

THE DITTON FAMILY

STATION MASTERS AT ST. MARGARETS

By
Stuart Moye

When John Ditton an Islington Cheesemonger boarded an Eastern Counties Railway [ECR] train on the 18th July 1846 he had no idea of what was to befall him or how it would change the direction of his life. The train on which he was travelling had started its journey at Ipswich and arrived at Stratford station in East London just before 4pm. While standing in the platform it was hit in the rear by a goods train with some considerable force. Several carriages were seriously damaged and ten passengers were injured one of whom was to subsequently die from their injuries. Mr. Ditton was one of those seriously injured and was thus due compensation from the railway company. The railways in those days tended to work with individuals to come to a mutually agreeable settlement rather than let things end up in court. In the case of Mr Ditton a rather unusual arrangement was made in which he was to be employed by the railway as part of the settlement. As a result he took up the post of stationmaster at St. Margarets station in 1847.

The station that John moved to was a small village station on the Hertford branch line with 7 passenger trains each way per day and limited goods facilities. It had a London bound platform on the Rye House side of the level crossing upon which could be found the original station building. A short Hertford bound platform also existed on the Ware side of the level crossing. The Buntingford line was yet to be built which meant the station at St Margarets was not yet a junction station. Bearing in mind he was new to railway work, John Ditton's task would have been less onerous than at a more important station.

A mid 1950s view of the original 1843 station building that the Ditton family would have known in the 1840s and 50s. The door in the picture gave access to the ground floor rooms which were in railway use. At the far end of the building was the entrance to the stationmaster's home occupying a small part of the ground floor and the upstairs rooms. In the 1850s the platform seen in the picture extended right to the level crossing just out of view to the left of the station building.



In 1851 the census recorded John Ditton, his wife Lucy, son George Williamson Ditton and a niece Mary Player living in St. Margarets with John's occupation listed as station clerk. This job title was used in the census in those days for what was to be later more generally referred to as a stationmaster. When he first arrived at St Margarets the railway was in the process of buying land behind the station building to extend the goods facilities. A part of this land provided the future stationmasters with a fair sized plot to add to a rather small garden originally provided. In 1848 John Ditton would have seen the provision of a waiting shelter on the Hertford bound platform giving passengers some protection from the wind and rain on an otherwise bare platform. John Ditton appears to have been an affable man and soon built up a good relationship with the local community. The stationmaster was an important person in the village in those days and could often smooth the way for local businessmen moving their goods by rail. However he appears not to have been as good at overseeing the finances which was to lead to some difficulties in 1856.

It was in late June 1856 when the Eastern Counties Railway officially discussed a loss of £29 11s at St Margarets station. Mr Ditton had promised to re pay the amount by the 17th but had failed to do so and had asked for more time. It was suggested that Mr Ditton was perhaps not up to the job of stationmaster. The unusual nature of the circumstances of his appointment was raised as he having been seriously injured in a railway accident some ten years previously had been employed to avoid a claim against the ECR. The decision was made to ask those who had provided a surety for Mr Ditton to pay the missing sum of money and Mr Ditton was to be dismissed. At time the ECR required a stationmaster to provide at least two people who could cover any losses that arose within a station masters responsibilities. This arrangement limited the railway's financial risk and those providing the surety were then left to reclaim the money from the railway employee. At the beginning of August, the money having been repaid, Mr Ditton was reinstated in consideration of his long service. At the same time the ECR transferred his son George Williamson Ditton, aged 16 years, by now a railway clerk to work at the Brick Lane Goods Station in London. Those individuals who had previously provided Mr Ditton with his surety were prepared to continue in the role and he was able to remain in his employment as stationmaster at St. Margarets.

However this was to be a short reprieve as the railway became aware of further irregularities and it was decided in early February 1857 to give John Ditton one months' notice to quit due to repeated accountancy errors. One month later it was reported that £50 had been presented to Mr Ditton by the local community on his leaving the service of the railway as the stationmaster at St. Margarets. He had clearly made a very positive impression on the local people and many kind things were said in his support. This included a particular point, that it was hoped he could find a similar post if not on the ECR then some other company as a stationmaster, a role they thought he was eminently suitable to perform. During March 1857 the railway company investigated the irregularities at St Margarets and Mr Ditton paid the £29 8s 9d which remained unaccounted for. Interestingly he was placed on the list of those persons suitable for future employment by the ECR. This is the end of John Ditton's association with St Margarets station although it is interesting to note that in 1763 he is recorded as a railway clerk rather than a station clerk which implies he had a lesser role than stationmaster after he left St Margarets..

In 1871 John's son George Williamson Ditton is recorded as the stationmaster at Chigwell Railway station. He is living with his wife Emily [Pledger] Ditton and 4 children George Williamson junior, John Henry Abraham, William Branch and Lucy Mary. While working at Chigwell he must have seen the notice regarding an announcement for those interested in applying for the job of stationmaster at St. Margarets. One wonders what went through his mind as to the possibility of returning to where his father had been stationmaster. He did apply for the post and his application was successful. This resulted in 1878 with him returning to his former home. He had last lived there 21 years previously but this time he was himself the stationmaster. George arrived at his new job just about one year after the station was fitted out with gas lighting. For the first time the staff no longer had to rely on oil lamps both indoors and out on the platforms. The station had of course changed a great deal since he was last at St Margarets. A whole new station building and platform had been built to provide main line facilities for London bound trains and a bay platform for the Buntingford line. The old station building had lost its railway functions and because of this and George and his family had full use of the entire building for their home. A home almost twice the size of the family home he would have remembered from his earlier years there.



A view south with the new station and signal box very much in evidence. Beyond the level crossing can be seen the old station building in which the Ditton family lived and beyond that the goods shed. This shows the station very much as George ditton would have known it in the last years of the 1800s.

By 1881 the census relates that his family had grown with the addition of Sidney J., Clifford Ralf and daughter Francis. The two eldest sons were by this time recorded as railway clerks working for the Great Eastern Railway [GER] that the ECR had now become. As stationmaster George had use of a small office within the main station building. In 1883 the GER built a brand new stationmasters office in a new extension at the level crossing end of the building. This provided a much more impressive office for a stationmaster and more correctly reflected George's status in the local community. A further significant change in the 1880s that George would have witnessed was the introduction of more modern signalling and the provision for the first time of a signal box. However the level crossing gates were still operated by a gateman who had a small hut provided for him next to the level crossing. At this time George would have been responsible for something like 28 members of staff including those who worked in the goods shed and yard.

By 1891 John and William had left home whilst Lucy had sadly died in the intervening years. George junior was employed at this time as a telegraph clerk by the GER. George senior's mother Lucy was also living back at the railway station. Her surname is recorded as Holwell having remarried following her first husband John Ditton's death and had also by now lost her second husband as well. George was to see a large growth in goods traffic when the St Margarets sand and gravel quarries and the Hailey Brickworks were connected to the railway by a long private siding to the south of the station. This put enormous pressure on the relatively limited goods facilities at the station and George was undoubtedly making representations to his bosses for more goods sidings at the station to be provided. He was not however to live long enough to see these additional sidings built.

It was on the 2nd April 1900 that George Ditton the stationmaster at St Margarets left the station for a short time but failed to return. Following an unsuccessful search a telegram from Rye House was received informing the St Margarets railway staff and George's family that his body had been found in the river. It appears this news was met with sadness in the local area as he was well regarded and thought of as a valued railway servant. With George's death at the age of 66 the father John and son George had, for a total of 32 out of the previous 53 years, served the villages of Stanstead Abbots and Stanstead St. Margarets as the stationmaster. The remaining Ditton family had to vacate the station house as it was tied to the job of stationmaster. Some of George's children at least are known to have gone to live in London. However the connection of the Ditton family with Stanstead Abbots was not yet extinguished. By 1901 John Henry Abraham Ditton is found living at Warren Cottages Cappell lane working as a carpenter and joiner. However by 1911 he had moved to 72 Vicarage Road Ware and was then employed as a stationary steam engine driver at a chemical works. This brought an end to the Ditton family connection with Stanstead Abbots and Stanstead St. Margarets.