FAIRLIE CONTROVERSIAL
– or a little local difficulty at Blisworth in 1875

The place is Blisworth, a small village in Northamptonshire, about five miles south of the County town on the Oxford turnpike. The year is 1875. Blisworth has long been served by the Grand Junction canal, but appeared on the railway map with the coming of the London & Birmingham in 1838. The first station here was rather inconveniently situated way up on the embankment where the railway crosses the turnpike, and so was replaced by the present station around 1845, after the L&B had opened one of their earliest branches from Blisworth to Northampton and Peterborough. This new station is even further from the actual village, requiring the extension of an old lane to reach it, but at least the towpath of the canal now provides a convenient short-cut.

In 1866, a second railway arrived here and established itself in the 'back yard' of the main line station, which was by then under the ownership of the London & North Western Railway Company. The newcomer, the Northampton & Banbury Junction Railway initially had its origins in the desire to provide a better form of communication between those two important Midlands market towns, but the earliest schemes for a railway all failed to bear fruit. However, the coming of the iron-ore age in Northamptonshire, following the successful promotion of local ores at the Great Exhibition of 1851, brought a new impetus for a line to Banbury.

Indeed, just reaching Banbury was no longer sufficient; the flourishing ironworks of South Wales had now become the new target. The Northampton and Banbury scheme was resurrected, but now with grand designs of extending westwards to Blockley, Ashchurch, Gloucester, Ross and eventually connecting into South Wales.

The Northampton & Banbury Junction opened from a single platform at Blisworth, adjacent to the LNWR premises in 1866, but almost immediately fell into financial chaos, badly affected by the banking collapse of the same year. Construction had stopped short in a field just beyond Towcester, and it would be another six years before trains were finally able to reach Banbury, Even then the last few miles from the lonely junction at Cockley Brake were over the rails of the LNWR operated Buckinghamshire Railway line from Bletchley.

The early days were extremely hard for the infant N&BJR, but this did not stop them pushing ahead with their plans for extensions, and the company even briefly changed its name to the much more prestigious Midland Counties & South Wales Junction Railway for a few years. However, the inevitable collapse into receivership soon followed, and a new sense of realism saw the grand plans abandoned, the company name changed back to the original, and by 1875 the N&BJR had also decided to divest itself of its ancient collection of locomotives and rolling stock, and hire the same from their close neighbours the LNWR.

In line with their early ambitions, the N&BJR had intended to begin operations in 1866 with ten new 0-4-2 tank and tender locomotives built by Neilson of Glasgow. None of these ever reached Blisworth, and instead services began in 1866 with just a single, as yet unidentified locomotive, and this situation ensued for the next few years, aided and abetted by a few hires and loans in times of need. However, by 1870 the finances must have been a little stronger, as a motley collection of engines were gradually accumulated, including three elderly examples from the ever helpful LNWR

who also assisted with the odd repair at nearby Wolverton works. These would suffice until the permanent arrangement with the LNWR began a few years later.
However, before long the LNWR had another railway neighbour at Blisworth. The lure of an easier connection with South Wales had also attracted the attention of other local ironstone entrepreneurs, who quickly promoted an alternative route through West Northamptonshire and Warwickshire to reach Stratford upon Avon. This was the East & West Junction Railway. Their Act of Parliament, which also granted running powers over the N&BJR to Towcester and Blisworth, was passed in 1863, but it took the EWJR until 1871 to open their first section, an isolated stretch of line a mere 6¼ miles long from Fenny Compton to Kineton. The completed route from Greens Norton Junction, on the N&BJR route near Towcester, to Stratford then opened in 1873, and once again there were grand, but ultimately unfulfilled, schemes to extend towards Worcester and South Wales.
Decline set in almost immediately, again followed by receivership and even a suspension of passenger services for eight years from 1877 to 1885. However by the latter date, the otherwise impecunious EWJR had already managed to sponsor a nominally independent western extension from Stratford to Broom Junction, on the Midland Railway route from Redditch to Evesham, and this at least provided another outlet for their potential traffic towards South Wales.
However, the predicted volumes of ironstone traffic had yet to reach the levels anticipated, partly due to an untimely general falling off in demand, and also to the aggressive tactics of both the GWR and LNWR companies who both wished to retain the traffic on their own routes.
The early years of the EWJR therefore followed much the same pattern as the evolution of their neighbour the N&BJR, but at least the EWJR were able to take delivery of their initial fleet of locomotives, these being three 2-4-0 passenger tank engines and three 0-6-0 goods locomotives, all provided by Beyer Peacock. However, by 1875 these were all back with their makers, and in a strange parallel with the N&BJR, the East & West also soldiered on with hired and borrowed motive power.
A day spent at Blisworth in late 1875 would doubtless have provided a fascinating contrast in terms of the locomotives that were to be seen around the station area. On the LNWR main line there would be F.W.Webb's new "Precursor" 2-4-0's which were gradually replacing older types, some of which would still feature on the cross country branch services to Northampton and Peterborough. The LNWR was also now providing engines and stock for the N&BJR; presumably these would have been other displaced types, but of slightly less antiquity than the random collection that they were replacing, some of which were still lingering in sidings around the N&BJ system awaiting sale. The East & West Junction would also have contributed their own collection of antiques on both their passenger services to Stratford and their iron ore traffic, some of which was routed via Blisworth onto the LNWR.
But we might just have chanced to see something very different here at Blisworth. Away to the north of the station, in the sidings where the Towcester line makes an indirect connection with the LNWR yard, something unusual was attracting the attention of the local railway staff.
On reaching home, the pages of the Northampton Mercury newspaper of 23rd October revealed all:

'EAST & WEST JUNCTION RAILWAY'

'The Gers of Rouen, and the brave Wellington, proving inadequate for the increased traffic on the line, they have lately purchased a magnificent new engine, a four cylinder double action Fairlie's Patent, weight 60 tons and complement 20 tons, capable of rushing away with a train of 1000 tons on the level or 600 or 700 tons over the Morton Pinkney gradient. But as everything great has its detractors and opponents, so has this engine. The Northampton & Banbury Co. refuse it transit along their line from Towcester to Blisworth. The consequence was, on Saturday evening last, the line was blocked against the passenger train. The market train, 6.25pm from Northampton, did not arrive at Blakesley until after 9pm. If such things are to continue, it is high times to recur to primitive modes of travelling. The Blisworth platforms are not very inviting these cold evenings. The offending parties should settle their differences in a more satisfactory way than at the expense and inconvenience of the public.'

The sight of this "Fairlie's patent" locomotive on the EWJR must have been quite a shock to local eyes, otherwise used to seeing relatively small engines on even the heaviest main line trains. Its arrival quite obviously also quickly attracted the attention of the Northampton & Banbury Junction Railway management.

At this point in time the N&BJR was meandering along in a hand-to-mouth existence, just about managing to keep their annual operating costs covered by revenue, but otherwise hampered by debts. In addition, and despite the newspaper report optimistically mentioning "increased traffic" the EWJR was certainly in decline, with their passenger service soon to be reduced to just two trains each way per day, before ceasing altogether in 1877.

The two companies were also not on the best of terms with each other, and there had already been various spats over the non payment of dues by the EWJR for their use of Blisworth and Towcester stations. They were both no stranger to litigation, and the attentions of the Railway Commissioners, this new contretemps soon resulting in that august body once again being required to intervene.

But just how did a struggling minor concern such as the EWJR manage to obtain the use of such a leviathan as the "Fairlie" which at the time was probably one of the largest locomotives in use on British lines?

The answer probably lies in a combination of factors. The EWJR were undoubtedly short of suitable motive power, despite their modest levels of traffic. The two engines mentioned in the newspaper report were an old French built 2-4-0, and an ancient 0-6-0 saddle tank on hire from that renowned dealer in secondhand locomotives, Isaac Watt Boulton, of "Boulton's Sidings" fame. But we will return to these two engines later, as they are both of great interest to the locomotive historian.

It also seems that around the same time the Yorkshire Engine Company had on their hands ten large 0-6-6-0 Fairlie locomotives constructed in 1874, under their works numbers 219 to 228. These double-ended locomotives, hugely proportioned by everyday standards, had twelve wheels of 3'9" diameter, four cylinders of 17" diameter and 22" stroke, and a weight of 77 tons in full working trim. The first five were modified to suit 5ft gauge track to fulfil an order placed by the Poti & Tiflis Railway of Georgia, although it is recorded that only four eventually appeared on the Transcaucasian system, with one believed to have been lost in transit at sea.

The other five locomotives however lingered unsold for some considerable time, despite being advertised in various places such as "The Engineer" for 16th August 1878. Eventually a buyer was found in 1881 in the shape of the Nitrate Railways of Peru. However, before the locomotives were despatched to their new owner a year later, they were first modified by the addition of a Bissel truck at either end, thus converting them into a 2-6-6-2 configuration. It seems that during 1881, Robert

Fairlie himself paid a visit to the Y.E.C. works and inspected the locomotives during their alteration. According to correspondence in the company's files, one of them was apparently reported as being stripped right down for detailed examination, suggesting that it may have already been put to some use during the intervening seven years.
It therefore seems highly likely that this was the locomotive that had been acquired by the EWJR in late 1875, probably after being hawked around by the manufactures in an attempt to find a buyer. Doubtless the EWJR would have been only too pleased to agree to a trial over their line, seeing this as a way of cheaply obtaining – if only for a short period – some modern and reliable motive power.
A drawing and photograph contained in an article on the EWJR in "The Locomotive" of 1911 supports this theory and shows that with the exception of alterations to the chimneys, cab and footsteps, the Fairlie locomotive in question was indeed identical to the others of the batch. The photograph also appears to show an "E.W.J.R." plate on one of the tank sides, the other bearing a plate indicating "Fairlie's Patent"
The "Fairlie" appears to have been in daily use on freight traffic on the EWJR from around October 1875, but it was not long before their neighbours the N&BJR took exception to the use of what they obviously considered to be an unacceptably large locomotive over their line from Towcester to Blisworth. Although some of the protestations were based on the safety of the locomotive in certain locations, there must also have been more than just a tinge of local rivalry involved in the decision to challenge the use of the engine over the line.
The two neighbouring railways failed to reach an amicable agreement, and the matter was therefore brought before the Railway Commissioners for arbitration on 14th February 1876. Meeting at Westminster, the Commissioners, represented by Sir F. Peel, Mr. Macnamara and Mr. Price, summarised the overall situation as follows:

"The East and West Junction Railway Company have the right of running powers over five miles of the Northampton and Banbury Junction Railway from their junction with it at Greens Norton to Blisworth and are desirious of using or bringing upon such railway a Fairlie engine as it is called from the name of its inventor or patentee. This engine the Banbury Company consider to be unfit for their railway, and the question of unfitness has been referred to us under the 115th section of the Railway Clauses Act of 1845 which gives a company power to object to an engine proposed to be used upon their line, and refers any difference between the company and the owner of the engine to arbitration. The reference has been made at the instance of the Junction Company."

The EWJR, in support of their claim to be allowed to use the engine over the N&BJR line stated that they had for some months used it on their own line, and then for a time on the NBJR line, and had found that it "*answered exceedingly well the purpose for which it had been procured*" and at the same time "*effected a great economy of labour in the conveyance of loads of iron ore*" over their system.They also claimed that no damage had resulted to any part of either company's line thus far, but nevertheless the Northampton and Banbury Company still objected to its use,
The N&BJR in turn produced an expert witness, one Mr. Jacomb the Chief Resident Engineer of the London & South Western Railway Company, who reported that it was his opinion that the "Towcester Road bridge of 40 foot span" was liable to be overstrained by the Fairlie locomotive when the whole weight of the engine was on the bridge.

However, an unnamed witness from the EWJR then countered by pointing out that when the engine was placed centrally on the bridge, due to its unusual length certain parts of it were not on the bridge at all, and therefore the effective weight was no more than that of a normal engine. The fact that the Fairlie had run over the bridge almost daily since September 1875 without any problem was also deemed to indicate that there should be no objection raised against its use on the line.
In addition, the EWJR claimed that the destructive influence of the locomotive on the rails was actually less than that of an ordinary engine, as the maximum weight of a pair of wheels on any ordinary engine was greater than the maximum weight upon any one pair of wheels on the Fairlie.
The Commisioners report goes on to state how a greater objection had been raised by the NBJR against the extraordinary width of the locomotive, which was 8ft 7in wide for a length of six feet at either end, and 9ft wide for the remainder of its length. In addition there was a ledge or footplate extension of a further six inches on either side of the widest portions, making a total width of ten feet at a point 4ft 6in from the ground. Apparently this width had already been reduced by three inches on either side. The NBJR claimed that there were certain points on their line where this extra width made the engine unsafe, specifically in the goods yard at Blisworth, the passenger platforms there and at Towcester, and on two other bridges.
However the EWJR again countered that the width of the Fairlie engine was very little greater than an ordinary engine and that this slight increase had thus far caused no inconvenience or damage whatever to the Northampton and Banbury Company .
The EWJR concluded their case by stating that the objections made were "*frivolous and were not put forth bona fide*", and were merely intended to obstruct the operation of their trains, pointedly remarking that the N&BJR already had an arrangement with the LNWR to provide an alternative route for iron ore traffic.
The Commissioners, after visiting the various locations involved, and having thoroughly examined the claims of the two companies, duly delivered their findings on 2nd March 1876.
They reported that the width of the Fairlie locomotive meant that a minimum space of only 1ft 4 in was available between the edge of the footplate and any structure on the lines in question. Board of Trade regulations did require that this should be at least 1 foot greater, however the regulations referred to actually only applied to the distance from the sides of passenger carriages, and so were considered to have no bearing on the case.
In addition they commented that all of the bridges on the NBJR line had been constructed to accommodate double track, but thus far only a single line of rails had been laid. They therefore considered that as long as the NBJR cautioned their staff to only stand on the unused portion of the trackbed when trains passed, they could not deem the locomotive to be unfit to work on the line. They did however recommend that the engine should be required to slacken speed before crossing bridges and should not exceed ten miles per hour when on the bridges themselves.
The Commissioners also felt that the six inch extension on part of the Fairlie's footplate should not be a problem at Blisworth and Towcester stations, as part of any potential overlapping was in fact due to the irregular shape of the platform edges, which had been allowed to bulge out from their original line of construction.
However, the sidings at Blisworth were thought to be a different matter. In most cases there existed at least the usual six foot space between tracks, but at the point of exchange between the NBJR and LNWR the space was even more restricted. The Commissioners therefore decreed that the Fairlie, although suitable for shunting in the

other sidings, should not be allowed to work where the clearance was less than six feet.
In conclusion the Commissioners stated:
" We decide therefore that the engine is not unfit to be used on the line of the Northampton and Banbury Company over which the East and West Junction have running powers under their Act, distinctly at the same time not approving of its being taken upon sidings at the Blisworth terminus where the free space on either side is under six feet. We make no order about costs."

The Fairlie was therefore free to continue running over the NBJR lines, but unfortunately there is no record of exactly how long it then continued in the use of the EWJR. It must however have gone back to its owners for preparation for sale at least a few months prior to its eventual departure overseas in 1881.
Thus passed a particularly interesting period in the locomotive history of these two minor lines. However, as alluded to earlier, the Fairlie was not the only stranger to appear around this time.
The use of two locomotives of French origin on the EWJR during this period, recorded as an 0-6-0 named 'La Savoie' and a fellow Buddicom 2-4-0 'Ceres' has already been well related in various publications. Contemporary newspaper reports of a lineside fire near Byfield confirm that the former was certainly at work on the EWJR in May 1875, presumably together with its French compatriot which was recorded as being used on passenger duties until these were suspended in 1877.
(Readers requiring more details of the court case following 'La Savoie's' indiscretions may wish to refer to 'A French farce in West Northamptonshire' in Railway Archive No. 29)
These two French built outside cylinder tender locomotives had found their way from the continent through the hands of Thomas Brassey, the railway contractor, having been previously used by him on contracts in France. Quite how they then came to be at Stratford upon Avon is not at all clear, although the fact that 'La Savoie' later again passed through Brassey's hands before finding later use with the Bute Trustees in Cardiff might suggest that these locomotives were actually on hire from him.
According to the 'Locomotive Magazine' 'La Savoie' arrived at Cardiff in 1885 as a six coupled saddle tank but somewhat confusingly is stated to have previously been a four coupled engine with a small pair of leading wheels, this description perhaps being more suited to its companion.. It is also sometimes reported as an 0-6-0 saddle tank whilst with the E & WJR, so it seems that it was rebuilt before leaving Stratford upon Avon for the Bute Trustees. It subsequently carried Cardiff Railway numbers 25, and then 32, was further rebuilt at Tyndall Street in 1888, and seems to have survived in use until around 1907, when it was laid aside and then broken up after remaining derelict for a number of years. One wonders whether a photograph might just have been taken of this unusual locomotive at some point during its stay at Cardiff, but unfortunately none have so far been located. On the other hand 'Ceres' appears to have been quietly scrapped some time after working the inaugural service on the Stratford to Broom Junction section, which, being nominally independent, managed to open in 1879 despite the suspension of services on the EWJR main line.
However, returning to the newspaper report of October 1875, the references to "*'The Gers of Rouen, and the brave Wellington"* are also of great significance.
Firstly, the fact that the French locomotive is referred to as "Gers" contradicts previous widely reported references to it being named "Ceres". The other French engine "La Savoie" is clearly referred to as such in other newspaper reports of the

same year after it disgraced itself near Byfield in setting fire to a lineside property, and in fact it seems to have been colloquially referred to as "Savoy". The fact that both locomotives came from the same supplier, Brassey, might suggest that there would be some concurrence in the naming policy. Both Savoie (or Savoy) and Gers are French *departements* and this might therefore be considered as a quite logical theme for the names. Although the accuracy of early newspaper reports must always be treated with some care, it is also true that early handed-down records of minor railways were of necessity handwritten, and it is quite conceivable that "Gers" could at some point have been wrongly transcribed as "Ceres".

The reference to 'brave Wellington" is also of great interest. This is identifiable as the locomotive which has been recorded as on hire to the EWJR in Alfred Rosling Bennett's "The Chronicles of Boulton's Sidings". Bennett records this early Thwaites & Carbutt 0-6-0, by then converted to a saddle tank, as being on hire to the EWJR "around 1875" and the newspaper report therefore conveniently confirms this date. It seems that "Wellington" was in use on the EWJR for some time, before being reclaimed by Boulton after the railway company defaulted on their payments, a situation that seems only too typical of the EWJR at that time.

The "Chronicles" also suggests that another very similar locomotive named "Nelson" was also hired to the EWJR, but a letter published in the "Locomotive Magazine" of June 15th 1922, from a J. Bradshaw, the son of the early Locomotive Superintendent of the EWJR, suggests otherwise. The correspondent states that, in addition to personally recalling the 1873 batch of Beyer Peacock locomotives that were returned to the makers, he could also confirm a tank engine named "Wellington" as being the only one hired from Boulton. In fact he recalls that the driver, a John Whitehead, was also provided with the locomotive.

To further add to the intrigue, in his letter Bradshaw also suggests that earlier references to a Somerset & Dorset Railway 2-4-0 engine being on hire from Boulton's around 1877 may have been erroneous. This locomotive is referred to in an earlier article on the EWJR in the "Locomotive Magazine", and also receives mention in "The Chronicles" although Bennett states therein that there are no records of Boulton actually owning such an engine. However, Bradshaw instead suggests that, to the best of his recollection, it was an SDJR outside framed *six coupled* goods engine built by Fox Walker that was tried at Stratford upon Avon, and this was returned immediately after losing a driving wheel tyre on its first trip. However this in itself seems unlikely to be accurate as neither the SDJR, nor any of its constituents, had owned a suitable double framed 0-6-0.

The early outside framed 2-4-0 engines on the SDJR were also actually supplied by George England, and not Fox Walker, although it does seem that some of these locomotives did later find their way to the latter company in Bristol as part payment for newly built 0-6-0 saddle tanks delivered in 1874.

Yet more confusingly, Bertram Baxter, in his "British Locomotive Catalogue", has listed two of these 2-4-0's, Nos. 3 and 4, as being hired to the EWJR in November 1874.

The balance of probability suggests that, as partly confirmed by Bradshaw, there was indeed an SDJR engine at Stratford upon Avon around this time, but that it may actually have been a 2-4-0 rather than an 0-6-0 type.

As a final embellishment to this pot-pourri of early EWJR locomotives it should also be mentioned that, somewhat unbelievably, yet another "Fairlie" type is thought to have graced the tracks between Blisworth and Stratford during the mid-1870's. There are several published references to the use of a single boilered 0-4-4 tank version on

the line, although no further documentary evidence of this has been discovered so far. This rather mysterious engine appears to have been built by R & W Hawthorn as their works number 1699 in 1877, to the order of the Fairlie Engine and Rolling Stock Company. It seems that, after a short period of demonstration use on the EWJR, it was sent to the Paris Exhibition of 1878 bearing the name "Robert Fairlie", following which it was put up for sale, and ultimately found a home in 1881 on the Swindon Marlborough & Andover Railway. Here it later became their No.4, but was less than successful, and after frequent periods of inactivity, it was finally withdrawn in 1892. To have seen just one Fairlie at Blisworth would have been quite something, but for two to arrive……..Blisworth must have been a fascinating place for a locomotive enthusiast of the 1870's!