

Edward Bury of Salford - and of the London & Birmingham Railway.

Probably the best-known name in railway history of anyone from Salford is that of Edward Bury, F.R.S., M.Inst.C.E., etc.

He was born on 22nd October 1794 at Bury Hall in Salford, to which the existing Bury Street used to lead, going north-west from opposite the present-day Rovers Return. Bury Hall itself disappeared in the early nineteenth century, its site built over by rows of cottages. These are also now long gone and covered by the car park south of the Stay Inn, just over the fence from Trinity Way, the A6042. Only one portrait of him is known - what is said to be "from a bad photograph" taken when he was old and probably near death. His grave at Scarborough is now quite unmarked, but there must once have been a monument there - to him and also to his wife, Priscilla Susan Bury, a well-known botanical illustrator in the style of Audubon - but it was probably tidied away on 'health & safety' grounds.

So what is known about Edward Bury? His father was a timber merchant and land-owner in Salford, and Edward set himself up in the timber trade in Liverpool before branching into ironwork with a foundry near the Liverpool & Manchester Railway's works in Tabley Street. He began to build an 0-6-0 locomotive for the Rainhill Trials but it could not be finished in time. His later attempts to sell locomotives to the L&MR were thwarted by George Stephenson; one objection was that Bury's wheels were "dangerous" because of their 6-foot diameter.

But he organised and supervised the motive power of probably the then most important railway in the world, the London & Birmingham, and did it so well that the L&BR was always able to pay a handsome dividend to its shareholders. His four-wheeled locomotives were designed to comply exactly with the L&BR directors' requirements, and were in two classes, for passenger and goods trains; ninety engines in total, and although built by seven different firms, they were planned to have identical, interchangeable parts. Such standardisation seems simple common-sense nowadays, but Bury's scheme was the earliest. (Compare the L&BR's stock of standard locomotives with the wild variety on almost every other line at that time.)

Meanwhile his firm, Edward Bury & Co of the Clarence Foundry, Liverpool (from 1842 known as Bury, Curtis & Kennedy) built locomotives whose characteristic features such as the inside bar-frame and the domed firebox spread worldwide - and endured for very many years. Bury was the Stephensons' biggest competitor and, although starting later, his firm exported almost as many engines to the USA.

He has also had more lies written about him than anyone else I can think of.

In books about railway history he is often ignored completely, but whenever he *is* mentioned – even by a few well-respected authors (as well as by countless others) – it is almost always to deride him, to blame him for things for which he was not responsible, to accuse him of being a mere business man “endowed richly with the commercial instinct”, an “unsportsmanlike” man “of some conceit” who exercised his power to the L&BR’s “great disadvantage” and whose “little pip-squeaks of engines with very few exceptions were scrapped within five years”. His designs have been said to be “almost entirely due to his partner, James Kennedy” – although quite how this can be known is never mentioned. Thus Ahrons, Rev. Awdry, Rolt, Canon Lloyd, and Nock. Worse still, according to Addyman & Haworth’s otherwise fine 2005 book, *Robert Stephenson, Railway Engineer*, if Bury had not been “insinuated as locomotive supplier and superintendent to the L&B, the expense of the [Camden] fixed engines would not have been necessary. The Bury 0-4-0s were somewhat deficient in power.” This, despite the Camden rope-worked incline having been recommended and planned as the L&B’s grand entrance into London by Robert Stephenson, months before Bury had anything to do with the line.

There’s also a bit of nonsensical embroidery from Sir Frank Markham, MP, in his *History of Milton Keynes* (1975) – “Bury retired [from the L&B] under a cloud of bankruptcy.” Clearly, when it comes to decrying Edward Bury, anything goes.

This relentless anti-Bury line seems to have been started by Clement Edwin Stretton, who wrote in 1895:

“In July 1846 the London & Birmingham Railway Company ceased to exist, and the new London & North Western directors ordered that Bury’s four-wheeled engines were not to be employed on the express trains between London and Rugby and Birmingham ... Mr Bury held the strongest views in favour of his four-wheeled engines and firmly refused to carry out the orders of the directors. Twenty-four hours settled the question. Mr Bury had to ‘go’...”

This, as usual with Stretton’s writings, is total garbage. From the L&BR and LNWR records, minute-books and letters, it is clear that there was no such order, no refusal by Bury, and no 24-hours’ notice. Bury’s first mention of his wish to resign – in November 1846 – came as an unwelcome surprise to the LNWR board. He departed in March 1847, and his engines continued working on the line for many years. But Stretton’s vivid ‘dismissal’ yarn keeps on being repeated.

Stretton was very keen to champion Bury’s successor on the LNWR, James Edward McConnell, contrasting the big and successful ‘Bloomer’ 2-2-2s with Bury’s earlier four-wheelers. So it is worth noting that the ‘Bloomer’

of 1851 was really just a simple enlargement of a Bury, Curtis & Kennedy design of 1848, but mounted on a plate-frame instead of a bar-frame.

Meanwhile, as well as more than 400 locomotives, BC&K had been producing all manner of articles, from church-bells to steamships, and the ironwork for at least one long bridge, that over the River Neva at St Petersburg.

In the mid-1850s Edward Bury retired to Ambleside, but soon became ill and was taken to Scarborough, where he died on 25th November 1858 at the age of 64. His widow, the botanical artist, who survived him for thirteen years, said that he had “devoted the best energies of his life to the success of the London & Birmingham Railway”. She was buried in the same grave in Scarborough’s Dean Road Cemetery, plot No C 33-9, which is now quite unmarked, somewhere in a plain grassy area.

Which seems a strange ending for an important railway pioneer and his well-known artist wife.

Harry Jack.

(03.09.2021)