

to the railway network by sidings from the Bletchley-Oxford line, but many soldiers used the station at Bicester North. On some Saturday mornings in the 1950s a rake of non-corridor coaches would leave Banbury to take soldiers going on leave from Bicester North to Paddington. On Sunday evenings in the late 1950s the 18.00 restaurant car service from Paddington to Shrewsbury was followed by a relief train at 18.10 which terminated at Gobowen, station for the army camps around Oswestry, while the 20.10 service to Wolverhampton connected with a local train which deposited RAF personnel just before midnight outside their base at Cosford.

From the time the railways opened in the early 1850s Banburians found excursion trains attractive, whether over short distances, as to Oxford for St Giles's Fair in September, or to London, where a Good Friday trip in 1860 enabled them 'to eat their Hot Cross Buns in Cockneydom', to the seaside or even to Paris. In August 1871 an 18-coach excursion train from Paddington to Birkenhead collided near King's Sutton with a train collecting ironstone wagons from sidings served by a tramway from pits at Adderbury, injuring 20 people. My own earliest recollection of travelling over the Bicester cut-off is of a trip to London on Easter Monday 1950, on a long excursion train from Wolverhampton hauled in both directions by 'Star' class 4039 *Queen Matilda* from Landore shed at Swansea. Some excursions diverted from the main line at High Wycombe to connect with sailings of Salter's steamers on the river Thames. On 20 July 1953 members of Banbury Grammar School enjoyed a Diamond Jubilee commemoration trip, travelling on a set of excursion coaches normally stabled at Craven Arms behind 'Modified Hall' no 7912 *Little Linford Hall* to Bourne End on the High Wycombe – Maidenhead branch. There they boarded a steamer, and after a visit to the observation platform at Heathrow, returned to Banbury from Windsor by way of Reading.

The Great Western and the Western Region of British Railways ran annual excursions from Paddington to Birkenhead for the Grand National. After the opening of Wembley Stadium in 1923, when appropriately located football teams were in the final of the FA Cup, as were Aston Villa in 1957, the Bicester cut-off was busy with excursions. Many other special workings used the line including a train double-headed by 'Castle' class engines nos 5060 *Earl of Berkeley* and 5065 *Newport Castle* that conveyed the Bolshoi Ballet to Stratford-upon-Avon on 21 October 1956. A flurry of special trains traversed the line in the last years of steam traction in