

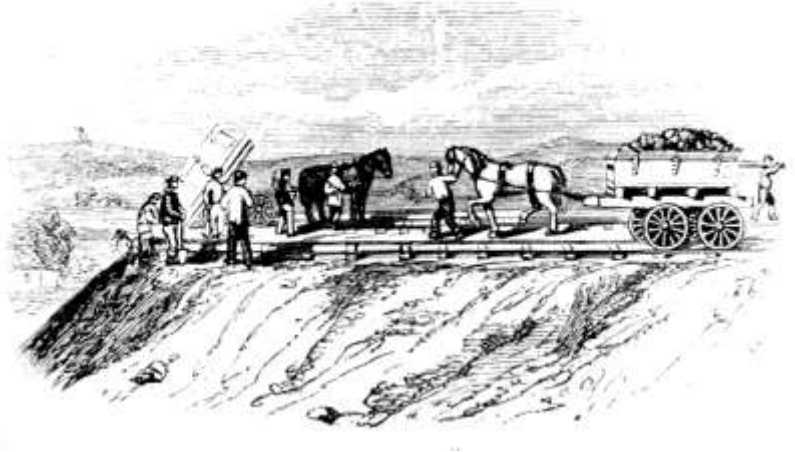
# SUTTON COLDFIELD'S RAILWAY EMBANKMENT IN THE 1860s

## Two Points of View

by Janet Jordan

### From the Horse's Mouth

*"I know I'm supposed to have plenty of stamina, be quick nimbled and pretty reliable, but, quite honestly, I feel ready for the knackers' yard and could well do with a nosebag! It's the last run of the day and I am beginning to feel I may not make it! The rail track is stretching way out in front of me, disappearing abruptly half way across the meadows lying either side. A bit further on, I can see Clifton's Hills and, just in front of them, the new Sutton Coldfield Railway Station and Goods Yard, which they have nearly finished. That's where we are all heading.*



Tipping: London-Birmingham Railway, 1830

*But this track that I am on is not down at ground level. Oh no! It's perched up in the air on a vast mound of soil – forty feet high, they say. This is Sutton Coldfield's railway embankment, in the course of construction. Behind me, the railway 'navvies' have been cutting through Manor Hill, blasting and digging away at the soil ready for use in forming this new mound in front of me. It's my job to shift the soil from one to the other.*

*So, they've put my harness on, I'm hitched up to a fully loaded truck and things are ready to roll. You would not believe the weight of it! As with the barges on the canal, they make me walk to one side of the truck. Gradually, my master begins to run beside me, forcing me into a trot. Then we are both dashing along as fast as our legs can carry us. It's frightening. Just as I think I am about to gallop over the edge, my harness gets released and I'm dragged away from the truck. That careers on at a rate of knots and the next thing I hear is the sharp 'thwack' as the truck is brought to a sudden halt by a strong piece of timber laid across the edge of the mound. The soil shoots out over the top, scattering down the side of the mountainous pile. They tell me this process is called 'tipping'.*



The finished embankment, from Manor Hill, c1870

*Hold on a second whilst I get my breath back. Right, it's time now to get hitched up again to the empty truck and take it back down the line. Tomorrow it will be the same thing again – all day long. What a life!"*

Horses were vital to the building of the early railways and it is thought they were still in use at the time these earthworks took place in Sutton Coldfield in the early 1860s. The opening of the Birmingham to Sutton Coldfield Railway Line took place on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1862 and things were never the same again.

On the negative side, the beautiful view of Sutton Park, when looking across the meadow from the dam (now The Parade), was definitely blighted. An alternative railway route to the east of the town had originally been suggested, but, when they were discussing which to choose, the Rector argued that, from this side of Sutton, the only people who would have their view shut out were “of the class of small houses where you see tea-accommodation in the window.” In fact, the sight was lost to all classes of people for ever more.

There were many advantages, however. For example, Sutton’s population rapidly grew as people were able to flock to the town. One new resident, James Fawdry, chose an unusual spot for his house.



James Fawdry's house,  
'The Woodlands', Manor Road c1970



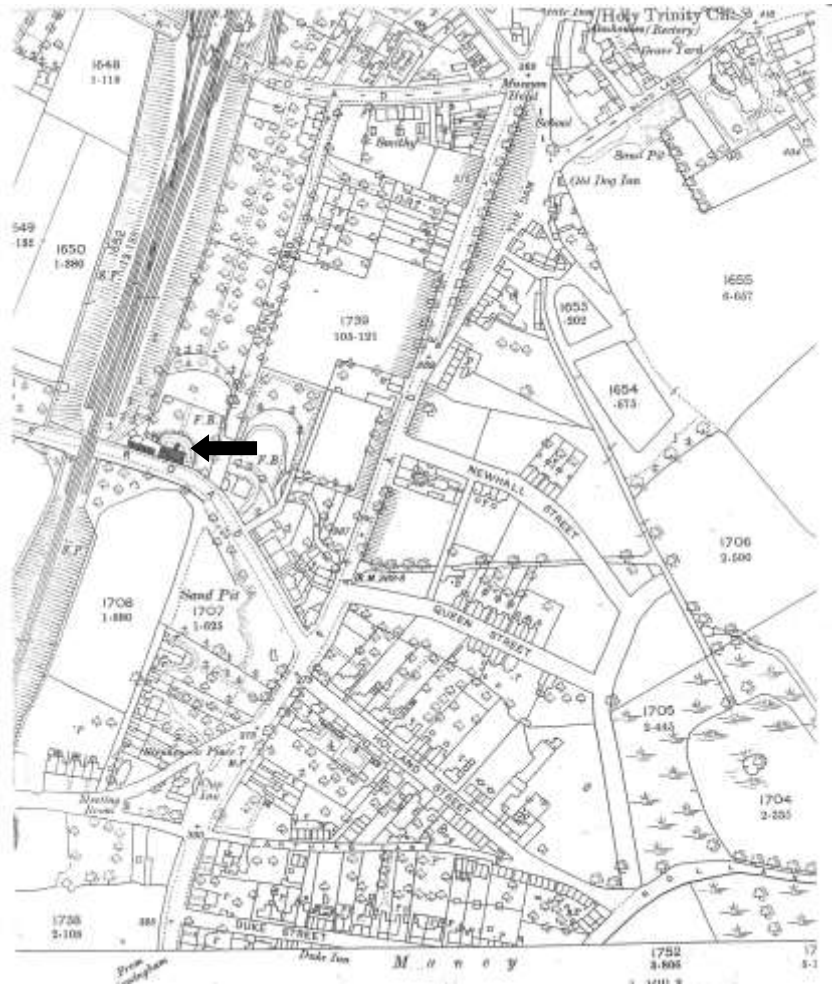
Site of 'The Woodlands',  
right hand side of Manor Road Bridge, 2009

It was positioned in Manor Road just beside the railway bridge which had been built to link the cutting going through Manor Hill with the new embankment. About six steam trains a day rattled past his house on their way towards Birmingham and one wonders how much privacy he would have had from the gaze of railway passengers. Why would he choose to live in such a spot, when there must have been many more suitable places available at the time? Based on what we know of his life, this may have been his answer.

### **James Fawdry (1831 – 1905)**

*“Why did I choose to live beside a railway embankment? Well, to begin with, I felt it was a prime site, a huge plot of land with plenty of potential. You’ve got to remember that, apart from noise of the trains, everything else about Sutton Coldfield in the 1860s was still very peaceful. There weren’t many shops and I only had a few immediate neighbours. I knew the shrubs and conifers that they had planted along the side of the earthworks would soon thicken out, so the trains would not bother us for very long.*”

*There was also that panoramic view of the town. From my side of Manor Road, way across the meadow I could see the houses in High Street, all down the Reddycroft, and then across to Holy Trinity Church with its old Georgian houses on Church Hill. Down Mill Street there was the new Town Hall, the almshouses and the school, and then, even lower down, beyond the Dam, the meadowland continued with just a few houses going up here and there. Over by Holland there were the pools which took the River Ebrook which ran across my garden and, then, up on the horizon, there were large trees covering the hills leading to Redicop Heath and the New Hall Estate. What better view could you ask for!*



OS Map 1889 showing the Embankment and James Fawdry's property

*My house was built on part of the Somerville Estate, which was being sold off piecemeal following the death of the last Lord Somerville in 1864. We named it 'The Woodlands', and, if you saw my garden, you would appreciate that it was because I had planted many rare shrubs and trees there. The house itself stood at road level. At the back, the garden fell away sharply to the level of the meadow, with a large pool where the ground was at its lowest. Through the trees, you could just about see the end of the garden reaching down the length of the embankment.*

*When I came to live in Sutton around 1865, I was a widower, around 33 years old. Two events immediately come to mind from that time. Firstly, my marriage to my second wife, Lucy, early in 1869 and then, in the same year, the day we both had a bit of a shock. On Monday, 8th April there was a thunderstorm. Lightning struck the bank of sandstone (on Manor Hill) opposite my house, causing over 30 tons of earth to fall! Fortunately, no-one was passing at the time or the consequences might have been serious.*

*Our marriage was blessed with five children, so you can imagine life was always full. In addition, I had had a thriving business as a baker and corn factor in Aston Street, Navigation Street and Deritend in Birmingham, but now an exciting prospect lay just down the road before me. Sutton Coldfield was a speculator's dream. All that land, waiting to be developed! And I could well afford to pursue my ambitions.*



James Fawdry's Buildings prior to demolition in the 1970s,

*I decided to buy up some of the meadowland to the east of The Dam. Once I had a foothold, I built one of the first shops on the main thoroughfare, a baker and corn factors'. I'm told that this part of The Dam was renamed 'The Parade' at my suggestion. Later on, around the 1880s, I constructed new roads, notably Newhall Street and Queen Street, where I intended to build some houses. These followed the same design: two up, two down, an attic bedroom, outside WC and coal store; no front garden but a long back one. The last of these dwellings was demolished in the 1990s to make way for Newhall Walk and its Car Park. I wonder if, before that happened, anyone noticed the sign in Queen Street depicting 'Fawdry's Buildings'?*

*Over the years, I liked to get involved in local matters and was on the Aston Board of Guardians and the Executive Committee of the Sutton Society for the Prosecution of Felons. At one time, I even held office under the old Court Leet. One of my passions, though, was for Dalmatians, Pomeranians and greyhounds and I won cups and prizes all round the country; 'Captain', my Dalmation, actually won the championship of England.*

*So, you can see, living beside the embankment didn't stop my family from leading a happy and prosperous life in Sutton Coldfield. In fact, I was able to leave the tidy sum of over £20,000 to them when I died in 1905."*

In the 1970s, plans to regenerate the area resulted in 'The Woodlands' being demolished and whatever gardens remained were gradually reduced to waste ground, eventually being used as a car park. The embankment also became neglected. In 2009, that position has not changed and it is hoped that new developers will soon be found to give the area a new identity!



The site of 'The Woodlands', Winter 2007



Looking towards Sutton Coldfield Railway Station, Winter 2007

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The finished embankment, from Manor Hill, c1870 (p44, *The Old Photograph Series, Sutton Coldfield*, compiled by Marian Baxter, \*BCOL942.496SUT)

James Fawdry's house, 'The Woodlands', Manor Road c1970 (*Sutton Coldfield 1974-1984* by Douglas V. Jones, pub Westwood Press 1984, \*SH 97SUT)

Site of 'The Woodlands', right hand side of Manor Road Bridge, 2009 (Keith Jordan's Collection)

OS Map 1889 showing the Embankment and James Fawdry's property (\*)

James Fawdry's Buildings in the 1970s, prior to demolition (*Sutton Coldfield 1974-1984* by Douglas V. Jones, pub Westwood Press 1984 \*SH 97SUT )

The site of 'The Woodlands', Winter 2007 (Keith Jordan's Collection)

Looking towards Sutton Coldfield Railway Station, Winter 2007 (Keith Jordan's Collection)

The site of 'The Woodlands', Summer 2009 (Keith Jordan's Collection)

Looking towards Sutton Coldfield Railway Station, Summer 2009 (Keith Jordan's Collection)