

Thomas Meynell was born in Crathorne, North Yorkshire on 11 April 1763 the son of Joseph Meynell and his wife Frances Newsam. On the 28th August 1804 he married Theresa Mary Wright in London. The following year they had a son Thomas, named after his father, and in 1827 they had a daughter, Theresa, named after her mother. No worries about what to call the children then. They had another son, Edward.

He was an eminent local landowner with seats at the Friarage at Yarm (now Yarm School) and Kilvington near Thirsk. Unlike many landowners who viewed the Stockton and Darlington Railway in a negative light, Meynell was enthusiastic about the scheme and saw its economic opportunities.

Meynell employed Jeremiah Cairns as his land steward in Yarm. Cairn's sister was wife to an engineer from South Wales, George Overton. In 1818 Overton was employed to conduct a survey ascertaining the benefits of canal versus railway and he came down on the side of a horse drawn railway from west of Shildon to Stockton Wharf. As a result of this, Overton was to produce the first plan for the route of the S&DR which was the subject of the 1821 Act of Parliament.

Meynell purchased £3000 worth of shares to support the railway. In recognition of his status as a major landowner and his support of the railway, he was appointed the Chairman of the Stockton & Darlington Railway on 12 May 1821, although he served in this capacity for earlier versions of the committee before the company was formally founded.

An early committee meeting resolved that Meynell and Edward Pease should approach suitable candidates to build the railway, who appointed George Stephenson as the line's engineer.

Meynell had the honour laying the S&DR's first rail on 23 May 1822. He was apparently pulled by 300 cheering, singing navvies in his carriage from his home in Yarm five miles into Stockton, with the Yarm Town Band in front, playing joyfully away. With him in his carriage was Benjamin Flounders, a Quaker who owned linen mills at Crathorne and who had invested heavily in the railway. A half-day holiday had been declared in Stockton for the historic occasion. At the town hall that Thursday, they met the mayor of Stockton, Richard Jackson, and the recorder, Leonard Raisbeck. Together, with the band still playing, they all processed down to St John's Well, Stockton. The well – a spring of allegedly health-giving water gushing out of the ground – was just outside the town centre and is now the site of a busy road junction. Construction of the railway, from Stockton to Darlington to Shildon, had properly begun on May 13, 1822, and by May 23, they were ready for the grand ceremonial laying of the rail. At 3pm, the band fell silent as Mr Meynell did the honours. But he was a man of few words and didn't feel the need to make a speech, or say anything at all.

Instead, a celebratory cannon was let off in a nearby field and the band struck up the National Anthem.

Perhaps the lack of a speech pleased the 300 workmen who must have been tired after dragging Mr Meynell's carriage for miles. It enabled the VIPs to promptly process back to the town hall for a celebratory meal while the workmen themselves

were treated to free bread, cheese and ale in the Black Lion Hotel which was owned and run by Martha Howson. Martha would later run a passenger service from the Black Lion using the railway.

The celebrations probably grew into a long, hazy evening, and before closing time, an entrepreneurial boy toured the streets selling souvenirs of the historic day. For a halfpenny, he sold a document which said it was “a full and faithful report of what Mr Meynell said at the opening”.

The boy took the souvenir-seekers’ ha’pennies and scarpered sharpish. The purchasers opened up their mementoes to discover to their horror that they had bought a blank sheet of paper.

“Hey,” they yelled after the fleeing boy, “there’s no speech here, you young rascal!”

“Ah know that,” replied the youth in a good local accent. “He m’yad n’yan!”

Meynell had an important role on the opening day; indeed he wore many hats that day. At lunchtime, when the train stopped at Darlington, his band from Yarm got on board two waggons behind Experiment and provided a musical accompaniment for the rest of the journey. I suspect he may have been in Experiment as a VIP, rather than conducting the band from inside the adapted waggon. It is often referred to as Mr Meynell’s band but this might have simply meant that he funded them, rather than playing in the band himself.

When the train arrived at Stockton’s quayside the band played God Save the King, then got out and led a procession into town where the workers went to the inns and the invited VIPs went to the Town Hall. Mr Meynell’s band went into a side room and continued playing, but Mr Meynell himself, as the Chair of the S&DR, chaired the banquet and after the ‘removal of the cloth’ started the 23 toasts with a toast to the king.

His special relationship with the S&DR manifested itself in other ways. The railway company owned the Yarm branch, having bought the land from Mr Meynell, but the depot at its terminus, although operating as an S&DR depot, remained in the ownership of Mr Meynell, who presumably saw the financial benefits in retaining ownership of it, but renting it back to the S&DR. This arrangement existed nowhere else at this date and did lead to some complexities, Mr Meynell commissioned the S&DR to build his depot, possibly to a different design than the other depots owned by the S&DR and designed by George Stephenson.

The Cleveland Bay was known as the New Inn when it opened beside the depot at the terminus of the Yarm branch. It was also owned and commissioned by Thomas Meynell, although his agent Jeremiah Cairns seems also to have had an interest in it. Meynell recognised the commercial opportunities of providing shelter and hospitality, plus a place to meet, for railway and goods depot users in addition to the drovers who traditionally used this route to drive cattle from Scotland to towns and cities in the south.

Both inn, depot and the Yarm branch had an opening day event too in October 1825, although the depot was not complete. As we have heard already, the opening ceremony consisted of an excellent supper for the 'respectable tradesmen'. The fact that according to the newspapers there were some 60 of these at the supper on the opening evening, plus Mr Meynell's band playing several appropriate airs (DCA 22.10.1825) and about 50 workmen in an adjoining room, shows that this was a multi room tavern with catering facilities. The band was joined by increasingly inebriated gentlemen singing and one of the toasts was to the Chairman of the Railway Company – Mr Meynell. This tavern would inspire the S&DR to commission three more in 1826 and the model, together with the depot, would develop into what we now think of as a railway station. Incidentally, this is one of the few early railway taverns that appears to have much the same layout as it did in 1825.

Thomas Meynell served the company for 7 years until 1828 when the extension to Middlesbrough was proposed. The proposal was led by other members of the Committee, particularly the Pease family, and Joseph Pease in particular. Meynell was opposed to the Middlesbrough branch line because it would take custom away from Stockton and Yarm. In this he was supported by one of the S&DR's solicitors, Leonard Raisbeck of Stockton, and another committee member, Benjamin Flounders of Yarm, plus William Chaytor of Witton Castle and William Luke Prattman of Barnard Castle and various business owners of Stockton.

Meynell presented a petition against the bill for the Branch Line on March 18th 1828. The Bill received Royal Assent on May 23rd and Meynell resigned along with the others who opposed the extension. Not only was Meynell concerned about the economic impact of this proposed new line, but he also decried what he felt was the disproportionate influence of Quakers in the company.

Outside of his service to the S&DR and band leader, he was a Deputy Lieutenant of Durham and a Justice of the Peace.

Thomas Meynell died in 1854 and his eldest son Thomas Jnr inherited his estates. Thomas Jnr had worked with his father on their railway interests and became Chairman of the S&DR from 1841. When Thomas Jnr died childless in 1863 (the year the S&DR amalgamated with the NER), the estates were supposed to pass to Edward, Thomas Snr's second son, except that he had died in 1856, only two years after Thomas senior. So the estate passed down through the male line to Edward's son, but Thomas Jnr seems to have made provision for his wife Jane when he died in 1863, leaving her either the lands at Yarm or more likely the income derived from them. This would have included Yarm Depot. Jane died in 1903, and the NER were continuing to pay rent for the Depot to her until that date.

Again, you can read more about this in the Yarm book available on the Friends' web site.