

# **The Railway at Parkgate**

## **A brief history by Alan Passmore**

### **Origins**

It is now well over 60 years since the last passenger train steamed through Parkgate, and recollections of the time when trains chuffed between Hooton and West Kirby are now a distant memory for those Nestonians who once travelled on this route.

The first railway on the Wirral peninsula was the Chester & Birkenhead, constructed between the city of Chester and the then quite infant town of Birkenhead (for Liverpool); it was opened to traffic in September 1840 with its first terminus at Grange Lane, extended in October 1844 to a riverside station at Monks Ferry. Subsequent amalgamations extended the company's area of operation by adding the later lines from Chester to Warrington and from Hooton to Helsby. Later known as the Birkenhead Railway this enlarged company was itself taken over jointly by the Great Western and the newly-formed London & North Western in November 1860, but, as a joint company, it continued to be managed separately from its parent companies until the nationalisation of the railways in 1948, when it became part of British Railways' London Midland Region.

The Birkenhead joint company, mindful of the prospect of good earnings from coal traffic from a new mine being sunk at Little Neston, built a single-line branch from Hooton to a terminus at Parkgate, opening to traffic on 1 October 1866. The major civil engineering challenge of this project was the excavation of the great sandstone cutting in the section between Mellock Lane and Lees Lane, Little Neston. There were two intermediate stations at Neston (later Neston South) and at Hadlow Road, Willaston, where there was a passing loop; the terminus at Parkgate was a single platform, with a run-round loop, situated at what is now the public (Ropewalk) carpark in Station Road. The contractor for this railway was that well-known bridge and civil engineer Thomas Brassey<sup>1</sup> (1805-70), a local Cheshire man, who by 1847 had been responsible for the construction of a third of the total railway mileage in this country.

From Parkgate, deviating from this line at Moorside Lane, a short mineral branch was later constructed to the colliery, which was situated at the bottom of what is now Marshlands Road, Little Neston; this mine eventually opened in 1874. Loaded coal trains from the colliery had to reverse at Parkgate before beginning the ascent to the summit of the line, near Leahurst veterinary faculty, on their way to the main line at Hooton; similarly for empties travelling in the opposite direction.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Brassey was born at Buerton, near Chester, son of farmer John Brassey and his wife Elizabeth. At the sale of the Mostyn estates in Cheshire in 1849 he acquired the freehold of the Mostyn Arms Hotel, Parkgate, which was subsequently purchased by the leaseholders the Grenfell family upon his death in 1870, thus allowing the expansion of their school. By this time he was said to have been responsible for a twentieth of the total mileage of railways worldwide.



*A portrayal of the inaugural train passing Moorside Lane on its approach to Parkgate on 1 October 1866.*



*A West Kirby-bound train passes the same bridge in BR days pulled by a GW prairie tank loco. The right-hand track is the colliery branch.*



*Neston/Wirral Colliery at Little Neston*



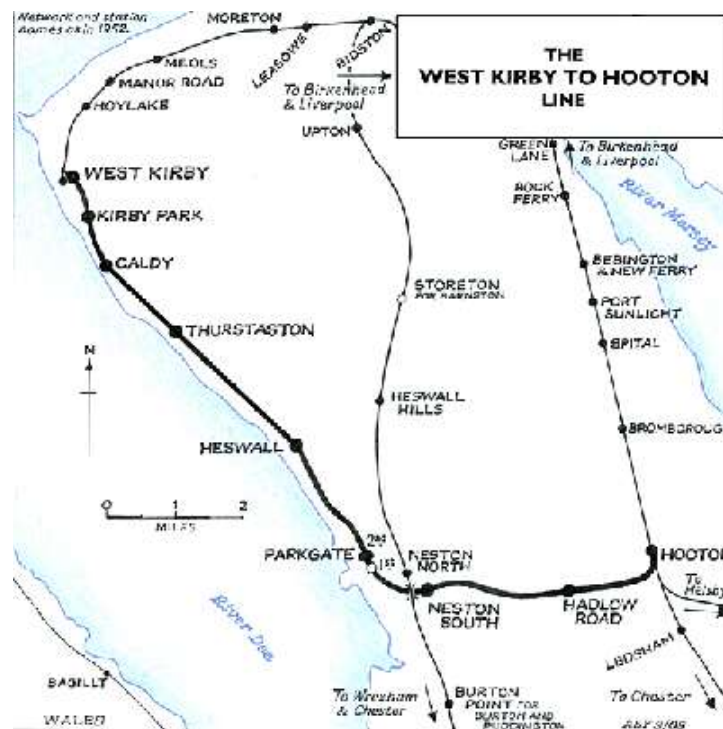
*The colliery loco Lord Talbot employed for shunting and conveying trucks to/from Parkgate, built by Black, Hawthorn & Co, Gateshead, 1881*

In time the location of the Monks Ferry terminus at Birkenhead proved not to be entirely satisfactory for the cross-Mersey ferry service to Liverpool, and the railway was, therefore, extended to a new, more commodious terminus at Woodside, opened in March 1878, giving passengers direct access to the floating landing stage already being used by the better sited Woodside ferry. It was then to this station that trains from Parkgate (not terminating at Hooton) ran through.

## Development

It had always been the Birkenhead company's intention to extend the Parkgate branch-line to West Kirby, in order to develop the potential for new business from west Wirral. This objective was achieved almost 20 years after the original opening, when the new extension was opened to traffic on 19 April 1886, providing access at West Kirby to the Wirral Railway and so on to Liverpool and Birkenhead via this alternative route.

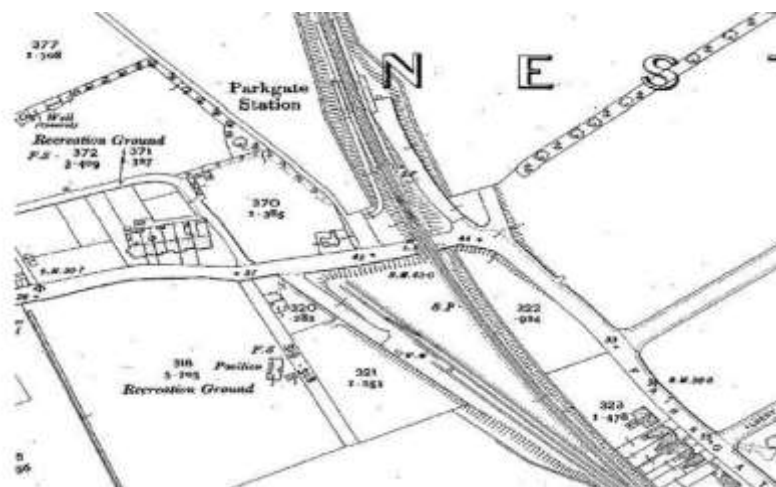
The new line followed a roughly level course alongside the Dee estuary between Parkgate and West Kirby, with intermediate crossing loops at the stations at Thurstaston and Heswall; a new station with passing loop was also constructed at Parkgate, as the new line deviated from the original alignment in order to cross what is now Station Road by a steel girder bridge. Most of the stations on the line were of brick construction, but this new station at Parkgate, being situated on an embankment, was of timber build with canopied buildings of similar design on each platform; the ticket office was on the up (for Hooton) platform, the two being connected by a pedestrian subway; the main station access road was also on this side, though there was also a cobbled footpath leading to/from the West Kirby bound platform.



*The Hooton to West Kirby branch line and associated lines at 1896.*

With the new Parkgate station open, the original station and yard then became a goods yard, where local freight was handled and the colliery trains reversed. The new station at West Kirby sat next to, but separate from the Wirral Railway station, the physical connection between the two lines being a short distance to the north.

Although this length of railway, like the original section, was built as a single track with passing loops at some of the stations, it is clear that the engineers had an expectation that it would eventually be doubled, when increasing traffic required capacity to be increased – all the bridges, cuttings and embankments were constructed with sufficient room for a second track to be added without the need for significant further engineering works. Traffic certainly increased over the years, but it seems that efficient management appears to have been capable of coping with the additional trains without laying a further track.



*Plan of about 1910 showing the Parkgate station of 1886 to the north of Station Road and the site of the original station to the south, now a goods yard with cattle or coal dock and sidings. The stationmaster's house occupies plot no. 320.*



*The former steel girder bridge across Station Road, Parkgate, built for the 1886 extension; the Girls Guildry procession was held as part of the local celebrations for the coronation of George V in 1911; the station entrance is to the right.*

## Services

At the time of opening of the railway most passenger trains ran between Parkgate and Hooton, but some ran through to Monks Ferry, then the terminus of the Chester to Birkenhead line, for the onward ferry service to Liverpool.

In 1895, just a few years after the opening of the West Kirby extension, there were ten trains each weekday in the up direction to Hooton, of which six travelled through to the later terminus at Birkenhead Woodside. In the opposite direction there were eleven trains through to West Kirby, while on a Tuesday and a Saturday there were late evening services that terminated at Parkgate. On Sundays there were just four trains in each direction.



*A pre-1914 photo by Arthur Maycock of Station Road, showing centre the station master's house and left a wagon in the siding, where the original station stood. To the right is the photographer's house Summerfield, outside which his friend poses for the camera.*

In 1922, just before the grouping of the country's railways (then about 100) into four main companies: Great Western, Southern, London Midland & Scottish, and London & North Eastern, there were fourteen passenger trains in each direction on weekdays, with five on Sundays. The first trains of the day were the 6.27 am from West Kirby and the 6.45 am from Hooton; the last being the 9.20 pm from West Kirby and the 9.45 pm from Hooton, though a later train at 11.24 pm from Hooton terminated at Heswall. A number of trains, including the 8.20 am from West Kirby, ran through to Birkenhead Woodside; so some passengers for Birkenhead and those for Chester had to change at Hooton. Children from Neston and Parkgate attending grammar schools in West Kirby would travel by the 8.12 am train from Neston, two minutes later from Parkgate. For trains travelling in the opposite direction four or five minutes were allowed between these stops, probably because of the adverse gradient for east-bound trains.

Ten years later, in the summer of 1932, there were 23 down trains and 22 up trains Monday to Friday, with an extra service on Saturdays, and seven in each direction on Sundays. This was the period when local residents were offered the greatest choice of services, but the line was losing a lot of money in making this generous provision.



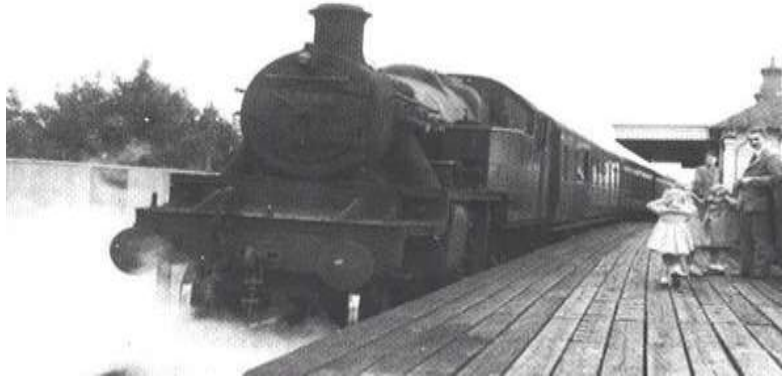
*Parkgate station about 1910, looking towards Neston. The presence of uniformed soldiers suggests this photo was taken at the time of the RGA's summer camp on nearby Parks Field.*



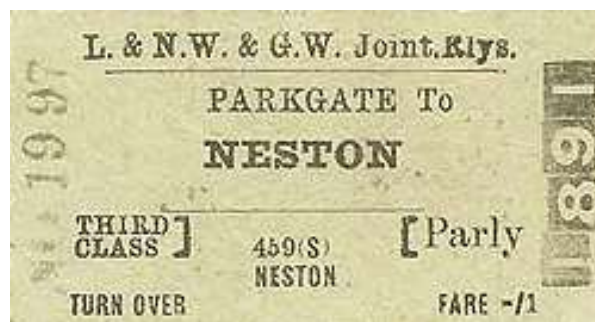
*On 6<sup>th</sup> August 1906 a crowd has assembled at the station entrance to greet the arrival by train of the 1st Worcester Royal Garrison Artillery (Volunteers) for their annual camp on Parks Field, where some tents have already been erected for them.*

Before World War 1 special trains were run for volunteer servicemen to attend summer camp at Parkgate. Various different battalions of the Royal Garrison Artillery used to arrive by train at Parkgate station and march with their baggage the short distance to Parks Field, where they each encamped for a week or two of artillery practice. Their arrival must have been given advance publicity, as photographs show crowds of people gathered to greet them and watch the spectacle. The practice firing took place on what is now North Parade, with the guns set up to fire over the sands of the estuary – no marsh yet! Each practice session would involve mounted soldiers with horses drawing their limbers and guns along The Parade between Parks Field and North Parade. Local people used to hang around during practice, hoping to pick up the used

shell cases. After a few years this artillery practice ceased, as it was considered dangerous by the authorities, and locals were thus deprived of this annual entertainment. The last such camp is believed to have taken place in 1920.



*At Parkgate Stanier-designed LMS class 3 2-6-2 tank engine No 40144 heads a train for Hooton; the small children block their ears against the sound of escaping steam.*



*Third class single ticket for travel from Parkgate to Neston – price one old penny (0.4p).*

There were also goods services on the line. The coal trains from Neston/Wirral colliery reversed at Parkgate, if travelling via Hooton, but a few continued north via West Kirby, the empty wagons doing the same journey in reverse. The branch was also served by a pick-up goods train, which brought wagon-load freight to individual station sidings, these being shunted in turn by the train's locomotive as it made its slow progress along the line. All stations on the line, except Caldy, had sidings for the reception of goods; wagons were picked up as well as dropped off by the pick-up goods. However, parcels and the shell-fish produce from the Parkgate fishery were carried by passenger train, travelling in the guard's compartment, because of the need for swift delivery.

As this was a joint line, passenger trains were latterly in charge of GWR large or small prairie 2-6-2 tank engines or LMS class 3 2-6-2 tanks, supplied by the joint locomotive shed at Birkenhead Mollington Street (6C); freight locos of both companies were supplied for goods trains by the same depot. Just a few goods trains used the connection with the Wirral Railway at West Kirby and no passenger trains until 1923, when the LMS introduced a new service whereby one or two coaches from a train originating at New Brighton were designated as through coaches for London Euston, being attached at Hooton to a train starting from Birkenhead Woodside. Some trains

on the main line from Woodside were LMS through services to London Euston (via Crewe) or GWR services to Paddington (via Birmingham Snow Hill), those for the latter route having to reverse at Chester (General), involving a locomotive change there.



*Parkgate station with what appears to be an Ivatt-designed LMS class 2 2-6-2 tank engine, waiting for the signal to clear, operating a push-pull service to Hooton with an old clerestory coach. The seated gentleman, posed for the photo, seems to be here to watch the trains rather than take one. The signs hanging from the canopies indicate the position of the pedestrian subway, while the gap in the fence on the far platform marks the start of the path leading down to the Ropewalk.*

## **Decline**

The service on the Hooton to West Kirby line continued much as above during the post-war years and during the early British Railways years, when more modern (steam) traction began to take over. It was only in 1948, with the nationalisation of the country's railways, that the line's status as a joint line came to an end, when all Wirral's railways became part of British Railways' London Midland Region.

By 1950, however, the branch service seems to have been pruned back somewhat, but it still provided at least ten trains each way Monday to Friday, with two extra services on Saturdays and a total of five on Sundays. The school train now left Parkgate at 8.28 am, leaving very little time for pupils to walk to their respective schools from Kirby Park (boys for Caldby Grammar School) or West Kirby (girls for WK Grammar School) stations. Boys and girls were segregated at different ends of the train and senior pupils were expected to maintain reasonable behaviour amongst the other schoolchildren.



Table 115

HOOTON and WEST KIRBY

Bradshaw October 1950

		Week Days															
Miles		a.m.	a.m.	a.m.	a.m.	a.m.	a.m.	a.m.	S	S	S	E	E	p.m.	p.m.	p.m.	E
	Hooton.....dep	6 30	6 58	7 24	8 13	8 30	10 30	11 55	1 4	1 55	2 50	3 41	4 48	5 54	6 8		
13	Hadlow Road.....	6 30	7 2	7 29	8 20	10 34	11 59	1 9	1 50	2 54	3 45	4 54	5 58	6 18			
33	Neston.....	6 30	7 8	7 35	8 25	10 41	12 5	1 15	2 43	3 0	3 51	5 06	6 4	6 25			
43	Parkgate.....	6 35	7 11	7 42	8 28	10 45	12 8	1 18	2 7	3 3	3 55	5 36	6 9	6 28			
7	Heswall.....	6 44	7 19	7 48	8 33	10 51	12 13	1 23	2 12	3 8	4 0	5 8	6 14	6 33			
9	Thurstaston.....	6 30	7 30	8 0	8 40	10 57	12 18	1 28	2 17	3 13	4 5	5 18	6 19	6 38			
10	Caldy.....	6 30	7 30	8 4	8 44	11 0	12 18	1 32	2 17	3 17	4 9	5 17	6 23	6 42			
11	Kirby Park.....	6 30	7 37	8 7	8 48	11 4	12 25	1 36	2 24	3 21	4 13	5 21	6 26	6 45			
12	West Kirby.....arr	6 58	7 40	8 10	8 51	11 7	12 28	1 39	2 27	3 24	4 16	5 24	6 29	6 47			

		Week Days															
Miles		a.m.	a.m.	a.m.	a.m.	a.m.	a.m.	p.m.	p.m.	S	E	E	p.m.	E	p.m.	E	
	West Kirby.....dep	6 17	7 20	7 50	8 30	9 0	11 17	12 40	1 57	2 45	3 35	4 25	5 47	6 56			
1	Kirby Park.....	6 17	7 22	7 52	8 32	9 0	11 19	12 40	1 59	2 47	3 37	4 27	5 49	6 58			
1	Caldy.....	6 17	7 22	7 52	8 35	9 4	11 22	12 42	2 2	3 40	4 30	5 52	7 1	7 11			
23	Thurstaston.....	6 25	7 29	7 59	8 39	9 8	11 26	12 48	2 6	2 54	3 44	4 34	5 57	7 5			
6	Heswall.....	6 30	7 34	8 4	8 44	9 13	11 31	12 53	2 13	2 59	3 50	4 39	6 8	7 11			
7	Parkgate.....	6 35	7 39	8 9	8 49	9 18	11 36	12 58	2 18	3 6	3 57	4 44	6 9	7 17			
8	Neston.....	6 39	7 43	8 13	8 53	9 22	11 40	1 2	2 22	3 10	4 1	4 48	6 13	7 21			
10	Hadlow Road.....	6 45	7 49	8 18	8 59	9 28	11 46	1 8	2 27	3 16	4 7	4 53	6 18	7 28			
12	Hooton.....arr	6 49	7 53	8 23	9 3	9 32	11 50	1 12	2 51	3 20	4 11	4 57	6 22	7 32			

**B** From Birkenhead (Table 113). **E** Except Saturdays. **U** From Birkenhead on Saturdays (Table 113).  
**c** Arr. 6 minutes earlier. **F** To Birkenhead (Table 113).  
**D** Arr. 4 minutes earlier. **S** Saturdays only.

Extract from Bradshaw's winter 1950 timetable (omitting late evening and Sunday services)

Local bus services began to pick up more passengers, car ownership expanded, and the number of rail customers began to decline quite quickly; besides, the railway was not entirely convenient, as many of the stations were rather remote from the population they were intended to serve, and other methods of travel became more convenient. Another, earlier factor may have been the opening of the Bidston to Wrexham line in 1896 by the Manchester, Sheffield & Lincolnshire Railway (from 1897 Great Central); the coming of this interloper would have had the effect of syphoning off many of the potential users of the Hooton to West Kirby line with its more direct routes to Liverpool and Chester.



A short train for West Kirby makes its way down the grade from Neston towards Parkgate, bunker first. The location is Moorside Lane bridge, where the freight line from Neston Colliery (right-hand track) joins the line from Hooton. The loco is one of Birkenhead's ex-GWR 4575 class small prairie (2-6-2) tank engines.

## Closure

The decline of passenger traffic became a serious concern in the post-war years, as receipts declined and financial losses began to spiral out of control; the closure of Neston Colliery in 1927 had already brought an end to the lucrative coal traffic. Things became critical, and passenger traffic ceased on 17 September 1956: the grammar school children, who had latterly been a mainstay of the service, now had to travel to West Kirby on the bus. Following the end of passenger services, the West Kirby to Hooton line was used for a short period for the training of staff in the operation of the new diesel multiple units, which were beginning to take over from the old steam hauled trains elsewhere: this cost-reducing strategy was not tried here, and passengers were not carried during this brief period. Meanwhile freight traffic stumbled on for a further few years, until that service too came to an end in May 1962.



*An ex-LMS Stanier-designed 8F 2-8-0 loco is in charge of one of the demolition trains on the stretch of line between Station Road and Moorside Lane. The houses to the right are in Parkgate Road. The track in the foreground is the former branch to Neston Colliery, which is being lifted first. The loco is one of a large class that latterly were the mainstay of London Midland freight work, surviving until the end of British Railways steam haulage in 1968; about a dozen were based at Birkenhead.*

British Railways then wasted no time and the demolition crews were brought in soon afterwards. By 1964 most of the structures had been removed and there is now little to show for the existence of the former railway, which for nearly 100 years played an important part of local life in Neston and Parkgate.

## The present

Following the closure and demolition of the Hooton to West Kirby line the former Cheshire County Council (CCC) stepped in and bought the line in 1968, as was permitted in these circumstances, to secure the 12-mile course of the track bed. Over the next few years discussions took place and work was put into hand to turn the former railway track into a linear country park. Formally declared open in 1973, though

already in use for a year or two, the Wirral Way was the first such country park in Britain. Today management of the park is shared between Cheshire West & Chester Council (CWaC) and Wirral Borough Council as successors to the former CCC, following local government boundary changes in 1974 and other changes since.

What remains of the former railway today? Well, the track bed is largely intact, although there are significant gaps at Heswall and in Little Neston, where in each case houses have been constructed on land in the vicinity of the former stations; at West Kirby too urban re-development has erased the northern extremity of the track bed, where the joint station once stood. Otherwise, with slight deviations at these points, the route is entirely traversable by walkers, cyclists and horse-riders. The highest point of the line was at Leahurst, and the rock cutting at Little Neston, previously referred to, remains as an indicator of the huge amount of stone that had to be excavated in the construction of the line in order to achieve a suitable gradient for operational purposes on the ascent from Neston and Parkgate – and the amount of labour involved – still visible is the evidence that it was men with pick-axes who cut the rock over 150 years ago.



*Site of the former (2<sup>nd</sup>) station at Parkgate: view towards Heswall (Photo: author)*

The pride of the country park must be the former station at Hadlow Road, Willaston, which was saved from demolition. It is now restored as a splendid museum with an occasional café, run by a voluntary 'friends' group. With its free carpark it is an excellent place to visit and/or use as a base for a walk or cycle ride. Station platforms also remain at Thurstaston, which became the headquarters for the park. A very informative visitor centre has been built close by, adjacent to a large dewpond, and there are also a café and campsite. Here the park incorporates a large tract of land which includes the sandstone cliffs and affords magnificent views over the Dee estuary. It is a very popular venue for groups of every age.



*The surviving platform and buildings at Hadlow Road, Willaston, in 2017  
© Paul Wright (www.disusedstations.org.uk)*

The station at Parkgate was a timber construction, both platforms and buildings, so easily erased but, if you look carefully, you may still find in the undergrowth remains which indicate the position of the former pedestrian subway which once connected the two station platforms; the access points appear to have been covered over with large stone blocks. What does remain at Parkgate, however, is the former stationmaster's house, a brick-built building erected at the time of the first station; it has recently been renovated and extended after a lengthy period out of use; situated in Station Road by the entrance to what is now the Ropewalk carpark, it overlooks the adjacent Neston Cricket Club field, commanding fine views over the estuary towards the Welsh hills.



*Looking towards the site of the former railway over-bridge, Station Road, Parkgate. The gate in the fence identifies the position of the former carriageway leading to the station. Compare this with the picture on page 4. (Photo: author)*

The Ropewalk carpark on the site of the original Parkgate station is handy for local walks and for access to the facilities on The Parade. All that remains at the other stations on this line are the former driveways, now providing access to the Wirral Country Park. Gone are the station buildings and platforms, the goods sheds, signal boxes and the signals and all the other apparatus associated with the working railway. Gone at Hooton are those platforms which would have been used by the trains operating on this branch. With the exception of a few remaining bridges, retained for strategic purposes, the demolition gang did a very thorough job of clearance, eliminating almost every piece of evidence that a busy railway once operated here.



*Parkgate Station: the remains of the cobbled pathway leading from the down (north-bound) platform to the Ropewalk and Station Road. (Photo: author)*

- Sources:
1. A Regional History of the Railways of Great Britain: Volume 10 – The North West – Geoffrey O Holt – Second Edition 1986 – David & Charles Ltd
  2. Bradshaw's July 1922 Railway Guide – re-print – David & Charles Ltd, 1985
  3. Disused Stations ([www.disusedstations.org.uk](http://www.disusedstations.org.uk))
  4. Photos by kind permission of Burton & Neston History Society – David Scott card collection – except where otherwise credited

See also: Railway Memories by John Reney Smith (1903-78) – [www.nestonpast.com](http://www.nestonpast.com)  
Neston 1840-1940 – Ed. Geoffrey W Place – Burton & South Wirral Local History Society 1996

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