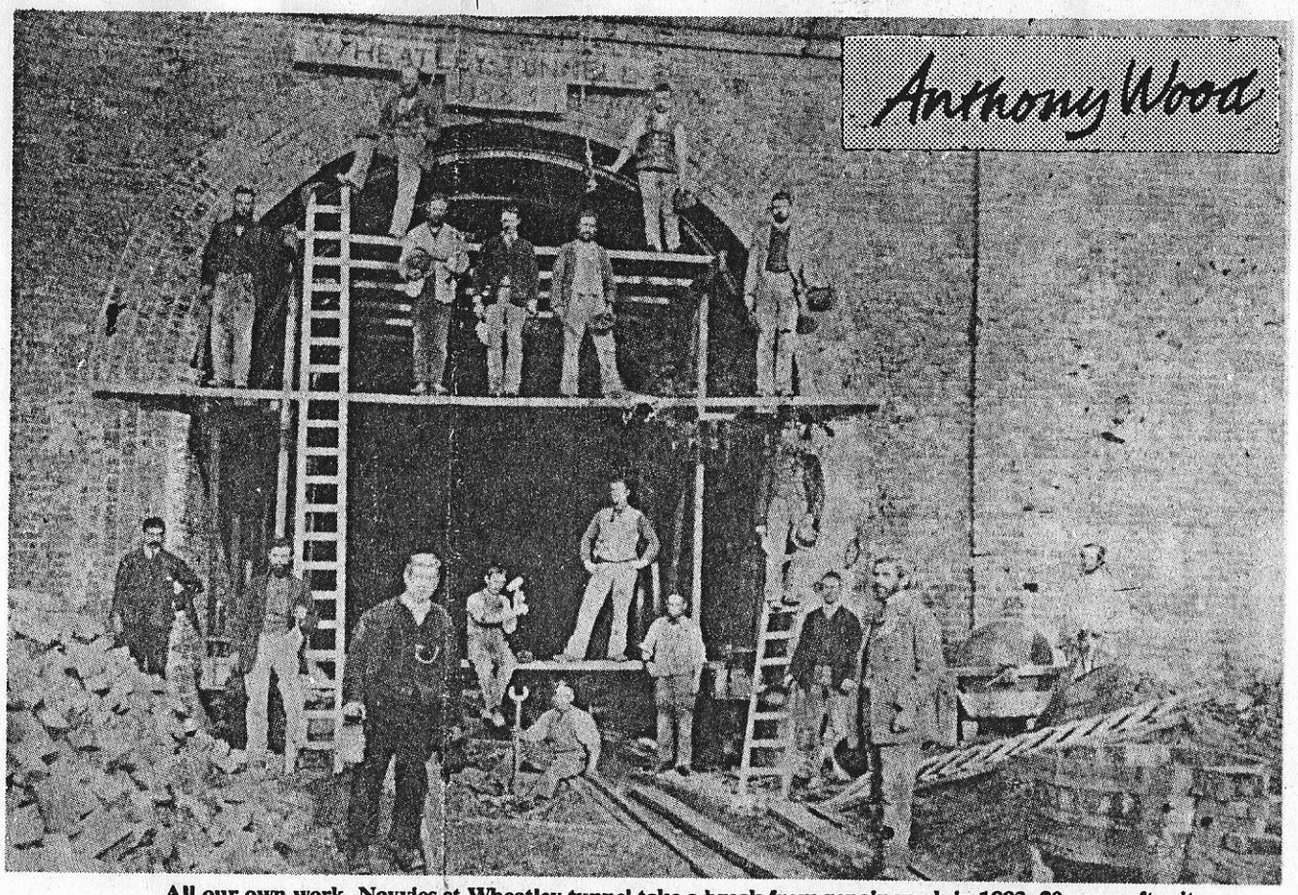
Reviving drop of the hard stuff, please! No, make that a bucket



All our own work. Navvies at Wheatley tunnel take a break from repair work in 1883, 20 years after it opened. Picture from Bodlein Library in Richard Lingard's book on the Princes Rosborough - Thame - Oxford railway.

THE Victorian railway navvies were among the most energetic labourers ever seen in Britain, to judge from the prodigious feats of engineering they performed with the most primitive of tools.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, in an occupation so fraught with danger to life, their capacity for work was matched by an equal appetite for the solace afforded by the bottle — or, to be more precise, the bucket.

Now beer in buckets I don't find it hard to imagine, but it does strain the credulity somewhat to think of folk caning into the same receptacles filled to the brim with spirits.

Kept diary

Yet this was certainly what was happening at Wheatley 116 years ago as work progressed on the railway tracks linking Thame and Oxford for the first time. We have the word of Mr Elton, the local vicar at the time.

Mr Elton was much in favour of the railway on religious grounds, believing that its opening would raise the character of the people, and he kept a diary in which he recorded the progress of the work.

His entry for October 9, 1863, reads: "The railroad is now begun in earnest. Upwards of 100 men near here. They fetched buckets of spirits on yokes from the King and Queen."

The vicar is quoted on this and other matters in Richard Lingard's readable book, Princes Risborough - Thame - Oxford Railway, which at £4.95 seems to me among the most attractive productions so far from the Oxford Publishing Company, the train book specialists.

"Imagine," writes Mr Lingard, "the reaction of a present-day publican if a road worker walked into a pub and asked for a bucket of gin."

Such was the reputation of the navvies — "a loud, drunken and unruly lot," Mr Lingard calls them — that a special clause was written into the contract making the construction company responsible for compensation to anyone whose peace or property was disturbed by their "riotous and unlawful behaviour."

It seems not to have been invoked, however. Indeed at Wheatley, where Mr Elton took the trouble to preach to them on one occasion, he reported that their conduct at a later entertainment evening had been exemplary.

Nowadays the tunnel is closed completely, along with most of the once-busy branch line. All that survives is the short stretch of track linking the British Leyland Cowley complex with the main line to Oxford and, at the other end, the track, little more than a long siding, serving the Thame oil depot.

Found favour

The line had its beginnings 120 years ago in the ambitions of the Wycombe Railway Company to extend its existing line from Maidenhead to Wycombe onwards into some 700 square miles of land in south Buckinghamshire and south-east Oxfordshire which had no railway link with outside markets.

Naturally it was a scheme that found favour with the local residents. At Thame, for example, 20 years of failed attempts to bring trains to the town had left local farmers and traders frustrated as they watched their markets gradually losing trade to areas already linked to London.

The opening of the first stage of the line, on which the great Isambard Kingdom Brunel was the engineer, brought Thame within a 2¾-hour train ride from Paddington (at a cost of 4s, third class) when it opened in 1862.

But it was the extension, three years later, through Wheatley to Oxford that really brought the line into its own, transforming it from a minor branch line to an important cross-country route linking London with the Midlands (though not, it must be said, at particularly high speed in the early days).

In both world wars, troop and armament movements swelled rail traffic enormously. Delays followed and the blackout caused problems. sometimes people failed to appreciate that the train had stopped between and not at a station.

Mr Lingard reports: "As a result of this misunderstanding, one man, thinking that he was at Horspath Halt, jumped out of the train and fell on to the track. His wife was left on the train, carried on to Oxford, and had to get a taxi back to her husband who had survived his undignified tumble.

"It was directly as a result of this incident that the cry became 'Thame next station' rather than 'Thame next stop!"

The line never really paid for itself in the years after the war. By 1962, there were only five trains each day between Risborough and oxford, and the line was losing £26,000 on its passenger services.

Tracks lifted

The last passenger train ran on January 6, 1963. Parcels and goods services lasted just two years longer. Four years after that, in 1969, the tracks were lifted between Thame and Horspath.

Mr Lingard's book, the second in the Oxford Publishing Company's large format series on more important branches, provides a valuable record of the line. Copious maps and diagrams dealing with the stations on the route will make it a must for the railway modeller, while the less technically minded will find their delight in the photographs, more than 100 of which are included.