvies, quelling quarrels and breaking up fights between the rival gangs of English and Irish labourers.

They worked with the simplest of tools – shovels, pick-axes and wheel-barrows – and transformed.

There were 2,000 workmen cramped in the fields engaged on the construction of the twenty arches at North Rode. The railway cutting at Key Green became the embankment at Brook House, Clergymen held meetings to discuss the workmen's welfare; the magistrates brought down prohibitions on the unlicensed beer shops; accidents happened, and gentile ladies were taken to view the sweating backs of the labourers, from a discreet distance – slowly the railways were taking shape.

By April, 1848, the first stage of the railway was ready to be opened, from Norton Bridge to Stoke. On 1<sup>st</sup> June, 1848, the viaduct at Congleton was completed, and the contractors laid on a celebration. About 1,000 labourers and 100 gentlemen of the town went in procession from Park Lane to the fields by the arches. Many ladies promenaded the grounds, adding much to the pleasure of the day.

After speeches, all sat down to a dinner of roast beef and mutton, and wines of the first quality, which had been provided by the Lion and Swan Hotel. Every labourer had a pound of bread and a quart of beer. After the meal, there was dancing, and then, as the shadows of evening fell, the company adjourned to the Assembly Rooms at Congleton, which had been lent by the Mayor, where dancing was kept up until a late hour.

It had not been the intention to open throughout to Macclesfield, but rather sections as they were completed. It was possibly a good thing, as, a couple of days before the opening to Congleton, the viaduct at North Rode gave way, and partially collapsed.