



All Change! 150 Years of the Railway in Elstree and Borehamwood.

British railways are the oldest in the world and their arrival, in the early 19th century, revolutionised the way that people lived.

According to one contemporary observer they 'set all the towns of Britain a-dancing'. Perhaps the closest modern day comparison is the age of the internet and the ability to communicate and conduct business in every corner of the world.

Before the very first railway opened, between Liverpool and Manchester, in 1830, Britain had hardly changed in centuries. It was a rural country, dominated by agriculture, and most of the population were born, lived and died in the communities where their family had probably lived for generations. Travel was for the rich.

Roads were mostly in poor shape - rutted in good conditions; muddy and impassable after heavy rains. People were accustomed to walking long distances, and it was not unusual for labourers to walk 6 miles to work. Wagons and canal barges were the only ways to transport raw materials and finished products. Both methods were difficult and time consuming, involving weeks of delay in the winter months. Sunrise dictated the time of day and as a result it varied across the country.

At that time, Elstree and Boreham Wood (as it was known then) were typical farming communities with a combined population of less than 300 people living in just 50 houses. In addition to farming, Elstree served as a 'watering hole' on the London to St Albans route and four stage coaches called there daily. This was the beginning of the 'golden age' of the stage coach, the only practical means of long distance passenger travel until the railways replaced them around 40 years later.

The arrival of the railway meant that, for the first time in history, people were able to travel faster than a galloping horse.

It was suddenly possible to travel and transport goods and information from one end of the country to the other in a matter of hours, rather than days, and by the time of 'railway mania' in the 1840's, rail passengers were moving at terrifying speeds of up to 60 miles an hour. Fears that it would be impossible to breathe at such speeds, that cows would not produce milk or sheep would turn black by passing trains, show what a leap into the unknown the railways were.

So fast were the new trains that the differing local times had to be brought in line with the standard London 'Greenwich Mean Time (GMT)' ensuring that all station clocks and train timetables were perfectly synchronised with each other across the country.

The new railway companies were keen to expand their networks. The Midland Railway, based in Derby, was granted in 1863 its own line extension from Bedford to London by 'Royal Assent', firstly for goods trains into St. Pancras Goods Station.

The momentous day for sleepy Elstree & Borehamwood had arrived! On 13th July 1868, passenger services started running through the villages on the new line, at first into Moorgate Street, and then into St. Pancras Station when it eventually opened on 1st October. The Bedford to St. Pancras route was from then on known as the Bed-Pan line.

Within 30 years the population of Elstree and Borehamwood had trebled. As in other towns throughout the country, industries were established, prospered, and began a migration of workers from farm to town.

Into this expanding, pioneer town of Borehamwood, well away from the London smog and offering cheap extensive land with good transport connections, a freshly emerging, state-of-the-art industry arrived. In 1914, the first film studios, Neptune Film Company, opened in Clarendon Road. Though there were other businesses in the 'Village', the film industry was to become the dominant employer in Borehamwood for the next 100 years.

Today, over 3.4 million people use Elstree & Borehamwood Station every year.

The pictures in the Resource Pack can be used in a variety of ways to stimulate Speaking and Listening activities, creative writing and further research into local history and the history of travel and communication.