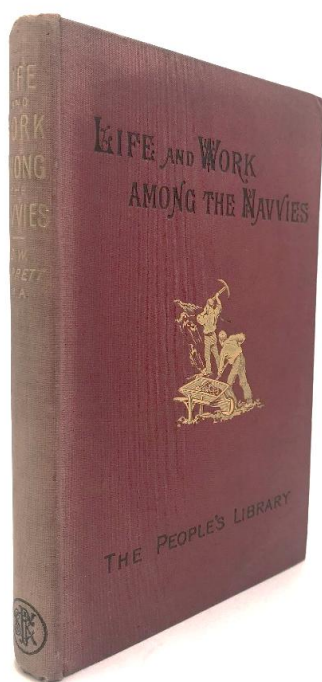


The Kettering-Manton Railway Line and The Gretton and Corby Mission – 150 years

There's a marvellous view when you look south across the Welland Valley from St James's Churchyard. Near the bottom of the steepest slope is an embankment for the Kettering-Manton line, used by freight trains and occasional passenger trains – sometimes with steam locomotives. Built in just two years, 1876–78, the line includes the famous Welland, or Harringworth, viaduct.

Gretton was the centre for the professional engineers, who rented houses in the village, while twelve formal huts to house the 'navvies' and their families, who came from all over Britain and Ireland, were built on Gretton Hill and in Corby Woods. Around these developed various buildings, including brick factories, offices and an informal shanty village. Inevitably some people - labourers, their families and others - died during the construction and some are said to be buried, unmarked and unrecorded, somewhere on the north side of St James's churchyard.



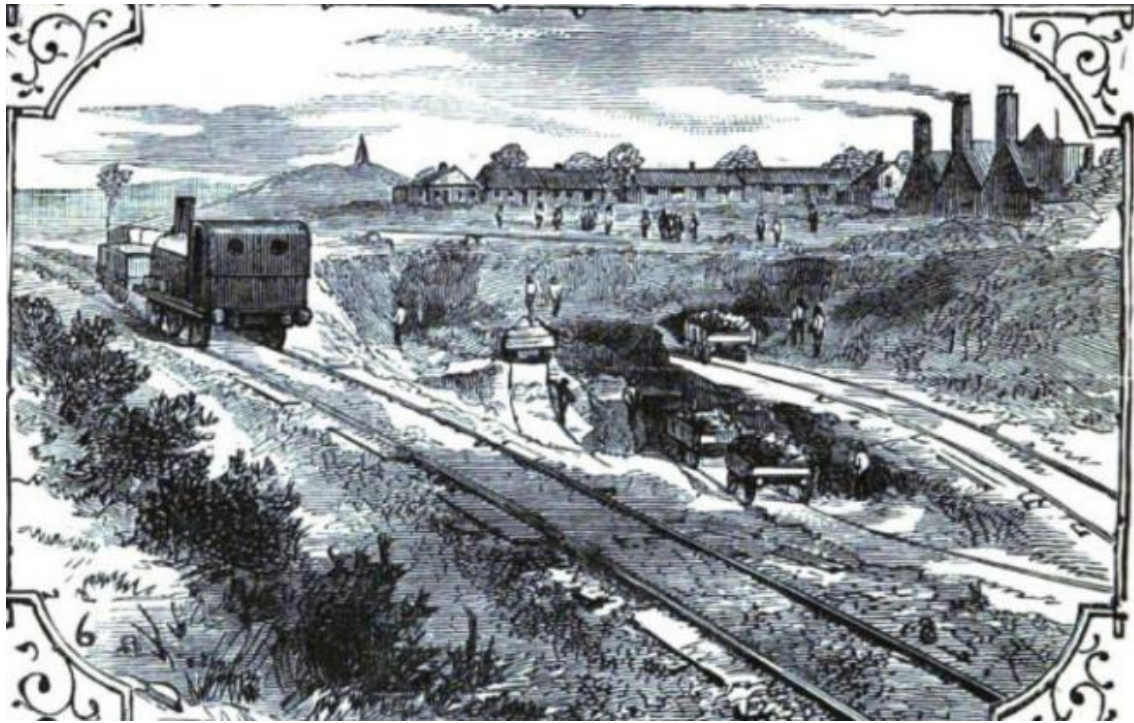
'Life and Work among the Navvies', by Reverend Daniel W. Barrett, the vicar of Nassington, is a first-hand account, published in 1880, of the construction of the railway and the people involved. He described how originally the railway was meant to pass closer to Gretton village than it now does, but the hill kept slipping, forcing the embankment to be built further down into the valley.

This fascinating early work of social science, from which these illustrations are taken, includes brief biographies of individuals, the costs of the works – human and financial – the amounts of food eaten and beer drunk and the social life of the workers. Daniel Barrett wrote:

'Anybody who had any concern for the soul of his brother man, had he passed along the line in the

early part of the year 1876, must have acknowledged that there was a pressing call for a separate and special organisation to supply the spiritual needs of the larger bodies of workmen who were beginning to congregate here and there at intervals along its course.'

He calculated that the total number of incomers - navvies, families and 'staff' - was at its peak around 4000 along the length of the line – so maybe a quarter of that number were based in Gretton and Corby.



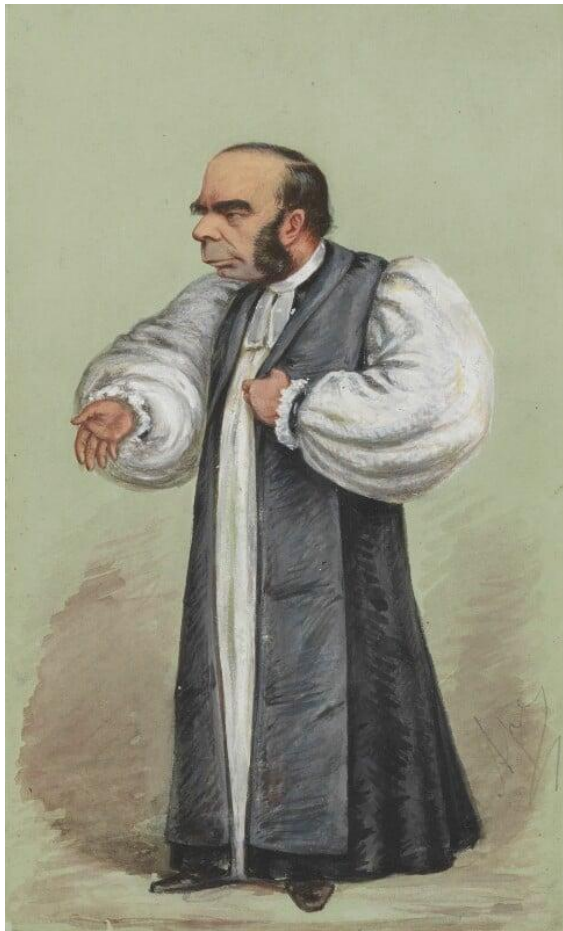
'Gretton, being the central village on the line, was the general "rendezvous" of the various officials of all grades. Here was the chief engineering office, presided over in the earlier stages of the works by A.C. Priestly Esq. A.I.C.E with a staff of clerks and draughtsmen at his command... the cashier department...who must have paid away many tens of thousands of pounds. Gretton was also the centre for the engineers of the company...'

'The various clergy through whose parishes the line was about to pass became anxious as to the effect these new visitors would have upon their people, ... but all at length saw the necessity of "something being done."

'Among the earliest efforts which were made, were those at Gretton and Corby...'

'The Rev. A. White, Vicar of Gretton, was enabled in the latter part of 1875 to secure the services of an earnest-minded layman (Mr. W. Chapman), who began at once to act as Lay-reader, confining his ministrations to

these parishes. Thus "The Gretton and Corby Mission" had its beginning. Whilst this effort was struggling into life, a similar movement was going on in other districts...'



The Bigger Mission and the Militant Bishop:

Eventually, overseen by the Bishop of Peterborough, [William Connor Magee](#), the various local Missions were amalgamated into just three. Bishop Magee was an Irishman and, it is sometimes claimed, may have been particularly concerned for the Irish navvies who made up about 50% of the workforce, although there's no evidence that this really contributed to his motivation. He was popularly known as 'the Militant Bishop', and famous for his thoughtful, although often controversial and very often forthright, advocacy of various causes (this caricature portrait is from *Vanity Fair* via the National Portrait Gallery). Frightened of neither a good argument nor of getting on with things, his attitude is perhaps summed up by his 1868 remark, in a sermon addressing church leadership, inaction and fear of

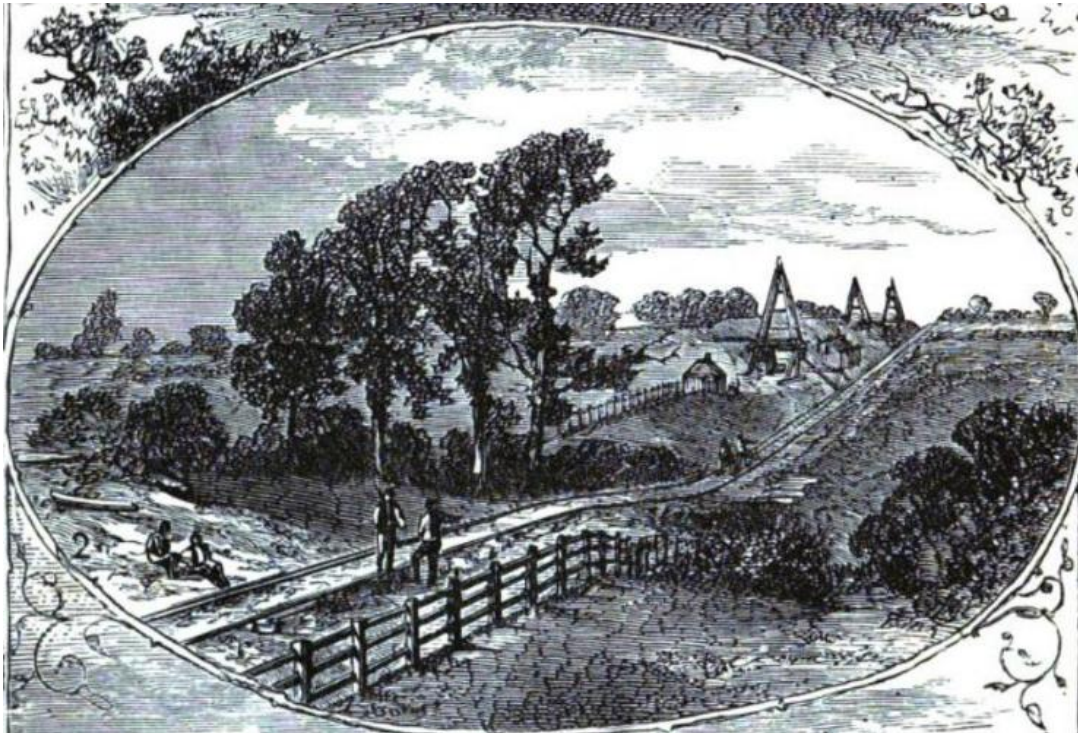
failure, 'the person who makes no mistakes does not usually make anything'. This phrase was later copied by numerous politicians in speeches and remarks, not least US President Theodore Roosevelt¹.

All three Missions were placed under the day-to-day direction of Rev. Daniel Barrett, who initially '*based himself in Gretton, that being the central spot*', before shifting his headquarters to Seaton.

Mr Chapman, the lay preacher, was confirmed in post by the Bishop and went on to preach at various sites along the line, including at a makeshift chapel in Corby Woods (as did Bishop Magee - an occasion described with great excitement in Barrett's book), working closely with both Rev. BEW Bennett, Rector of Corby and the new vicar of Gretton, Rev. Leonard Addison. The missions ran Sunday schools and church services for this

¹ Jacob A Riis, [The American Monthly Review of Reviews](#), vol 22 1901 p184

huge new and transitory population, raised funds to look after the sick, attended the dying and organised funerals.



A Legacy: The official involvement of the Church of England in this Mission set a precedent and spurred on the founding, near Leeds, of the [Navy Mission Society](#) in late 1877, by Rev. Lewis Moule Evans and "the Navvies' friend" [Elizabeth Garnett](#). Indeed, you could argue that while Bishop Magee was robust in his opposition to '[Christian Socialism](#)' (in one essay he wrote that a state that carried out the 'precepts of Christ ... could not exist for a week'²), the Gretton and Corby Mission was an important influence on late Victorian social activism and engagement within the established Church of England – a revolutionary change from Georgian laissez-faire attitudes of non-engagement in civic matters and something that, still sometimes controversially, continues to this day.

As always, to find out more about history and natural history at St James's, have a look at our blogs and other materials, on our website @ <https://www.achurchnearyou.com/church/16602/>

² The State and the Sermon on the Mount, [Fortnightly Review, January 1890](#) p33