

🌀 The Roads and Railways 🌀

Until the eighteenth century, villagers travelled slowly on local by-ways and drove roads. Local landowners and gentry helped improve transport by financing the first turnpike roads at the end of the seventeenth century. They were managed by local trusts and the costs of construction were recouped by tolls collected by pikemen. The Temple family of Stowe helped finance the turnpike that passed Finmere. It ran from Bedford via Stony Stratford, Buckingham, Tingewick, Aynho and Banbury to Warmington in Warwickshire. The section that bypassed Finmere (the old B4031) was the first to be built in 1744. There was a turnpike at 'Finmere Warren Gates,' the tolls from which produced an income of £253 a year in 1784. After construction of the turnpike, the old Roman road was left as a bridleway. In 1813, a turnpike branch was laid from the Red Lion to Bicester.

The Stowe Road

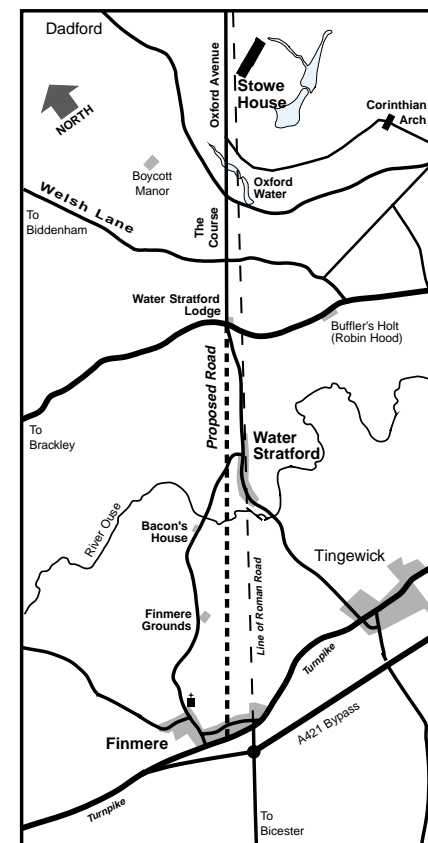
Lord Temple, Richard Grenville, inherited Stowe in 1749. Building on the work of his uncle, Lord Cobham, Temple energetically reshaped the house and grounds. By his death in 1779, he had overseen the creation of one of the finest garden landscapes in Europe.

Lord Temple's magnificent estate needed good road connections. He planned that visiting nobility and royalty would approach on perfectly straight roads lined with trees. As they rode closer to the estate, grand vistas would open revealing the glory of Stowe, the splendour of its temples and the opulence of the main house. The approach from Buckingham was known as the Grand Avenue. It leads from the town centre via Chackmore to the Corinthian Arch. Once through the arch, visitors were treated to a panoramic view of the south front of the house. From the southwest and Oxford, the approach was along The Course, the tree-lined avenue from the Lodge on the A422 Buckingham to Brackley Road to the current entrance to Stowe. Thereafter, the Oxford Avenue continues over Oxford Water to the north front of the house.

A map in the Huntington Library, California, shows that Temple planned to link the turnpike at Finmere to the Oxford Avenue. The Huntington map is undated but is likely to date from the early nineteenth century. Although the Temples obtained part of Palmer's Glebe land before 1822 to construct the road, it was not built. This was probably because of the increasingly disastrous state of the family's finances as they strove to fight off bankruptcy.

Finmere would have been quite different if the road had been built. There would have been a lodge where the school now stands. A tree-lined avenue would have stretched north through Town Close and Finmere Grounds past Bacon's House.

1784	2000
£253	£20,000



The proposed road to Stowe

The Buckinghamshire Railway: The road and the rail and steam and the sail.

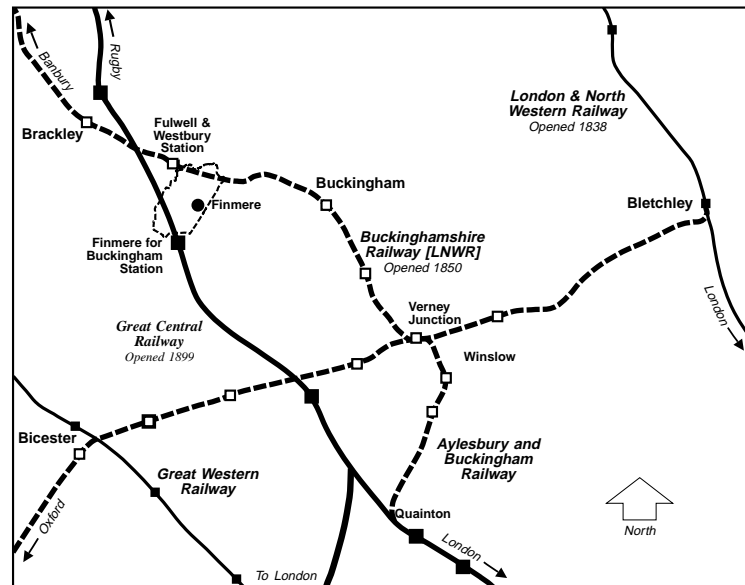
Now to describe the great Bucks Line,
I think I'll have a try,
And tell you how the work went on,
Through hills both hard and high...
At the entrance of the County
On Oxfordshire's north side
We first encounter Bacon Hill
A cutting deep and wide
Twas Bacon's Wood, a place of note,
A favourite game preserve;
But the game was kill'd, the wood was fell'd
The Company for to serve
Then the Surveyor he came forth,
With a quick discerning eye,—
He drew his chain—the Act was pass'd—
Then the land they did buy;
The Timber-merchant then stepp'd in,
And fell'd the noble oak;
Both elm and ash, and lime and beech,
Soon felt the Woodman's stroke.
This work was done with quick dispatch;
Soon all was clear'd away,—
The brush, the timber and the roots,
Was gone without delay.
Then the Surveyor next began
His level for to gain;
Wallace, he did the contract take,
And rent the rocks in twain...

Extract from a private memoir published by Charles Whitehall of Gawcott, 1849.

The Buckinghamshire Railway

Sir Harry Verney of Claydon House and the Duke of Buckingham of Stowe were both enthusiastic promoters of railways. In the 1840s, Verney supported a scheme to link Oxford and Bletchley, and the Duke backed a project to connect Buckingham and Brackley. By 1847, they had decided that they would work together to develop a scheme that became known as the 'Buckinghamshire Railway.'

Robert Benson Dochray was engineer for the line. The first turf was cut at 5 pm on Tuesday, 20 April 1847 in a field adjoining the Cross Trees public house in Buckingham. The line was to run from the London and North-Western Railway (LNWR) at Bletchley to Claydon. From the new Verney Junction near Claydon, one line branched south to Oxford, the other north to Banbury. The Banbury line ran through the north of Finmere parish, where its construction led to the clearance of Bacon's Wood.



The Buckinghamshire and Great Central railways

The construction of the railway was sometimes hazardous, especially in bad weather. There were many accidents, including two in Bacon's Wood:

Buckinghamshire railway. A fatal accident occurred on this line on Thursday, the 27th ult. at the cutting in Bacon's Wood in the parish of Fimmere, in the county of Oxford. While Thos. Winterburn, aged 19, and Alfred Dewett, aged 17, railway labourers in the employ of Mr Wallace were at work getting earth and filling wagons, a slip of earth fell and killed both on the spot. A Coroner's Inquest was held next day before Mr Churchill Esq. one of the coroners for the county of Oxford, at the house of Mr William Treadwell at Bacon's Farm, where a verdict of accidental death was recorded. (Buckinghamshire Herald, 30 July 1848)

On the 14th Inst. Brown, a workman employed at the Bacon's Wood cutting, on the Buckinghamshire railway, in blasting rocks, was injured by the top of his fingers being cut off by the blow of a sledge hammer, accidentally given by the man who was forming the hole for the powder. The injured man was holding the drill where the other was striking. Brown was taken to the surgeon, and is going on favourably. (Jackson's Oxford Journal, 22 December 1848)

By August 1849, the permanent way was laid from Buckingham to Brackley and the railway opened on 4 May 1850.

On Wednesday last, the line from Banbury from Bletchley was opened to the public... The first train left Banbury at half-past six am, and although the morning was a wet and cold one, yet an immense number of persons congregated to witness the departure of the first train... Along the line, vast numbers of passengers were congregated and cheered the trains as they passed and testified the delight which this novel scene afforded them. (Jackson's Oxford Journal, 4 May 1850)

The Oxford branch opened on 20 May 1851. The total cost of the fifty-three miles of railway was £1,120,000. The line was leased to the LNWR who, according to The Standard newspaper, planned to 'run few trains, and will use light engines with large carriages, holding a large number of passengers, running at moderate speed.'

The nearest station to Fimmere was Fulwell and Westbury, located in the valley by Fulwell House, where platforms and the converted station house remain. There was also a halt at Bacon's House Crossing for goods traffic. Ron Wakelin recalls watching the Royal Train pass Bacon's House Crossing on its way to Brackley in 1950. It carried King George VI and the present Queen Mother on their way to Silverstone for the first Grand Prix d'Europe. The line was closed in 1963.

Buckinghamshire Railway timetable, May 1850

Banbury departures.

Weekdays: 6.30, 9.45, 13.50, and 17.00. Sunday: 9.45.

Bletchley departures.

Weekdays: 9.45, 11.55, 4.15, and 7.15. Sunday: 11.55.

In 1922, there were seven services in each direction on a weekday.

1851	2000
£1.12m	£81m

The Great Central Railway

The Parish Meeting did not object to the building of the new line but, on 28 March 1895, resolved that footpaths should not be obstructed by its construction.

1895	2000
£250,000	£18m

1895	2000
£11.5m	£810m

1895	2000
£420,000	£30m

Finmere Station was on the former Great Central Railway (GCR), the last mainline to be built in this country and the first to be closed. Sir Edward Watkin, the visionary and adventurous chairman of many railways, was the driving force behind its construction. A Manchester-born son of a wealthy cotton merchant, he planned to link the industrial centres of Manchester and Sheffield with the expanding markets of continental Europe. Watkin was already chairman of the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway (MSL) and proposed to link this to the south coast, eventually continuing to Paris through a channel tunnel, for which funds of £250,000 had been put aside.

Sir Edward initially planned to run his link over the lines of existing operators but could not reach agreement with them. Work commenced on a new £11.5 million line, known as the London Extension, on 13 November 1894. This ran south from Annesley, Nottinghamshire to join the Metropolitan Railway at Quainton Road, Buckinghamshire and continued as a joint line to Marylebone. A later, alternative route linked to the Great Western at Princes Risborough to go forward to Marylebone.

Walter Scotts, civil engineers from Newcastle-on-Tyne, constructed the section from Brackley to Quainton Road at a cost of £420,000. It involved excavations of cuttings at Mixbury, Finmere, Chetwode and Steeple Claydon. Finmere Station was built just over a mile from the village, 54.5 miles from the London terminus at Marylebone. It had a small goods yard with a cattle pen, coal staithes and store, and a wooden bridge over the line was built for use by the local hunt. The station was advertised as 'Finmere for Buckingham,' to entice customers from the slower service provided directly to Buckingham by the LNWR. The entrance to the station was between the lines under the bridge and traps waited in its shelter for passengers. The line opened for passengers on 15 March 1899.

Local entrepreneurs were keen to exploit the new station. Paxton & Holiday developed a live stock market on land adjacent to Finmere Station. Work on the Shelswell Inn began in May 1900, though the magistrates were initially reluctant to grant a licence to Hall's Brewery of Oxford, despite a petition signed by local residents. Finmere Station was also a popular alighting point for day-trippers from London. Shelswell farmer, Joseph Watson, described the visitors to Bicester Licensing Magistrates:

Two or three special trains came down on Sundays during the summer bringing excursionists from London. Sometimes fifty or sixty got out at Finmere and he should think the average for the summer would be about 25 or 30. They came for a holiday to the villages round... a great many alighted at Finmere for Buckingham,

but had to walk the four miles as there was no conveyance to be hired in [Newton Purcell]. (Bicester Advertiser, 1 September 1899)

At the same hearing into the application for a licence for the Shelswell Inn, the Chief Constable of the Oxfordshire Constabulary reported that the excursionists did not leave until two o'clock in the morning during the summer.

During the early 1920s, wealthy commuters took advantage of a new evening slip coach service, including: Admiral Roger Keyes, Tingewick; Captain Ferrass Loftus, Tingewick Hall; the Honourable L. Fleischman, Chetwode Manor; and Charles Trotter, Barton Hartshorn Manor. As the train approached the station, the guard released the last carriage, which was braked as it entered the station, allowing the express to continue without stopping. It had been thought that the slip coach was introduced as a service to prominent local residents; another suggestion is that a director of the GCR lived locally and this may have been the reason for attaching a slip coach to the evening express. In 1922, the fastest journey time from Fimmere to Marylebone was one hour and nine minutes on an express that stopped at Aylesbury only. The first service of the day at 7.59 am took longer and did not arrive in Marylebone until 9.48 am, a journey time of nearly two hours.

The GCR remained independent until 1923, when the London & North Eastern Railway absorbed it. On nationalisation in 1948, the line became part of the London Midland Region.

During the Second World War, Fimmere saw frequent rail movements due to its close proximity to the airfields and military camps. Prisoners of War were marched from the station to the camp at the crossroads between Water Stratford and Stowe. After the war, there was little local custom and the station was only busy at the beginning and end of Stowe School terms.

After the Second World War, motorcars and buses provided increasingly effective competition to the railways. In 1961, Fimmere Parish Council agreed to support Oxfordshire County Council in objecting to the British Transport Commission to proposals to close the former Central Railway and Fimmere Station. These protests were ignored and in 1962, Dr Beeching proposed to close the former GCR line, which was already starved of freight and express passenger services. In February 1963 it was reported that Fimmere Station would close to passengers the next month.

Monday 4th March 1963 has been fixed as the date when all passenger services will be withdrawn at the smaller intermediate stations on the Great Central Line between Aylesbury and Nottingham Victoria. Among the stations affected are Quainton Road, Calvert and Fimmere. (Buckingham Advertiser, 1 February 1963)



The Station Master and two of his staff pose during a quiet moment, around 1910

Suicide at Fimmere Station

The villages of Newton Purcell and Fimmere were thrown into a state of great excitement on Saturday night by the rumour that a well-dressed man had committed suicide by deliberately throwing himself in front of an express train on the Great Central Railway near Fimmere Station. It appears that as the nine o'clock express from Sheffield to London was nearing Newton Purcell, a ticket collector saw a man come out from the side of the line and fall down in front of the train. The train was travelling about 70 miles an hour and the brake was at once applied... It was ascertained that the man's body had been cut in two parts...

On Monday, Mr Dancer of the 'Kings Head,' Brackley... identified the head as that belonging to a man named Thomas William Twynham, a native of King's Sutton... On Saturday [Twynham had] called at the 'Red Lion,' Little Tingewick, where he only stopped a few minutes each time... but it was noticed by those present that he appeared very downcast and depressed. On Tuesday afternoon, an inquest was held at the Shelswell Arms... The jury brought in a verdict that the deceased committed suicide during a fit of temporary insanity. (Jackson's Oxford Journal, 28 June 1902)

In 1956, the station provided the following facilities and services:

Goods traffic.

Passengers, parcels & miscellaneous traffic.

Furniture vans, carriages, motor cars, portable engines and machines on wheels.

Horse boxes and prize cattle vans.

Carriages and motorcars by passenger or parcels train.

In its last years, the Permanent Way Department used the station yard for the storage of thousands of sleepers.



Finmere Station, 22 March 1961

The 13.15 pm departure from Nottingham Victoria waits to depart
Finmere for Marylebone.

Surplus steam locomotives from other regions were transferred to the line while other regions adopted new diesel locomotives. The service was run down and, on 3 September 1966, Watkin's London Extension operated as a through route for the last time. His vision of a central link from the industrial towns of the north to continental Europe had lasted just sixty-seven years and the line was never profitable.

Watkin's vision may yet be revived by Central Railways plc. The company is pursuing a proposal to rebuild the line, despite the defeat by Parliament in 1996 of a private bill to rebuild the railway. It estimates that a rebuilt line will remove 40% of projected traffic between the UK and the continent from the roads. The project is meeting heavy opposition from local environmentalists and residents who argue that it will disturb the peace of many villages, including Finmere—especially at Warren Farm. The company is optimistic that it will complete the project by 2005. If it succeeds, which is by no means certain, Watkin's vision of a direct connection from the north of England to the continent through a channel tunnel will have at last been realised.

The Bypass

At the end of 1998, the old Turnpike Road from Tingewick, which passed the Red Lion, the Kings Head and on to Croughton, became a 'no through' road. Traffic was diverted to the new, long sought, bypass.

Although Finmere has benefited, the bypass was most needed by the villagers of Tingewick where the narrow and busy A421 blighted the main street. A survey of road traffic between Tingewick and Finmere in 1992 recorded more than 11,000 vehicles a day; one in eight vehicles was a heavy goods vehicle. The route was also due to become a primary route linking the M40 at Banbury with Buckingham, Milton Keynes and the M1.

Three options for the route of the bypass were put forward for consultation in 1992. Two planned to join the existing road east of Little Tingewick, and one the Bicester road south of Finmere. The planners hoped that work would begin in late 1995.

Once the southern route, across Aerodrome Farm and joining the Bicester road, was chosen, it was proposed to extend the carriageway westwards. The views of Finmere villagers were sought at an exhibition held by Oxfordshire County Council at Finmere school on 8-9 October 1993. Four options for the route were displayed. One would create a new roundabout outside the Red Lion; the others crossed Gravel Farm to join the B4031 west of the village.

Villagers expressed concerns about the effect of the bypass on ecology, landscape and local business, but they also welcomed the relief of traffic and accidents at the Red Lion junction. Despite being the most costly option, it was decided to build the most southerly route across Gravel Farm, though the County Council would not accept a proposal to take the route south of the farmhouse.

Construction of the £12.5 million three-mile scheme commenced in November 1996. Earth excavated during the roadworks was used to level out a dip in the A421 near Little Horwood. In 1998, the Tingewick Bypass and the Finmere Diversion were opened, giving much relief to both villages.

During the 1990s, the GCR cutting at Finmere was used as a landfill site for domestic waste and for spoil from Finmere Quarry.



Finmere Station in its final years



The Station Master on Fimere Station in 1904