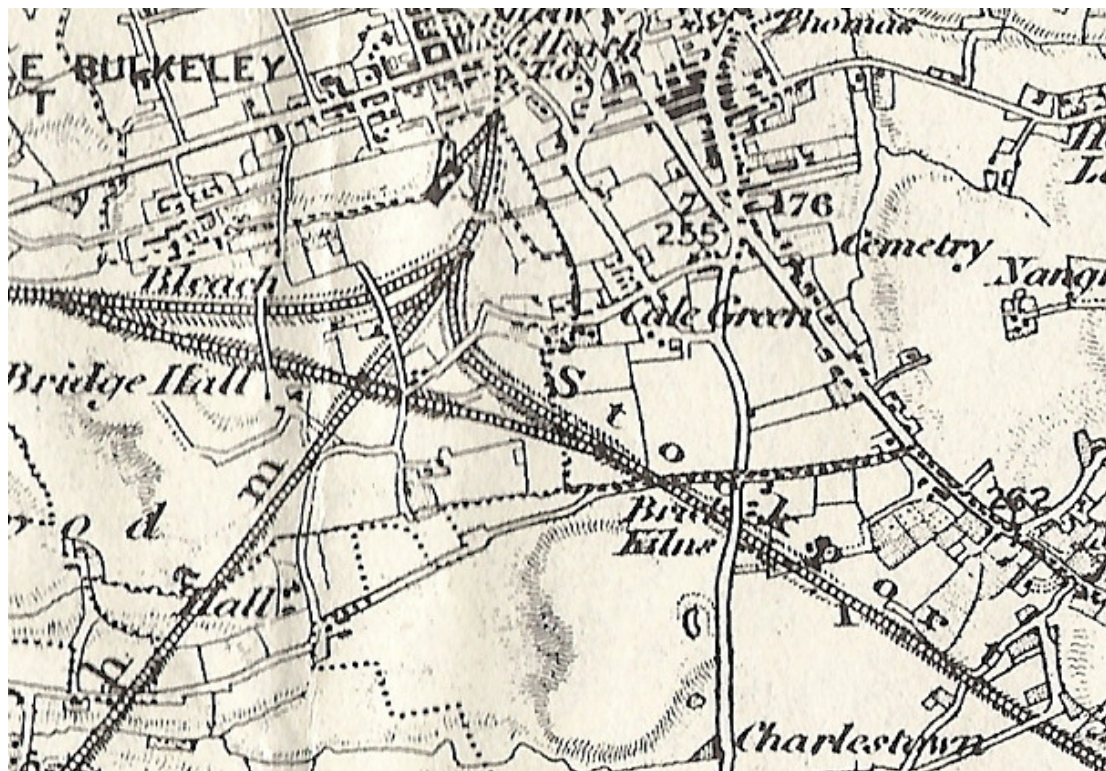


## Thomas Cooke: Davenport's First Station Agent

The Stockport, Disley and Whaley Bridge Railway, completed in the summer of 1857, passed through open farmland to the south of Stockport on the way to its first station at the village of Hazel Grove. Some of this land was part of the estate of Bramall Hall, owned by the Davenport family. For some time the Davenports had been hoping to solve their financial problems by selling land for residential development, and Colonel William Davenport Davenport, the head of the family in the 1850s, had hoped that a station would be provided to act as a focus.



No accurate map shows Davenport station 1858; the extract above is from an 1880s Ordnance Survey map published in about 1880. In fact it was the 1840s map with railways added and little else, but it gives a good idea of the situation just before the station was built. It shows that the railway, and the shallow embankments need to create the bridge over Bramhall Lane, obliterated a brickyard with its associated kilns. The 'hatching' on the map seems to suggest that a large area, later covered by the housing from Oakfield Road to Ashfield Road, had been excavated for brick-making clay.

When told that no station had been built, he wrote to the Railway's board of directors demanding action, and in 1858, trains began to call at a small station by the bridge where Bramhall Lane crossed the line, which was christened 'Davenport'. At that time there were just a few scattered cottages and farmhouses in the area, apart from one large house 'Bramall Mount' recently built at the nearby crossroads. Small hamlets existed at Cale Green, Mile End, and in the area around the junction of Woodsmoor Lane and Bramhall Lane. However, a station needed staff, and the first person to have the honour was, I believe, Thomas Cooke, whose life and career can be followed using online and published resources; some what follows involves a little guesswork, but I believe it to be basically correct.

Thomas Cooke was born in 1824 in rural Cheshire near the village of Haslington; he was one of a large extended family of Cookes who worked Hooter Hall farm. As a teenager, he would have known of the appearance of railways in the area, and the opening in 1837 within easy walking distance of a railway station, namely Crewe. The 1841 Census returns that reveal that by that year many of the men in the village gave their occupation as 'railway man' or 'railway labourer', among them Thomas Cooke, one of five Cheshire-born railway labourers lodging with William and Jane Hartley.

The Manchester and Birmingham Railway, opened in 1842, made it possible to travel easily from the area to developing towns such as Stockport and Manchester. Thomas may well have worked on the construction of the line. Maybe he was inspired to travel, as by 1851 he had relocated, by train or perhaps on foot, to the Stockport area, as he was to be found living close to Stockport at Heath End Farm, Cheadle Heath, working for the farmer, Thomas Pickford.

Heath End farm, rented by Mr Pickford from Peter Pownall of Bramhall, comprised a group of fields between the Cheadle to Stockport road and the river Mersey. It ceased to exist in viable form when the Midland Railway's line from New Mills to Cheadle Heath and its connecting link to the Woodley to Glazebrook line, were built across the land in 1900-1902; the farmhouse was alongside the Stockport Road on its north side, immediately to the west of the

bridge over the railway. Most of the remaining land is now covered by housing.

The following glowing review of Heath End is from a letter by 'A Friend to Improvement' published in *The Farmer's Magazine* in 1839 (Vol.2, p.295):

Mr Thomas Pickford ... a few years back took a farm at Cheadle Heath in the parish of and near the village of Cheadle. The farm was, when he entered upon it, in a most miserable plight; the land almost exhausted, the fences down and in short anything but tempting. Although Mr P. was a young man just married, and entering upon life, this dreary prospect nothing daunted him: on the contrary, he set about his work with an earnest determination and improvement followed his steps. He was to be seen late and early hard at work for he is one of those who say to their labourers come, and not go. His carts were to be observed daily wending their way to the farm laden with manure from the neighbouring town of Stockport, himself invariably one of the drivers, having been most active in the labour loading: and the consequence appears on looking at his fields, the dreary appearance of brown and sour looking vegetation has vanished and given way to the smiling verdure of the most approved cultivation. When he first commenced his barn and hay lofts were not half filled crops, and now they are crammed with produce and around them stand as sentinels goodly of grain and fodder, which present the picture plenty (a prototype of the farmer's own face) to all who view them.

Pomona presides over his orchard, and Ceres over his crops, whilst his dairy overflows with lacteous beverage and butter. His fences are barriers well maintained, and smiling peace with bounteous plenty meet the spectator on every hand. This, Sir, has all done in a very few years and the means are simple; he is a practical farmer, he is a worker, his wife a worker, and all his servants male and female are and must also be workers too. Luxury gives way to plenty and dainty bits to nourishing food of a substantial nature. He sees that his work is done and himself works as hard as any man he has his wife is a worker as well; he is training up his children to industrious habits and he pays his rent, his tithes, his rates and debts with cheerfulness, thanks God for his mercies,

goes to bed early and rises early, and contented follows his employ briskly; never interferes with politics or religious squabbles, nor murmurs against his landlord, and he has met and will meet with his reward. May he continue to enjoy that prosperity and happiness he so richly merits!

Thomas Cooke must certainly have been 'a worker', as he was allowed to marry Thomas Pickford's eldest daughter, Mary, in 1853. No doubt looking for a better income for his family, he obtained a post in November 1853 with the London and North Western Railway, successors to the Manchester and Birmingham company, in the 'Coaching' department which provided station staff. Thomas and Mary found themselves in Batley, Yorkshire, where Thomas worked at the station (opened in 1848 and still open today) on the line between Manchester to Leeds which includes the long Standedge Tunnel. Yorkshire must have seemed like a foreign country to them, where people spoke in a strange dialect. Their son, Daniel Pickford Cooke, was born in Batley about 1856. At that time the old village of Batley was growing rapidly, becoming Batley a centre of the 'shoddy' industry which wool rags and clothes were recycled for weaving into into blankets, carpets, uniforms.

When in 1858 he was offered the post of 'Agent' (salary £52 per annum) at the new Davenport station, back in Cheshire, Thomas would surely have been very pleased to accept, and Mary would happy to be near her family again. Thomas took up the new post from March 1<sup>st</sup> 1858. Little has been discovered about what Davenport station looked like in 1858; a small brick office and waiting room may have been built on the Stockport-bound platform; and there was an entrance from Bramhall Lane to each platform. The familiar tall booking office building of today dates from the 1880s. Garners Lane met Bramhall Lane opposite Kennerley Road, and crossed the railway on the level near the present car park entrance, where a small cottage described as the 'railway lodge' was provided at that point. Possibly that was home to Thomas, Mary, Daniel and baby Harriet Ellen Cooke who was born not long after the family came to Davenport.

Life at Davenport in 1858 must have been very quiet, with very few trains each day, and few local residents likely to be travelling by train. There were no

facilities for handling goods at that time, and the connecting line from Davenport Junction to Cheadle Village Junction with its associated signalbox was still in the future. It appears that Thomas was the only member of staff; perhaps his wife unofficially helped with the level crossing. I believe that the term 'Agent' denoted a person with responsibility for a station but not management of staff.

Their life in Davenport was to be brief. From 1<sup>st</sup> December 1858 Thomas was transferred to Furness Vale station, then also quite new and initially known simply as Furness. The family moved in to the station house alongside the station and its level crossing.



Furness Vale, probably c.1900 (Furness Vale Local History Society)

During their time there, a tragic family accident occurred. On 19 August 1864, young Daniel, aged 9, was racing home from school when he ran across the level crossing a stationary freight train, whose safety-valves were making a loud noise of escaping steam. He did not see or hear a non-stop passenger and mail train on the other line, his father's attempts to stop him came to be late to prevent him being struck and killed by the rotating cranks on the locomotive.

This must have been a great blow to the family, but Thomas stayed on the Railway; after a short spell at New Mills he finally moved to the post of Station

Master (salary £70 per annum) at Chapel-en-le-Frith, on the extension of the line to Buxton which had opened in 1863. The well-built station building, still standing in 2014, included accommodation for the Station Master; by this time the family had grown again, and the 1871 census lists Thomas and Mary with Harriet Ann (aged 12), plus Margaret Ellen (9) and Thomas junior (2) both born in Furness Vale.

Trustworthy applicants for the job at Chapel seem to have been hard to find before Mr Cooke arrived on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1870. Since the station opened on 14<sup>th</sup> June 1863, there had already been seven Station Masters, four of whom had been 'dismissed' for misconduct of some kind.

Back at Davenport, slightly confused company records seem to suggest that a Mr Wilkins took over, but soon afterwards the London and North Western Railway Company announced in the press that Davenport station would 'close for the winter months' from 1<sup>st</sup> October 1859. Unfortunately, it appears that it did not open again the following spring, or for a few years afterwards, although the Garners Land level crossing must have needed an attendant. . But meanwhile, efforts to sell land for building development were slowly bearing fruit and, no doubt after further protests from Bramall Hall, Davenport Station opened again with the arrival of new Station Master Joseph Casson on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1863. Attempts to close it again in the 'Beeching Era' a hundred years later were defeated, and the station still flourishes.

Thomas and Mary Cooke's three surviving children all left the High Peak for new lives in Manchester. Harriet Ann Cooke, like her mother, did not look far for a husband: she married John Crossfield, a railway signaller based at Chapel-en-le-Frith where he would have been reporting to Thomas Cooke. Eventually, he left the railway, and by 1901 the couple were running a tobacconist's shop at 118 Rochdale Road, Harpurhey, Manchester.

Margaret Ellen Cooke left home early for a job as a live-in worker along with other girls, at the premises of Abel Grundey, draper and outfitter at Manchester House, Market Street, New Mills. She married Samuel Ezra Croker of Whaley Bridge, also a railway employee - a goods clerk - but by 1891 they were also

living in Harpurhey where he worked as a bookkeeper, and later on his own account as a 'Clerk and Draper' at 132 Rochdale Road a few doors away from the Crossfields. Margaret and Samuel died while still in their forties, but raised three children: Edith, Thomas Percy and May, but both died in the forties. Thomas Percy Croker went on to work for the General Electric Company.

Thomas and Mary Cooke's son Thomas made a career for himself in South Manchester as a School Attendance Officer: a public servant, feared in some quarters, who would visit the homes of parents whose children failed to attend school and demand to know a the reason.

Thomas Cooke remained at Chapel-en-le-Frith station until his retirement, when he and Mary went to live in a cottage at Martinside, a hamlet in the shadow of Combs Edge a couple of miles from the station, where Thomas died in 1891. Mary died a few years later.