

A Eulogy to the denizens of Chelford railway station

by George B Hill

Chelford – a railway station adopted by nature

Chelford, the railway station to which I have commuted most weekdays for 30 years, latterly as Station Adopter for 2006 & 2007, is not a railway station that looks like the product of a great designer's imagination. Opened in 1842, it rests on the open, richly farmed Cheshire plain between Crewe and Alderley Edge, as little more than a punctuation mark in the long story of the former Birmingham and Manchester Railway Company (later London and North Western Railway) line. In layout and situation, Chelford Station holds no unusual appeal. It was not planned as the gateway to an historic town, or crafted slowly from local stone, or designed in harmony with architectural treasures nearby. It was not inlaid into a scene of natural beauty: neither hills nor dales surround it, nor does an attractive river or a bold coastline adjoin it. In fact, it seems to rest very lightly on the fertile farmland around it: its only neighbours are a busy farmer's auction market backed by a sleepy housing estate, and fields that at times hold potatoes, dairy or beef stock, or corn. Its very existence lies below the horizon of awareness even of most travellers, until they have the 8.19 to catch. So, served by swift Northern Rail trains that stop there only for moments beneath the shiny new station signs, Chelford Station makes only a token impact upon the environment, unnoticed and unremembered - except, of course, by its only permanent residents, the insignificant green, creeping or cheeping things that inhabit or invade the lowliest of little-disturbed places.

Time is unmeasured at Chelford. Trains depart when they will and arrive if they will. There are no clocks, no station displays, no telephones. The station is unmanned now and has been for many years since Roy, the last friendly face of British Rail, gratefully took early retirement. Roy greeted me for years as I disembarked each morning, summer and winter. And winter must have been a bleak time for him; he once told me that in the bitter winter of 1962/3 he remembered the snow on the tracks as being deep enough to be level with the platforms. Roy was always there, except when he took leave on one of his rare days out to a race meeting, dressed in his best clothes. He told me he only staked his small bets on real racehorses, for he had no interesting in gambling off-course, only on the living competitors themselves. Apart from passing travellers, Roy's only regular contemporary at Chelford in the "BR" era was the local track maintenance worker, an all-weather sort of rail-man who walked the line seemingly endlessly, often dangling, as if it were toy, a convenient sledgehammer. I used to think him an unimaginative person, until one day he stood long enough to talk to me. Revealing that in his spare time he was a Methodist lay-preacher, he gave me a moving account of the bravery of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, who was martyred for his faith in AD 155, and left me wondering how little we know of the rich reflections in the lives of those most inconspicuous around us.

In its 165 years, Chelford Station has almost never risen to public attention. The almost solitary, tragic exception was an extraordinary accident in December 1894, when a high-sided goods wagon was literally blown by a gale into other wagons and derailed, coming to rest foul of the up main line, in the path of a hapless Manchester to Crewe express. The sidings are gone now and in summer, gentle nature brightens all the sides of the permanent way that remains. But in mid-winter, with its windswept platforms and its brown stems of brittle, dead vegetation, Chelford can look as though it were yet mourning the fourteen precious lives lost on that stormy day over a century ago. And that seems right, for winter is the season when we are least proof against the harshness of existence; there are few bleaker places for a lonely passenger than a railway platform with little shelter and the

train overdue on a draughty January day. Even the noisy road traffic crossing the bridge can seem almost friendly and comforting then, compared with the empty tracks and platforms on the station below, that seem unremembered by the world. Yet, whatever the season, a place like this is not a place wholly unremembered by all living things. In fact, it is one adopted, if not by human residents (apart from me) but by nature itself – and those few into whom nature lets its secrets there.

Winter may be long but - with all human residence now only fleeting - summer is a season of secret life at Chelford. When rain is followed by sun, most of the station other than the ticket office and the platform surfaces disappears slowly under greenery. In the long, languid dog-days of midsummer, a late or missed train home is not a great trial should one have no appointments to keep, or a handy mobile phone to postpone them. At the back of the up platform, and at the sides of the path down from the road, are green areas that, even with the ordered planting projects now powered by the enthusiasm of green-fingered local people, will probably always be rustling, faintly buzzing jungles, where there is always something to observe as an afternoon whiles away. Benefiting from full sunshine all day, the sometime shrub border can be literally crawling with wildlife when examined closely.

Watching nature about its business is a great stress-buster, even if it is only studying the myriad tiny red spiders on the red-brick wall, or counting the spots of each of the 2, 7 and 10-spot Ladybirds on a rambling Dog Rose. Some creatures are more mobile than others, and the grasshoppers leave the snails far behind. But mobility can be a hazard: winged insect life is not common, probably because so much of it gets picked up and blown miles by the slipstream of every passing express and freight that thunders by, pursuing the needs of the nation. Yet, even as I was thinking of writing these words, two butterflies flew up in front of me from the greenery by the platform, one a smart Small White and the other an elegant Painted Lady, a creature so finely aristocratic that it is scarcely believable that in its short life it might already have flown the English Channel. Other butterflies are on the march, too; I have recorded seven species this year and it is only about three years since the first orange-and-brown Gatekeepers moved in to make Chelford platform, like many other places in Cheshire, into a new home for themselves.

Unsurprisingly, birds are infrequent at Chelford, and even more infrequently seen, apart from Woodpigeons and Crows on the overhead cables, and for occasional Swallows and Pied Wagtails that hawk by in summer, in search of flying insects around the cattle market. Yet they are there. Last summer, I watched for several evenings a Dunnock, as it carried food to its cheeping youngsters in a hidden nest deep in the thick roadside hawthorn by the bridge. It approached the hedge each time from the platform rather than the pavement side, so only I could see it and not the road users. When the leaves thickened on one small tree a Woodpigeon built a nest, though I did not spot it until the autumn. From the field hedge or across the field in summer come at times various birdsongs; a Yellowhammer is a regular, while at times a Little Owl calls from one of the Oak trees on the far side of the potato field. Between trains in May and June, a Common Whitethroat rattles its scratchy song from the scrub beyond the down end of the up platform. However, the Corn Bunting that in the 1980s used to sing its equally unmusical jingle-of-keys song each summer from a perch beyond the road bridge, and occasionally from the wires near the platform, is alas! long-vanished now, like nearly all of its declining kindred from this part of the county. Yet there can still be surprises, like the high flying skein of a hundred wild Pink-footed Geese that flew over one frosty morning, wandering far from their Lancashire carrot-fields in search of new feeding areas – but not pausing to stop off at a railway station!

Vandals are also part of the environment at Chelford, though happily only at reasonable intervals, and with their effects soon erased by fast-moving repair teams. However, even the aftermath of vandalism surrenders to the wildlife. Last year some fence panels were kicked in. They fell among sprouting thorns and, before the fragments could be removed, the thorns grew impenetrably up and choked them. Then a Robin nested somewhere in the bramble scramble below the remaining panel pieces, and I watched it feeding its recently fledged young above them. After that, the young Rabbits that lived nearby took to basking in the sunshine on the panel fragments, then startling passing passengers when they bolted back into cover across the drum-like surfaces. Now the area has been swept clean, and the Rabbits are waiting to see what might be planted there . . .

The natural wealth of the summer alongside and around Chelford platform, for most of my thirty years, lay mainly in its wild flora, not its fauna. It was never a *tame* flora. When walking through cities, my eye is often caught by the riot of vegetation that soon takes over any untended plot. The “weeds” of such places, as most people call them, are anything but weedy. As with human beings, they are endowed by their Creator with a beauty that lies in their origin and longing for life, rather than in their behaviour. They are fiercely greedy, determined flowers that try to strangle all their competitors in the attempt to produce an outburst of fertility and seed before they do. And such plants may not be common ones, either. Often they are rich in colour, and often they are rich in history, being aliens from faraway lands brought hither by ordinary or sometimes extraordinary means of transport. And what could be more extraordinary in its transporting powers than a railway?

Second only to a port in the variety of its immigrant flora, a railway station is full of botanical mystery. Over the years before the modern generation of gardeners started to get a grip on them, I found some eighty-five different flowers and plants unplanted by any gardener growing around Chelford, in the station, its perimeter and by the track at the platform ends. Many grew in places on the station alien to their natural habits, and many had hitch-hiked on human transport to get here.

Some aliens of railway stations, of course, are too well known to retain much secrecy about their movements. Rosebay Willowherb and Oxford Ragwort spread throughout the railway system in the nineteenth century as their plumed, feather-light seeds drifted long distances in the slipstreams of train carriages (or, as one famous botanist personally recorded, even while floating inside them!). Garden and White-lipped Snails have often used the winter-dead stems of the former to sleep on at Chelford. American Willowherb was a more recent arrival here. Other railway travellers have not arrived yet, but Canadian Fleabane and Prickly Lettuce are now only three stations south of Chelford, and I expect seedlings of them to try for a foothold before long. Another that did arrive, the appropriately named Sticky Groundsel, is a plant I rarely encounter except at railway stations, whose stony environments presumably resemble its natural wild home on shingle banks by the sea.

Away from the platforms, Long-headed Poppy and yellow Common St John's Wort will doubtless continue thoroughly at home on the permanent way just beyond the road bridge, unaffected by any gardening revolution as they have been for many years. Their presence is of little surprise to any botanist. But other residents, albeit often brief ones, have been much more of a puzzle. Whence came the solitary plant of blue-flowered Devil's-Bit Scabious, a damp grassland species that flowered for a couple of summers at the foot of a lighting pole by the up platform? Why did a plant of the elegant Corn Sowthistle, one of my favourite weeds and not usually a railway traveller, suddenly appear in flower last summer, after having been absent for thirty years until now? And what on earth was a plant of shade-loving Wood Avens doing, last summer, underneath the one small Lilac tree near the disused ticket office?

Some disembarked flora is evocative. When I first started catching trains from Chelford in the 1970s, ferns still grew under the platforms, where they had colonised during the humid days of steam trains. Now they only survive, attractively, on the north walls of the road bridge, overlooking both platforms; for even in hot weather there are few places less arid than the sunless side of the bridge. Arriving at Chelford on a blisteringly hot afternoon, I have stood often at the end of the up platform just beside the bridge, where the shade and the draft through the bridge together provide what must be one of the coolest places in the district. And above me on the wall there still thrive more ferns than I can confidently identify without rock-climbing the wall (something which I suspect would be frowned upon, even by a loyal fan of Chelford Station). Certainly Wall Rue and the attractive Maidenhair Spleenwort are there. Broad Buckler Fern grows with them; my hope is one day to spot amongst it a frond of the uncommon Black Spleenwort, a habitué of places like this when it deigns to take up residence. Small plants of Lady Fern and Male Fern - in chaste marriage, each in their different mortar cracks - also grace the wall, while they grow huge on the bank by the path nearby.

The road itself brings other invaders, that camp out on at the roadside of the station bridge, or creep through the hedge onto the bank, or sidle quietly down the sides of the platform path, or bloom usually undisturbed at the edges of the station car park. In the latter situation, Lesser Swine-Cress and Pineappleweed are probably unnoticed by anyone except me, but the huge dandelion clocks of Goat's Beard must surely astonish and delight any children that see them against the car park fence.

They overlook, however, the Greater Celandine that has crept through the roadside hedge above from the pavement side, bearing its yellow flowers on stems full of its corrosive orange latex beloved of herbalists. The seaside plant Danish Scurvy-Grass has arrived on the bridge verge, as it has on the verge of most salt-sprayed motorways and major roads in Britain. Most people would scorn its dull appearance, but to me it recalls the surf-splashed shore of the faraway Outer Hebridean island of Barra, where I first encountered it when it was a far less common plant.

But perhaps my favourite find was the single plant of Chicory that appeared for one summer only some twenty years ago, at the road edge just at the top of the station path. Chicory is among the most will-o-the-wisp of all plants, a gawky, ungainly plant that arrives in inconspicuous mystery, then achieves sudden beauty when its buds open into dandelion-shaped flowers of the most delicate sky-blue. The Cheshire county flora notes that it occurs “most years somewhere in the county”; but it never persists in this area. Chicory is sparing with its favours; but just once it has condescended to grace this humble spot – and me, a fellow traveller like it – with its ephemeral beauty.

It is not only weeds that seem ephemeral nowadays. As we all know, the whole living planet needs our increased care; we cannot afford to let any of it vanish away. Even the lowliest green thing, growing in the most impoverished soil, holds a tiny piece of our future in its CO₂-absorbing leaves. Today it is we who must serve all creatures great and small, as well as them us. That requires humility. In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah knew what weeds were. Yet he foretold the coming, centuries later, of someone important, whom he said would appear like a weed, “as a tender plant, and as a root growing out of a dry ground”. That newcomer would appear merely as a servant to us all, with no stately form or majesty that would cause us to be drawn to him. In fact, Isaiah said we would despise him, as much as we would any weed. It is easy to suppose that weeds are no more significant than, say, a carpenter riding a donkey. Yet some of us believe that it was the carpenter himself who made even the “weeds”, and appointed us to care for them, along with all the rest of the world. And all of us, whether loyal to any sort of Creator or not, are now aware that the future of our whole planet does depend upon us looking after the humblest of green things.

During some thirty years of entraining at Chelford, I tried without success, several times, to add tame plants to the wilderness garden by the up platform. Several seedling Buddleias, a plant that normally thrives on impoverished conditions, have died on me at Chelford. Each withered in turn despite my ministrations, or, more often, was turned into Rabbit flesh, rather than growing to give me the butterfly-laden bush I hoped would entertain me as I wait. Hopefully the new generation of keen gardeners will have more success, as their massive efforts put the small ones I have made to shame.

The ever-hungry young Rabbits, the doom of all my pitiful attempts at horticulture, are nearly the only mammals that live visibly at Chelford Station – nearly, but not quite. Some ten years ago the adjacent field had been combine-harvested one day to leave stubble sprinkled with fallen grain. I was awaiting the 17.34 that peaceful evening when something small and brown caught my eye as it scampered in the stubble. I was intrigued to observe, playing among the sliced stalks, a whole family of young Brown Rats. Rats are barely more attractive to me than to most people; my neighbour, an ex-railman himself, like most rail-folk totally abominates them. Yet I was briefly entranced by the little family as they foraged gratefully in the warm stubble, so amazed by the dropped bounty that they emerged together in full daylight from their dark home somewhere under the platform structure.

On one memorable occasion, a different sort of four-legged creature invaded Chelford’s long platform. Many years ago, I arrived one evening to find a broken-down train at Chelford, its engine being attended by the train staff and busy engineers. It was a pleasant evening. Since the trains at that time had windows that could be opened wide, many passengers were leaning or looking out from the lowered sashes, taking the fresh air and watching such movement as was visible near the station. Suddenly, the bored watchers found a new and entertaining subject. A heifer had escaped in the nearby cattle yard, and the young cow was being chased unsuccessfully around the yard by a collection of rather unathletic-looking farmhands.

Many passengers smiled and one or two actually cheered, probably for both pursuers and pursued. The long wait ceased to bore, and the chase was followed with avid interest. The passengers watched eagerly as the heifer evaded all its pursuers, then escaped both from the cattle yard and

from view altogether. There was scarcely time to yawn before the young cow reappeared. It was no longer hidden from view at all, for it had found the station gate improperly propped open, and now galloped right in front of the surprised train passengers, dashing along the down platform right under their noses. The young cow reached the end of the platform, turned round and galloped back past us again. Reaching the other end of the down platform, it accelerated down onto the track, under the main road bridge and away along the permanent way, at speed.

There was a stunned silence. The train crew and engineers dropped all their tools at once. All of them turned and started to run along the up line, followed in the gathering gloom by as many farmers who still had the wind to do so. In a gasping line, they stumbled after the fleeing animal, in the general direction of London. The train passengers standing at each window gaped at each other, then grimaced slowly and wearily as they left the windows and sat down, resigning themselves to the remainder of a long wait that had just become indefinitely longer. While, outside the windows, the other non-human life that had already invaded and adopted Chelford Station continued in its peaceful existence . . . in the presence of prolonged human company - just for once.

Chelford Station Checklist 1977-2007

(site, perimeter and track side @ platform ends)

Wild flowers/native trees

Birdsfoot Trefoil
Bittersweet
Black Knapweed
Bramble
Chickweed
Chicory
Clover, Red
Clover, White
Cocksfoot
Common Forget-me-not
Cow Parsley
Creeping Buttercup
Dandelion
Danish Scurvy-Grass
Devil's-Bit Scabious
Dock, Broad-leaved
Dock, Curled
Dog Rose
Elder
Fat Hen
Field Horsetail
Foxglove
Fumitory sp
Germander Speedwell
Goats-Beard
Goosegrass
Grass, Annual Meadow
Grass, Couch
Grass, Creeping Bent
Grass, Creeping Soft
Grass, False Oat
Grass, Italian Rye
Grass, Rye
Grass, Rough Meadow
Greater Celandine
Greater Plantain
Great Sallow
Ground Elder
Groundsel, Common
Groundsel, Sticky
Hairy Bittercress
Hedge Mustard
Herb Bennet
Hogweed
Ivy
Jack-by-the-Hedge
Knotgrass
Large Bindweed
Lesser Bindweed
Lesser Burdock
Lesser Swine-Cress

Lesser Yellow Trefoil
Long-headed Poppy
Meadow Vetchling
Mugwort
Nipplewort
Opium Poppy
Petty Spurge
Pineappleweed
Ragwort, Common
Ragwort, Oxford
Red Fescue
Red-legs
Ribwort Plantain
Russian Comfrey
Shepherd's Purse
Sowthistle, Prickly
Sowthistle, Common
Spanish Bluebell
Sterile Brome
Stinging Nettle
Sweet Chamomile
Thistle, Creeping
Thistle, Spear
Vetch, Bush
Vetch, Tufted
Wavy Bittercress
Wild Radish
Willowherb, American
Willowherb, Broad-leaved
Willowherb, Great Hairy
Willowherb, Rosebay
Wood Avens
Yarrow
Yorkshire Fog

Planted Trees/Shrubs

Hawthorn
Oak
Silver Birch
White Horse-Chestnut

Ferns

Black Spleenwort
Lady Fern
Maidenhair Spleenwort
Male Fern
Wall Rue

Garden/cultivated plants

Forsythia
Hebe sp
Lilac

Mexican Orange
Rhus typhus
Rosa
Rose of Sharon
Wheat (!)
etc

Birds (on station or track)

** = nest/young seen

* in territory

Blue Tit
Common Whitethroat*
Crow
Duncock**
Goldfinch
Greenfinch*
House Sparrow
Robin**
Woodpigeon**

Birds (overhead)

Black-headed Gull
Jackdaw
Swallow
Pied Wagtail
Pink-footed Goose

Birds (heard)

Little Owl
Yellowhammer

Mammals

Brown Rat
Rabbit

Butterflies

Comma
Gatekeeper
Meadow Brown
Painted Lady
Red Admiral
Small Tortoiseshell
Small White

Bumblebees

3-banded White-tail
Brown-backed Carder Bee

Ladybirds

2-spot Ladybird
7-spot Ladybird
10-spot Ladybird

Other creatures

6-spot Burnet moth

Common Field Grasshopper

Hoverflies

Red Spider mite

Silver Y moth

Wasps

Garden Snail

White-lipped Snail