

The Railway King – A Heritage Walk for York

written by Oliver O'Shea

NB: The underlined text highlights the sections that come directly from primary sources and archival material.

(1) Draper's Shop

Elizabeth Hudson: This is where everything started for us: our draper's shop, a beautiful little place in the shadow of the Minster. Not sure whether you lot even know what 'draper' means now - but, don't worry, basically it means we sold cloth. 'Drapers' does sound a bit more refined than 'cloth shop', I suppose. Mind you, today's owners don't seem to sell nowt much but preservatives and tea towels, by the looks of things. But that's by the by.

My dear George, started out as apprentice here at fifteen, under my father Richard. Originally, the business belonged to Bell and Nicholson - but Bell had long passed.

So, after he finished his 'prenticeship, George became a partner of the business. And it wasn't long after that, when we did marry and I became: Mrs Elizabeth Hudson. I might have been five years older than him, and perhaps not the ... well... most sought after woman in York... but we were a good match for each other. And I loved him very much.

We lived above the shop with our children, leading a humble life, doing Nicholsons proud. Carriages would be lined up outside on College Street, with some of the finest folk of York patronising our business for their linen and silks. George was very attentive to all of our customers, ensuring they made a habit of visiting our shop.

Patron: He would have ransacked the place through before he would allow one to leave unserved, if it was only a purl of silk thread one might want. And bow to one's carriage with as much grace as if one had spent a hundred pounds at a visit. By such conduct he won my regard, and secured my custom.

George Hudson: Ah, the happiest part of my life was when I stood behind the counter and used the yard measure in my own shop. I had one of the snuggest businesses in York. My ruin was having a fortune left to me.

Elizabeth Hudson: 30,000 pounds! Inherited from his great-uncle Matthew Bottrill, one of the wealthiest men in the city, who lived just down the road from here, on Monkgate. And that's where me and the family moved into, after his death in 1827.

George Hudson: 30,000 pounds... that's three million or so in your money today. Or something like that anyway.

But that fortune was the very worst thing that could have happened to me. It let me into the railways, and to all my misfortunes since.



Elizabeth Hudson: Right then, don't hang about -- take a turn past the Minster and along Stonegate, to follow my George's path to power over the next decade. You'll see, we soon had an even grander home than his uncle's one on Monkgate!

Journey from (1) to (2), whilst passing the Minster:

George Hudson: It didn't take me long to put my money to good use - that is to say, to make even more of it. And the railways struck me, as a great investment opportunity.

Railway Entrepreneur (*in a meeting*): Let me tell you why I seek your investment honourable, Sirs: great, noble and national deeds and works, incidental only to railways, will come out of the railways; such works as may chance to compete with our ancient cathedrals. Railways are the corporations of our time, which have the most real life and energy in them, and, like the corporations of olden time, will do noble deeds. So I say: invest, invest, invest!

(2) Mansion House

Lady Twaddington: Greetings gentlefolk, and welcome to the elegant Mansion House, the prestigious residence of the Lord Mayor of York. On numerous occasions, have I attended festivities and celebrations here, none more grand than those held by Mayor George Hudson. Three times was this honourable gentleman elected to this most esteemed of offices: the first in 1836, and then again the year after, only to be elected in 1845 for a final time after he had become the Right Honourable Member of Sunderland at the Houses of Parliament.

My husband, naturally, voted for Hudson as alderman and mayor on each of those occasions, belatedly returning the Tories to power in this city after the desolate years of Whig control. Hudson may have only been a mere draper ten years prior, but following the death of Mr Bottril, he was one of the richest men in York. The Mayorship was of course highly befitting to the Chairman of the York and North Midland Railway, promoting York's business interests in ways that were unimaginable before.

And I can honestly say, that prior to Hudson, we have never witnessed such splendid entertainments in the city, on any previous occasion whatsoever.

Duke Guffaw-Jaw: Indeed! The banquets were of the most sumptuous description, the dishes were excellent and of luxurious variety, and everything was served up in the best style.

Sir Quaffalot (*inebriated*): And hours of (hiccup) champagne, port, sherry, claret and tobacco.



Dame Stirstick (*confidentially*): I must confess the dinners of his Lordship rival, if they do not eclipse, the civic entertainments of London - the Lord Mayor of London must look to his laurels.

Lady Twaddington: Not only the genteel citizens such as you and I felt the benefit of his generosity either. He feasted his way into the hearts of his fellow-citizens.

Small Urchin: When her majesty Queen Victoria was crowned, I'll never forget how Mister Hudson gave us poorest people of York a free breakfast!

George Hudson: Over 14,000 adults and children I provided for on the day of her coronation - the proudest day York ever had. And all of it paid for, and all the other banquets, out of my own purse.

And let's not forget, I was making my shareholders, honest citizens of York, wealthy too; besides providing employment and industry for workers on the railways.

Lady Twaddington: But, that petty solicitor, George Leeman of the Liberals, always sought to bring Hudson's character into disrepute at every possible occasion.

George Leeman (*in Guildhall council chambers*): "You Tories, have bowed down before the golden calf of Hudson's wealth and worshipped it. As a thorough Tory party man, this 'magnate of Monkgate' cannot help considering every political opponent a personal enemy and that his rank, influence and money have been generally used to crush those who entertained sentiments contrary to his own. This city is now but an appendage of York and North Midland Railway, including among its councillors, not only the chairman and vice-chairman of the company, but also its solicitors, its official agents, its bankers and engineers. York is little better than a pocket borough controlled by the 'Railway King'.

Lady Twaddington: Tch! Never mind that ignoramus. I graciously invite you to traverse the Ouse and observe for yourself how Mr Hudson made York the beating heart of the railways.

(3) Lendal bridge

John Leeman, Lendal Ferryman: Howdo. John Leeman, Lendal Ferryman. Or *used* to be ferryman, anyhow. Before this here bridge was built, I would take the people of York over the Ouse here on my boat, between Lendal Tower and Barker Tower. Course at first, when railways came to York, I made a few bob more than usual: what with all the extra custom, people visiting York, coming to theatre and seeing them old walls what we've got.

But that Hudson fella, he came up with the bright idea of building this bloody bridge. Some say he only wanted to build it, so that his proposed train station on other side of river would be more appealing than the London and York Company's proposal for a station on Micklegate.

Hudson's enemy, George Leeman, -no relation, I promise- managed to prevent him for a while. Kept arguing over who would pay for it and it got delayed. Not the first time councillors have argued over Lendal Bridge, and no doubt not the last either. But it happened in the end.



First bridge, collapsed whilst they were constructing it, mind - in '61. But it was built come '63 by a Mister Thomas Page, same gent who did Westminster bridge. To cross, you had to pay a toll, 'cause someone has to pay for these things.

Come to think of it, Leeman ended up taking credit for that bridge, once it was finally built. Funny that.

I got compensated in fairness, forty pound all in all, given that it ruined my livelihood. *(Sigh)*

Right, let's be having you. Unless you want to swim over to other side, you'd better cross that bridge if you want to see where station used to be.

(4) Lutyens' monument

Vagrant: You see here, where this monument is, this was where the original station's coal depot and carriage sidings were. Hudson built his station on Toft Green with trains snugly sliding right alongside the city walls - back towards the river, where the grass mounds are now.

I lived on Toft Green in a House of Correction - but with Hudson's influence he was able to buy up the land and we were moved on somewhere else, so he could build his station here. Not that the likes of me would be able to afford travelling on the railways, not even in Third Class. But I tell you what, thanks to the railways, the price of coal has dropped from sixteen shillings to five for us in York.

They had to breach the walls to get a station this side of it, which upset some of the well-to-do people. What's his name, the one who paints them pictures of naked women... uh...William Etty... he opposed it.

William Etty: A disregard for the monuments of their ancestors, is one of the strongest marks of an unthinking, barbarous, sordid, and even brutal age.

G.T. Andrews: Much of the disquiet about the rupture, was calmed upon the unveiling of my designs for an elegant Tudor arch to complement the architecture of the medieval walls. Hudson was a personal friend of mine, and I designed many station buildings for his companies, including the station at York. With a colonnade entrance of polished stone in the Italian style, it was another fine success.

George Hudson: -and not overly costly either, Mr Andrews.

G.T Andrews: When our station opened, the Minster bells were rung, flags were hoisted and every sight, every sound, every movement seemed to bespeak a holiday; even the sulky booming of the cannon on the river had a gladsome interpretation.

Vagrant: As Hudson acquired more and more lines, the station became busier and busier until another platform was required.



Shareholder: Providence not only blessed Hudson with intellect of which the cleverest people might be proud, but also with a constitution which enabled him to go through as much work as would have killed half a score of men. To see the Railway King in his office, you found him immersed in a sea of papers - estimates, evidence, correspondence - surrounded by clerks, giving audience to deputations, and members of parliament.

Vagrant: And Hudson became richer and richer, spending more of his time in London rather than York.

George Hudson: So what? If results such as the world believes flows from railways, I have thus been a benefactor to my country. Is it a charge against me that by those means I have made a fortune? Why, is there any gentleman that would not like to make a fortune of the matters he is connected with? Prime Minister?

Prime Minister Gladstone: I think it is a circumstance of which this country has reason to be proud, Hudson, that our railways should, without any pecuniary aid or assistance from the Government, have been constructed by private enterprise, and by means of private capital.

Passenger: Hmmph! That's all very well except, travelling by Mr Hudson's railways is indeed a trial of patience - I have been on 37 trains over 6 weeks and not one arrived on time. In five of those journeys I passed through York from the south, and not once did I reach that station at the hour named in the time table, having been late sometimes 40 minutes, always as much as 24 minutes. The main causes of this disgraceful state of things seem to be - first, an utter disregard for punctuality on all the lines and branches; and, secondly a station at York, ill-planned, worse managed, and far too small for the traffic.

George Stephenson: I am afraid to say this passenger is right. The station should never have been built within the city walls. As I advised Hudson initially, a terminus within the walls would only result in any trains approaching from the east, requiring to reverse in order to enter and exit the station. But he would do anything to avoid the success of a London to York line, along the East coast, rivalling his own line via the Midlands.

George Hudson: Well, well Mister Stephenson.... I have become too great a man for you now .

George Stephenson: I have made you a rich man, George, but you will soon care for nobody except whom you can get money from.

(pause)

My friends, if you pass under the archway, you will be able to see -in the distance- where the station was, thankfully, relocated.

(5) Leeman Statue & Leeman Road

George Leeman: Hudson did as he chose, for his own ends, making and unmaking dividends, traffic, capital, and revenue, just as he pleased; disbursing sums of which he refused to render any account, pocketing cheques for which there is no authority, and of

which he will give no explanation; appropriating to himself money belonging to the company.
And, paying dividends to shareholders from capital instead of from revenue.

It was I who exposed the fraudulent accounting practices that brought about his downfall; it was I who deposed the Railway King.

As you cross over the road, you will notice not a statue erected to Mr Hudson, but a monument to yours truly: GEORGE LEEMAN. Thrice Lord Mayor of York, twice Right Honourable Gentleman for York in Parliament, and: Chairman of the North Eastern Railway company.

What a damn fine statue.

Oh, and do take note of the street name as you walk ahead to the National Railway Museum.

During the journey to the NRM ...

Young Child: (*reading from book, slowly*) : *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, Thomas Carlyle, 1850.
"The question 'Who is to have a Statue?' means, Whom shall we consecrate and set apart as one of our sacred men? Sacred; that all men may see him, be reminded of him, and, by new example added to old perpetual precept, be taught what is real worth in man. Whom do you wish us to resemble? Him you set on a high column that all men, looking on it, may be continually apprised of the duty you expect from them. What man to set there, and what man to refuse forevermore the leave to be set there.

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