

‘ONE RULE FOR THE RICH AND ANOTHER FOR THE POOR’

SOCIAL CLASS AND NEW STREET STATION

Tom Gidlow

On the 1 June 1854 a new station was officially opened in Birmingham. New Street Station was a great engineering achievement covered by a huge glass and iron roof. It was a monument to the power of steam and Birmingham’s importance as a railway centre, but one history is rarely told: how the lives of ordinary people were changed.

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The Railway Station by William Powell Frith, 1863. A crowded platform shows Victorian Society in its variety.

The first railroad connections reached Birmingham in 1837 with termini at Vauxhall and Curzon Street, outside of the town centre. The existing road between the stations and the Bullring was expanded in order to take pedestrian traffic into the centre of town. However travelling into the Bullring remained inconvenient for passengers and demand grew for the construction of a new station with easier access.

Railway companies needed to secure an Act of Parliament to enable them to compulsorily purchase land. New Street Station required acres of land for lines, platforms, offices, waiting rooms and means of conveying passengers to and fro.

The land for the new station was relatively inexpensive in a

low-lying and densely populated part of Birmingham and contained the poorest slums in the town, including the damp Froggery, so called because frogs bred there. The area was poor and rarely visited by officials, so the residents’ experience is difficult to present.

Construction

An Act of Parliament was passed in 1846 and the demolition of the slums began in the same year. Birmingham Corporation was happy for this land to be regenerated due to the high costs of policing it, and, since the council did not gain the power of compulsory purchase until 1875, the clearance was hailed as a triumph of social consideration by the London and North-Western Railway (LNWR) which owned the station.

Destruction

The reality was starkly different. Compensation went to landlords, but residents were rarely owner-occupiers and faced eviction without payment. We hear resentment in the voices of local people years after their removal.

Mr. Isaac Harris was recorded by the *Birmingham Daily Post* in 1859 at a meeting to discuss a thoroughfare through the station.

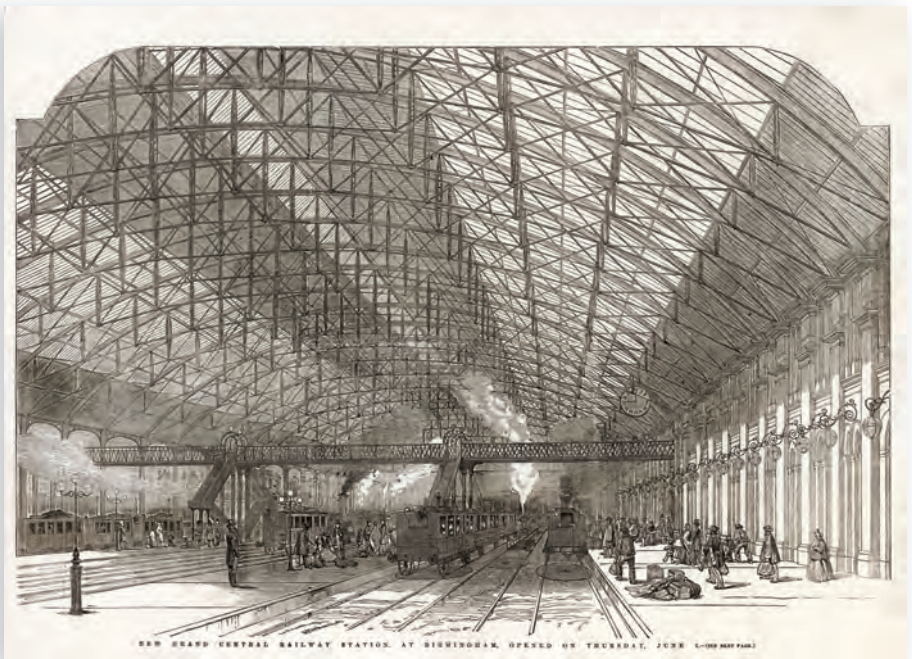
No less than 5 streets had been appropriated by the London and North-Western Company – King Street, Peck Lane, Colmore Street, Little Colmore Street, and Well Street. Parts of Queen Street, Temple Street, and Pinfold Street, had also been sacrificed. All the public had got for this was one street – Great Queen Street – which the company had made for its own accommodations.

Right-of-Way

The problem of a right-of-way through the station caused resentment years after the evictions. The daily commutes of those Birmingham citizens who passed through the station from home to work were supposedly protected by law. The LNWR, however, repeatedly closed off the station to non-passengers, causing huge inconvenience to local residents who had to travel around the vast station.

The station operated a central walkway from which passengers accessed platforms, but access was often illegally restricted for non-passengers by not allowing the poorest to cross by this route. Richer members of society remained at liberty to use this walkway without being hindered by LNWR staff.

One contemporary newspaper remarked how the ex-residents 'were all aware of the great powers exerted by the Company,' as it seemed that there was one rule for the rich and another for the poor. In 1875 an anonymous individual, A.B., expressed the injustice felt by many: 'I noticed also that a good coat seemed a better passport than a bad one. If the rule is made it would be better to carry it out without respect of persons.'



Passengers await their train beneath New Street Station's soaring canopy, *Illustrated London News*, 1854. Grand Central Railway Station was an early name for New Street.

© Illustrated London News Ltd/Mary Evans

Workers

Locals found employment in the station, although jobs could be short-term and dangerous. In 1862 John Moran was killed in a scaffolding collapse whilst repainting the galvanised metal bars that held up the 2½ acres of glass in the roof. Moran, of Bow Street, was a bricklayer, but found temporary work in the station. Many labourers were employed during the 1885 expansion, when 1,000 men were engaged over two-and-a-half years. Once the expansion was complete the station employed a permanent staff of 600, all male.

Accidents

The station experienced accidents and deaths. The LNWR did little, except when forced to pay compensation. Records are limited but an unnamed woman received £155 in 1872 for injury caused by a train.

The layout of the station contributed to accidents. When 200-300 people left a train during the night, they were often unable to see the footbridge to cross the rails, which was concealed at one end of the station. This forced passengers to exit by crossing open track. One public-spirited campaigner, S.A. Goddard, tried to warn people in the station of the danger presented by trains. A railway policeman in 1872 who had been in the job for only a short time was asked: 'how many persons have been killed here since you were assigned to the place?' He replied: 'None killed, sir; but there have been many escapes.' Local safety campaigners focused on the need for a railing to denote the division between platforms at track level and the rails.

New Street Station was an asset for Birmingham, but the development tended to benefit the better-off. Its building destroyed homes, disrupted rights of way and it could be a very dangerous place to work in and use. The LNWR was a powerful corporation, which ordinary people found difficult to combat. ●

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Further Reading

Gordon Cherry, *Birmingham: A Study in Geography, History and Planning* (Wiley, 1994).
Andy Foster, *Birmingham* (Yale University Press, 2005).
Chris Upton, *A History of Birmingham* (Phillimore, 1993).