

***'Engines of Growth, Wakefield Railways and their associated industries'* by Dr Phil Judkins**
Wednesday 10 September 2025

The meeting opened with the Chair, Michael Rochford introducing Dr. Phil Judkins, a long-standing member of the Wakefield Historical Society and Vice-President. The presentation of his lecture was especially appreciated given Pam's recent hospitalisation. Those present and indeed all members warmly endorsed the good wishes for Phil and Pam.

Dr Judkins introduced his lecture by referencing the event at WX on Thursday 02 October, but emphasised that this evening's lecture would contain much more information, of especial interest being the industries which grew up around the local railways as they grew and developed.

The colour coding system with which Dr Judkins explained and demonstrated the organic growth of what was at one stage, the most densely packed railway network, was especially helpful in understanding the way in which the fiercest of Victorian industrial battles developed the railway networks.

Dr Judkins' opening slide showed a Wakefield engine featured in the classic 1960s film "The Railway Children" and named as The Green Dragon. For many years, this engine was stabled at the Wakefield Motive Power depot and provides an introduction into the importance of Wakefield as a railway centre. From possibly the oldest viaduct and tunnel at Flockton, and a Wakefield world first, a public tramway where people could pay to have their own wagons on the track, Wakefield was at the very centre of the birth and growth of the railway industry.

But, as Dr Judkins had intimated at the outset of his lecture, the role railways played was as a part, an extremely significant part, of a multi-mode transport system, alongside tramways, rivers and canals. A system which initially was intended to carry goods and freight to support, develop and expand local industries and trade across the country and eventually beyond, also became a vibrant passenger network.

Dr Judkins highlighted the sheer size and scale of industries such as corn – the new Corn Exchange, opened in 1838 and further developed in 1864, turned over a staggering £100m per week in today's money.

As the first mainline railways began to emerge, a first local station was opened at Oakenshaw on 01 July 1840, its construction saved by the efforts of the Wakefield Historical Society many decades later. Initially, rail travel was not for local people but rather aimed at wealthier individuals wishing to travel to Leeds and London.

The railways expanded to cater for these growing needs. Entrepreneurs such as George Hudson opened new lines connecting Manchester and Leeds, and with it, new stations such as Kirkgate were opened. Dr Judkins showed the audience a spoof poster which highlighted the opposition to the new lines, a document now preserved in the national archives.

But, development continued, and Westgate Station was the next new addition – where fine houses were destroyed to build the station.

Dr Judkins lead us through a fascinating account of how local firms set up and run by people such as Edward Green and Sons, Bradley and Craven, George Craddock Snr and Jnr, Chas Roberts and Co., Drake and Warters used the railways to grow industries as diverse as coal, corn, grain, iron, malting, gingerbread, cement, bricks, shipyards, wire ropes, as well of course as livestock. The sheep and

cattle market in Wakefield was the biggest livestock market in the North of England at the time facilitated by the travel links from based on the old drove road from Kendal and the Yorkshire Dales.

The railways made an immense and not to be undervalued contribution during the First World War. Travel to the continent as ambulance trains and troop carriers proved the worth of the railways. Sadly, a new war was soon to come along, with the railways again being vital to the war effort. Dr Judkins provided some fascinating material of a German map of bombing targets and photos of key targets to guide their bombers – including the fuel depot at Wakefield. A new industry, manufacturing military equipment from torpedo tube doors to landing crafts, was added to the list

Come the 1960s and the Beeching review led to many closures of lines and stations as the private car and the lorry usurped many of the traditional functions of the railways. In particular, with the decline came the closure of the Belle Vue depot and many familiar landscapes vanished from the skyline. New industries such as distribution arrived and Westgate station had its moment of national fame as Denton station in the Touch of Frost television series.

Dr Judkins ended by saying this will be his final lecture for the Society as he and Pam are relocating in 2026. He was thanked by the Chair on behalf of the meeting for a fascinating and extremely interesting presentation and took several questions from an interested audience.

Steve Hargrave

03 October 2025.