

THE WARE, HADHAM & BUNTINGFORD RAILWAY

COMES TO St. MARGARETS

BY

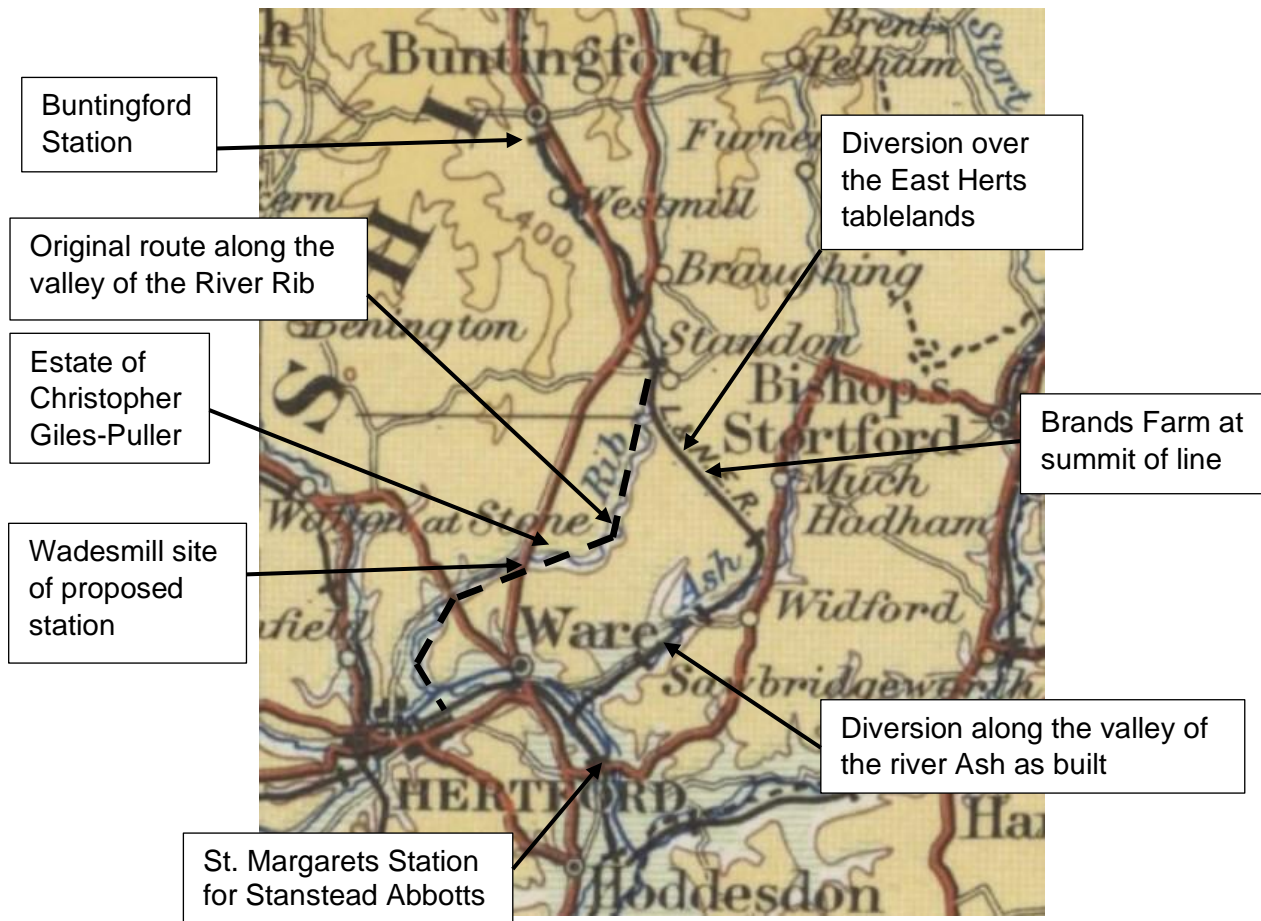
STUART MOYE

It is a strange historical fact that the Buntingford Line had been proposed to link Buntingford to Ware but ended up being diverted to the station at St Margarets. This then led to St Margarets passenger station being partially rebuilt so that both platforms were located in the parish of Great Amwell. This curious state of affairs arose due to one particular landowner refusing to allow the railway to pass through his property as well as other interested parties raising numerous objections. This was to cause considerable difficulties for the fledgling railway company even before the Act of Parliament had reached the House of Commons. Unfortunately like many small railway companies at the time, with committees made up of local people, many poor decisions and other mis-steps were made. This is hardly surprising as few if any of the people involved with these small railway projects had much understanding of the complexities involved. The Buntingford line, like so many other small Victorian railway enterprises, was to run out of money before the line was completed and eventually sold to the larger neighbouring railway company.

Buntingford in the early 1800s benefited greatly in being on the Old North Road that ran from London up the Lea Valley to Ware before heading through Buntingford on its way to the north with considerable stagecoach and wagon traffic. However, things were to change dramatically during the 1840s and the early 1850s. In 1842 the railway reached Bishops Stortford some 12 miles to the south east of Buntingford [*extended to Cambridge in 1845*]. 1843 saw the railway arrive at Ware 10 miles to the south. Royston 12.5 miles to the north of Buntingford was connected by railway with Hitchin in 1847. [*This line subsequently gave access to London in 1850 and Cambridge in 1852.*] This left Buntingford surrounded by railways but with at least 10 miles of road travel to reach the new mode of transport. In those days the railways could offer speeds of travel some three times faster than the road for passengers at about half the cost. The comparison for goods traffic was if anything more favourable. As the network of the local railways grew Buntingford witnessed a loss of traffic passing along the High Street. Indeed, the majority of stagecoach services through the town were withdrawn as soon as a suitable replacement railway line was opened. This particularly impacted the many Inns and hotels in the town and all the many businesses that supported them. Like many towns initially bypassed by the railways the residents of Buntingford realised that their own town was already witnessing a decline and understood that in the longer term this trend would inevitably continue.

It is not therefore surprising that a meeting was arranged in the town to discuss the opening of a railway from Ware to Buntingford. This took place on the 1st August 1856 at the George and Dragon Hotel in Buntingford High Street. A single-track railway line to join Buntingford and Ware was proposed at an overall cost of £100,000. The meeting was advised that an expected income from the line was estimated at £10,000 per year implying a 5% annual yield on subscriber's investment. It was pointed out to the 150 or so attendees at the meeting that local goods could more quickly and cheaply be moved by train to distance markets, particularly London, as compared to the turnpike roads. Equally the cost of bringing in goods especially coal would be considerably reduced. After the meeting things moved quickly with consultations with local landowners and businesses. Somewhat surprisingly the £500-£600 needed for parliamentary fees was raised by subscription before the end of August. Importantly a survey of the route was made in detail between September 1856 and September 1857. The route proposed followed the valley of the River Rib from Buntingford through West Mill, Braughing, Standon, Barwick and Wadesmill entering the Lea Valley between Bengoe and Ware Park. The traditional link between Ware and Buntingford was the Old North Road [later the A10] and this planned railway sensibly duplicated this. There was also the option of the railway serving the County Town of Hertford as well as Ware.

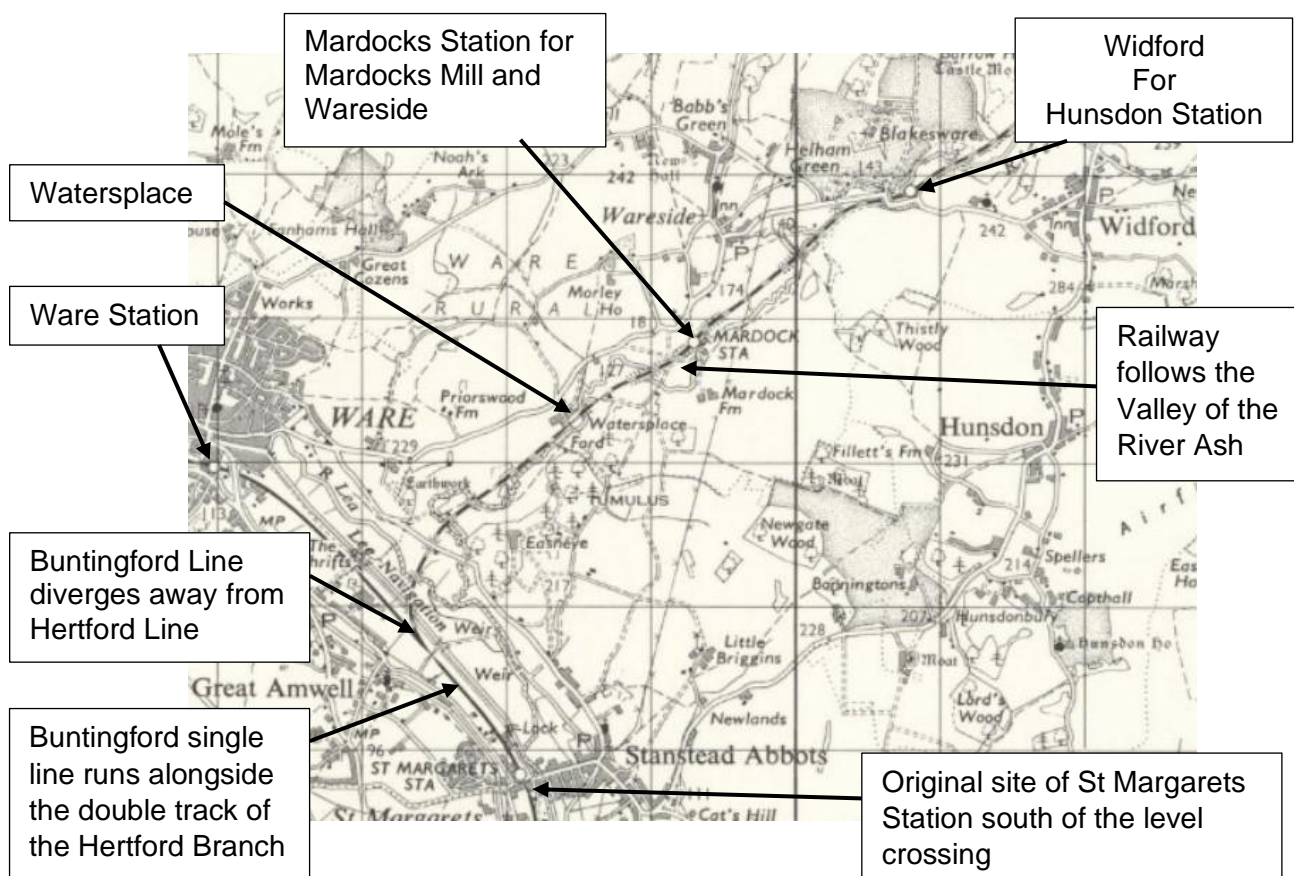
Unfortunately, it became apparent when talking to landowners that Christopher Giles-Puller of the Youngsbury Estate at Wadesmill / Thundridge was very much against the railway intruding into his sphere of influence. It was not an uncommon experience for new railways at the time to face such firm resistance. The outcome was a diversion of the railway south of Standon climbing a steep slope up onto the East Hertfordshire tableland heading south east towards Much Hadham before joining the valley of the River Ash. The railway was to serve Widford for Hunsdon and Mardocks for Wareside before entering the Lea Valley between Ware and Stanstead Abbots.



With this new route in mind steps to negotiate with landowners on the diversionary route took place as well as preparing for a placing a bill before parliament. Surprisingly after the Giles-Puller experience the Ware Hadham & Buntingford Railway [WHBR] bill was deposited in the House of Commons before all land negotiations in the Much Hadham area were complete. So, when the bill received its Royal assent on the 12th July 1858 the section just beyond Widford to Brands Farm [NW of Much Hadham] could not be built due to strong objections from the Much Hadham residents. This meant a second Parliamentary Bill was required, with all the additional costs, to alter the route in the contested area. In the meantime, work progressed on building the line to the south and north of the problematic section. Indeed, track had been laid from Buntingford to Brands Farm by mid-1861. The second bill passed through parliament on the 22nd July 1861 and included a new route in the Much Hadham area and allowed for the ECR [Eastern Counties Railway] to invest in the new railway and to operate it once opened. The involvement of the ECR reflects the growing financial difficulties of the Buntingford line scheme and the realisation that it was very unlikely, that without an arrangement with the ECR, the line could not be finished nor rolling stock purchased. The ECR owned the Broxbourne to Hertford railway with which the Buntingford Line was now planned to connect with at St Margarets Station and thus had a vested interest and the possibility of taking over the new railway in the not-too-distant future.

Once the second bill passed through parliament money became available from the ECR to complete the railway. It inevitably came with the proviso that two ECR Directors joined the Buntingford Railway Board. Work progressed at some pace on the St Margarets to Widford section as well as on the new diversion permitted under the second Act of Parliament. Not only had the costs escalated because of the second bill being needed but also by building the railway from Buntingford southwards. This had meant that all the materials needed had to be moved from Ware northwards by road adding an estimated £350 to the overall cost. At the same time as all of these arrangements were being made the ECR amalgamated with other East Anglian railways to form the Great Eastern Railway [GER], coming to fruition during July 1862. The Board of the Buntingford Company arranged for a Board of Trade inspection on the 18th April 1863 believing that it would pass. They were to be grievously disappointed when the Inspector found many faults in the construction of the railway, many caused by poor quality workmanship by the contractor. A second inspection on the 30th June 1863, after remedial action, found the line acceptable for public use. On the 4th July 1863 the GER commenced operating the railway on behalf of the Ware Hadham and Buntingford Railway for 50% of the net profits. At St Margarets the Buntingford Line trains used the then existing London bound platform on the Rye House side of the level crossing. Initial services being some four passenger trains each way per day with two goods trains added as demand increased as goods handling facilities at the various stations came into use.

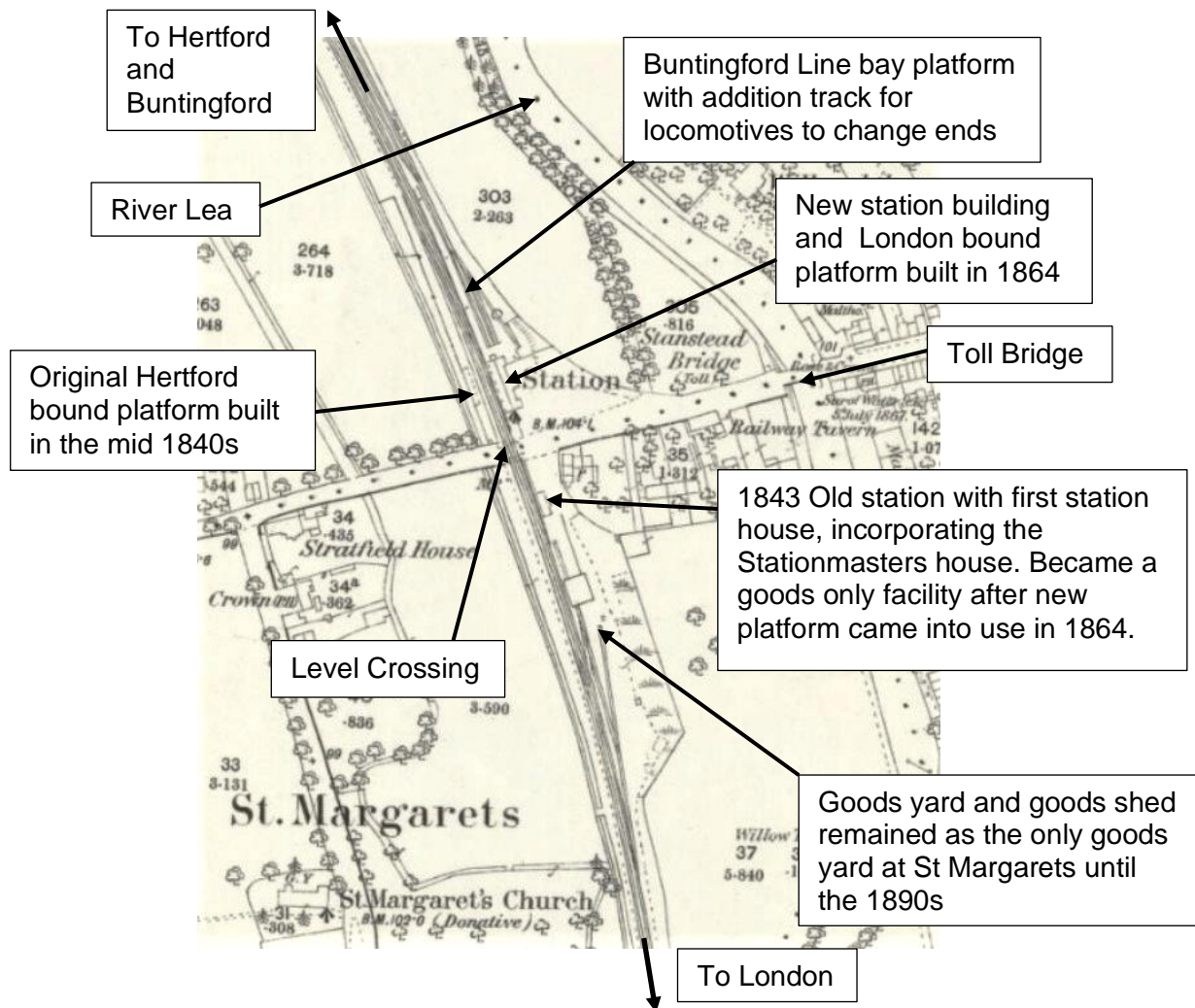
THE SOUTHERN END OF THE BUNTINGFORD LINE



The map shows how the WHBR could have easily been connected to Ware. However, it seems the Board members had through trains to London in mind. These never materialised with just through coaches once a day each way being provided for most of the life of the railway. The junction being at St. Margarets was to result in a considerable loss of local traffic on the railway once local buses began to run along the main road between Ware and Buntingford in the 1920s.

It became clear quite quickly to the GER that the station at St Margarets was inadequate to cope with both the Hertford and Buntingford trains. This led to a decision to build a new London bound [up line] platform including a separate bay platform for the Buntingford Line trains as well as a new passenger station building. This new construction was built opposite the existing Hertford bound [down line] platform which meant the passenger station at St. Margarets was now entirely within the parish of Great Amwell. The old station located in the parish of St. Margarets became a goods only facility with the old station building being altered internally so that the Stationmaster could occupy the entire building as his home rather than just the upstairs section as before.

St. Margarets Station after changes following the opening of the Buntingford Line



Once the line was opened the WHBR Directors were encouraged in the second half of 1863 by the number of passengers using the line. At the same time it was clear that a lack of funds was restricting the development of goods facilities along the line. By July 1864 passenger receipts were exceeding the Companies original expectations but goods income remained low despite improving facilities for goods traffic. By this time money for further investment was in short supply. This did not deter some Directors of the WHBR from encouraging the idea of an extension northwards from Buntingford to Royston, needless to say this project never materialised. There were also concerns that the GER were not running the railway in a way that would maximise receipts and thus payments to the WHBR. There was in fact very little in real terms that the WHBR shareholders could do about that problem.

BUNTINGFORD LINE TRAFFIC INCOME

Period	1863	1864	1865	1866	Season
Dec-Feb	-	959	1105	1188	Winter
Mar-May	-	1048	1166	1396	Spring
Jun-Aug	762 [fn1]	1405	1540	1442	Summer
Spt-Nov	1075	1221	1351	-	Autumn

*The figures are in pounds sterling rounded to the nearest pound.
£100 in 1865 is worth approximately £8,900 today.*

[fn 1] Railway opened July 3rd 1863

The yearly increase from 1864 to 1865 saw revenues rise from £4,633 to £5162 a percentage rise of 10.2%. During this period the shareholders and directors of the WHBR had expected a much larger growth in income to occur. They had thought that as the railway became increasingly established in its early years more and more traffic would be attracted to the railway. In fact, the growth was mainly due to some extra income from goods carried on the railway with revenue growth from passenger traffic being negligible. This was in distinct contrast to the upbeat news concerning passenger numbers they had heard at their meetings in 1863 and early 1864.

By May 1865 the financial situation was very obviously of great concern with mounting debts and diminishing funds. The overall view the majority of shareholders took in a critical meeting held in May 1865 was that not only had expected traffic levels not been reached but what growth there was seemed in fact to be slowing down. In the previous year the company had suffered a series of financial setbacks which had rather undermined shareholder confidence. It had also become apparent since the line was opened that the WHBR company owned very little except the land on which railway ran and the annual income from the GER and was unable to pay its debts. This led in June 1865 to the GER being approached to take over the Buntingford Line Company completely. However, it was not until the 1st September 1868 that the Buntingford Line passed into the hands of the GER.

Stuart Moyer November 2022

Note

Related information in another article on this website may be of interest to readers.

St. Margarets New Station 1864