

This excerpt from the first part of *The Last Journey of William Huskisson* describes the build-up to the official opening of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway. Huskisson's fatal accident was about two hours away.

The sky was brightening. For John Moss and the other directors assembled at the company offices in Crown Street it was already a day of triumph, whatever the ensuing hours might bring. They had received word that the Duke of Wellington, the Prime Minister, had arrived in Liverpool safely, and was on his way, though there appeared to be some delay. As they waited, they were encouraged by the huge crowds and the morning's papers.

Liverpool enjoyed a prosperous newspaper trade, and in one week a resident might decide between the Courier, the Mercury, the Journal, the Albion and the Liverpool Times, and while there was little to divide them on subject matter, they each twisted a Whiggish or Tory knife. Advertisements and paid announcements anchored the front pages. Mr Gray, of the Royal College of Surgeons, announced his annual trip from London to Liverpool to fit clients with false teeth, which were fixed "by capillary attraction and the pressure of the atmosphere, thereby avoiding pinning to stumps, tieing, twisting wires..." Courses improving handwriting were popular, as were new treatments for bile, nervous debility and slow fevers. The Siamese twins at the King's Arms Hotel were proving such a draw that they were remaining in Liverpool until Saturday 25th, when, according to their promoter Captain Coffin, "they must positively leave". The day's papers carried news of a special medal to commemorate the opening of the railway, "a beautiful and highly-finished production that leaves its competitors far behind". A copy in gold had already been sent to the Duke of Wellington, Sir Robert Peel and Mr Huskisson.

Crime and misadventure featured prominently. Accidents were invariably Melancholy. In the week of the railway opening, the papers had news of a melancholy event in Oxford Street, London, to a young man named James Rogers, a porter employed by Mr Benson, a grocer in Tottenham Court Road. "The unfortunate young man was crossing Oxford-street, carrying a heavy load, when he was suddenly knocked down by a large carriage dog that ran with great force between his legs, and most unfortunately at the same instant a cart was passing loaded with bricks, the wheel of which passed over his leg and thigh, which were fractured in a most shocking manner before the car-man had any power of stopping his horse." There was so much sudden blood that another dog stopped to drink it. Assistance was immediately rendered to Rogers, and he was conveyed in a most deplorable condition to the hospital, where his family met him with long faces.

Some of the papers reflected the weary early struggle of the railway and its attendant parliamentary warfare, thus lending an even grander air of triumph to today's opening. Railway stewards called on soldiers from the 4th Regiment to hold back the crowds; it appeared that the entire town of Liverpool was

converging on Crown Street, and that everyone from the countryside had spread themselves along the route. The air was greasy and sweet, the ground still damp from the night's rain; the forecast was fair, with more rain expected by the evening, but by then it was believed everyone would be safely home.

"Never was there such an assemblage of rank, wealth, beauty, and fashion in this neighbourhood," one local remarked. And there was triumphal music at every turn, "the band of the 4th King's Own Regiment...playing military airs, the Wellington Harmonic Band, in a Grecian car for the procession, performing many beautiful miscellaneous pieces, and a third band occupying a stage above Mr Harding's grandstand, at William the Fourth's Hotel, spiritedly adding to the liveliness of the hour whenever the other bands ceased."

But the Duke of Wellington had still not appeared as expected by 9.30, and it was said he had indulged himself the night before. In fact he had spent a quiet evening with friends in Childwall, recovering from his recent excursions in Manchester. It had already been quite a week for the Duke, and it was only Wednesday. The previous Saturday he had been met at the Manchester coach office by an open carriage drawn by four horses - a carriage sent by his host for a few days, the Earl of Wilton - and the Duke paraded alone through the town on his way to the Earl's residence Heaton Park. It hadn't been a smooth ride. Although most onlookers cheered him on this solitary journey, he also received hisses and boos, and they had grown from one individual on the steps of the Albion Hotel to a noisy chorus by the time he reached Stockport.

On Sunday he attended Prestwich church, where the minister preached an apt sermon from St Luke's gospel: "Woe unto you if all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets." On Monday he toured factories and attended a gala banquet at the Theatre Royal, an awkward evening in which 750 men ate and proposed toasts from tables set up in a tent in the audience section and from a marquee on the stage. The Duke of Wellington noted that the President for the night was the Manchester's chief magistrate, and talked of how important it was to maintain a steady police force and good civil order to uphold the progress of commerce; Wellington, of course, had an eye on revolution in Paris and the abdication of Charles X. Succeeding him, the Earl of Wilton spoke of how public opinion was moving with rapid strides "in a course which, if unchecked, would be attended with considerable danger." People just weren't as obedient or respectful as once they were.

Several factors had placed the Duke of Wellington's government in a precarious state. The Duke himself faced pressures from within - not least from Huskisson's Liberal Tory faction demanding a more tolerant, reforming outlook. And the mood of unease he had just witnessed in the streets, a revolutionary spirit inspired by the uprisings in France and Belgium, had no more certain local manifestation than the Manchester cotton workers who had taken to wearing exotic cockades decorated with the shades of the tricolore. The Manchester "Peterloo" massacre of 1819 - in which eleven people were killed and hundreds injured when the cavalry was used to disperse a vast but peaceful crowd demanding widespread reforms - was still fresh in the memory, and the clamour for parliamentary representation and a widening of the franchise was intense. Remarkably, Manchester returned no MPs to Parliament, while a tiny area like

Newton, a mid-point on the Liverpool and Manchester line, returned two. The Duke was keeping a lid on things, but steam was rattling the rims.

On 9th September, Lord Charles Greville, clerk of the Privy Council for 40 years and horse trader to King George IV, captured the mood in his diary. "Nothing can exceed the interest, the excitement, the consternation which prevail here," he wrote after visiting Lancashire. "As we went down on Saturday, Henry [his brother] told me that there had been alarming accounts from the manufacturing districts of a disposition to rise on the part of the workmen."

Greville met his brother-in-law Lord Francis Egerton, later to be the Earl of Ellesmere, the proprietor of the Bridgewater Canal. "He takes a gloomy view of everything, not a little perhaps tinged by the impending ruin which he foresees to his own property from the Liverpool Railroad, which is to be opened with great ceremony on the 15th; moreover he thinks the government so weak that it cannot stand, and expects the Duke will be compelled to resign." A day later, Greville made another entry. "I think the alarmists are increasing everywhere, and the signs of the times are certainly portentous."

And so it was that the opening of the railway had come at the perfect moment for the Duke of Wellington, for he planned to use it to celebrate Britain's standing in the world. Fifteen years after his glories at Waterloo, jingoism still had its uses. There was irony here, for the railway conveyed the one thing Wellington distrusted the most: the rapid dissemination of new ideas.

It was arranged for the public dinners at the opening ceremonies to be packed with Tory supporters, and this had been evident at the Theatre Royal in Manchester on the Wednesday night. But on that evening it was also clear that not all of Wellington's friends were keen on the railway. The Earl of Wilton, who had been one of its chief opponents from its inception, spoke repeatedly of his unshakable vision of doom.

After a triumphant dinner the previous night, Huskisson awoke with a sore head. At seven-thirty he arose in an unfamiliar bedroom at Wavertree Hall, the residence of Charles Lawrence, the chairman of the Railway.

How did Huskisson feel? Clearly not well, but he had always enjoyed the ability to raise his spirits on demand, and on the day of this grand opening, with himself as much the conquering hero as the Duke, he moved to the washroom for his ablutions.

The mirror showed a man older than his sixty years. That Huskisson had been intermittently unwell and accident prone since his youth was now more than apparent. It was a frailty he masked with a keen interest in sports and walking, but it laid him low for weeks at a time. In recent years he walked with a stiffened elbow that caused one friend to detect a marked alteration in the spirit and elasticity of his carriage. The frequency of these accidents, coupled with chronic internal episodes of gout, "had given rise to a certain hesitation in his movements wherever any crowd or obstacle impeded him..."

It would require an unduly cynical perspective to suggest that Huskisson's undivided support of the new railway project had much to do with his misfortunes with horses and their carriages, but he did profess to be awaiting the day when journeying would be less jolting to the constitution.

The Duke of Wellington appeared at the Crown Street offices just before ten, accompanied by the Marquis and Marchioness of Salisbury, the Marchioness leaning on his arm. He was all in black, still respectful of the death of the king, but it was an outfit pumped up with a black Spanish cloak. Simultaneously, the three bands struck up "See The Conquering Hero Comes". He was widely cheered despite his tardiness; the directors found it hard to suppress their relief, at his arrival and his reception.

Those with tickets had a little adventure assigned to them - the task of finding their particular carriage. There were eight locomotives in all, and with the exception of the Duke of Wellington's engine Northumbrian, were each parading their own coloured silk flag: for Phoenix it was dark green, North Star's was yellow, Rocket light blue, Dart purple, Comet deep red, Arrow pink and Meteor brown. Their names suggested fleetness and celestial guidance, while the Northumbrian was named after its engineer's birthplace. The flag colours enabled spectators to identify them as they passed, and helped the 700 passengers locate their seats: their tickets had a corresponding colour. Once settled, the coaches released their brakes and ran by gravity through a 300-yard tunnel, at the end of which they entered a terminus and were attached to their engines. The engines themselves had no brakes, and could be stopped only by the driver reversing the valve-gear, a process that took several seconds to effect and many more to complete.

On this one day, the trains would be travelling to Manchester on both sets of tracks, side by side. Northumbrian would pull the Duke of Wellington and his guests on one track, while the other seven locomotives would proceed in one line on the parallel. There was a logic to this arrangement: the Prime Minister and his friends could steam up and down as they pleased, inspecting the railway's landmarks as their interest allowed, while they in turn were inspected by the populace. The Duke's grand carriages were full before the rest, and so they trundled back and forth to view the other trains on the other track, which gave, as one newspaper reported, "the assembled thousands and tens of thousands the opportunity of seeing distinctly the illustrious strangers, whose presence gave extraordinary interest to the scene". Most had never seen the Prime Minister before, nor the princes and envoys and MPs who sat excitedly behind him.

The parade suited his engine driver too, George Stephenson, who soaked up the cheers and gasps with the occasional wave of his hat. One passenger assigned a seat in a carriage drawn by the Phoenix was delighted to find his engine leading the procession on the other line. The Phoenix consisted of three open and two covered carriages, each carrying 26 passengers. "A few minutes before eleven all was ready for the journey," he remembered. "and certainly a journey upon a railway is one of the most delightful that can be imagined."

Another traveller, a correspondent for the *Mechanics' Magazine*, seemed disgruntled when he found himself in the Arrow, last but one in the procession. He noted the constables and soldiers "keeping the railway clear, and impressing on the multitude some regard for their lives and limbs." He perused the track and the engines, and noted that they were all made by Robert Stephenson and Co. He wondered about the absence of two other engines from London, made by men

called Braithwaite and Ericsson, concluding that they had not yet been tested, and the directors no doubt deciding, "it would not be prudent to allow them to make part of a procession which it was of the utmost consequence should be exposed to as few risks of failure as possible."

The reporter remarked on the almost boundless power about to be put into operation.

Henry Booth, the railway's secretary, had been at the railway offices for about an hour by the time the others arrived. He seemed to know everyone. He greeted Charles and Harriet Arbuthnot, Joseph Sandars, Charles Blacker Vignoles, the Stephensons, Charles Lawrence, Viscount Melbourne, Sir Robert Peel, Charles Babbage, Viscount Grey, the Russian Ambassador Count Potocki, the Austrian Ambassador Prince Esterhazy, the United States Consul Francis B Ogden, Edward John Littleton MP, General Gascoyne MP, Sir George Drinkwater (the Mayor of Liverpool), Lord Monson, Lord Clive, Lord Grosvenor, Lord Talbot, Lord Harrowby, the Earl of Brecknock, the Earl of Winton, the Earl and Countess of Wilton, the High Bailiff of Birmingham, the Vicar of Eccles, Dr Brandreth, Dr Southey, William and Emily Huskisson, and finally the Duke of Wellington and cortege. Liverpool had never hosted the aristocracy in such numbers; they had been promised a day of significance.

Booth left the office for a while to walk through the short tunnel towards the locomotives. The drivers were dressed in fine waistcoats and new shoes for the occasion, but spits of flame were already boring holes in the glossy leather. Booth shook their hands on their hissing footplates. There was some nervousness with the excitement, a desire to meet expectations. In the general clatter, for reasons unknown, could be heard an occasional bang.

Booth gave a little speech to a group of newspaper reporters, the same conquering message he had carried for years. "Speed, dispatch, distance are still relative terms, but their meaning has been totally changed within a few months," he said. "What was quick is now slow; what was distant is now near; and this change in our ideas will not be limited to the environs of Liverpool and Manchester."

The crowd were proud to be a part of history themselves, happy to admire Booth's scaffold of rhetoric. "There can be no question that foreign countries will adopt the railway communication as one great step in mechanical improvement and commercial enterprise," Booth informed them. "The country of the Pyramids, of Memphis, and of Thebes, shall then be celebrated for railways and steam carriages; the land of the proud Mameluke or the wandering Arab, of sphinxes and mummies, will become the theatre of mechanical invention, science and the arts. The stately Turk, with his turban and slippers, will quit his couch and his carpet to mount his engine of fire and speed, that he may enjoy the delight of modern locomotion. From west to east, and from north to south, the mechanical principle, the philosophy of the nineteenth century, will spread and extend itself. The world has received a new impulse."

The full carriages descended through the Liverpool tunnel to be affixed to their engines. And then, at twenty minutes to eleven, Henry Booth passed a heavy gun to a local dignitary, who treated it just like a starting pistol and fired one

fearsome shot towards heaven. But the official starting signal came the next moment from a nearby canon, its ecstatic blast flying over and beyond the rails towards a bystander, its cladding hitting him in the face and knocking out an eyeball so that it hung by its moist sinews on his cheek. So this was the beginning - a hat-hoisting hurrah and the day's first misadventure. The acclaim of the crowd rose like a wild wave on the Irish Sea. The fired-up locomotives began to roll towards Manchester.

Taken from *The Last Journey of William Huskisson* (Faber, 2002)