

## Frocester to Frampton-on-Severn Mineral Railway

By Stephen Mills

We recently became aware of plans by Novus and Innova to develop a large solar farm between Frocester and Eastington. This includes a solar array of photovoltaic panels that will cover approximately 223 acres of what is presently mainly open farmland plus a few wooded areas. As part of the planning process, geophysical surveying and archaeological trenching is apparently to be undertaken; and areas of significant archaeology have been confirmed, and a detailed mitigation strategy is to be prepared to accompany the planning application.

From the perspective of industrial archaeology, there do not appear to be any visible features of note, although on closer inspection, it seems that the development may be on top of a section of the route of a former mineral railway line that once ran between Frocester station (Figure 1) and gravel pits at Frampton-on-Severn. Although little remains of this enterprise, it seemed to be good opportunity to delve into its history.



**Figure 1 Frocester station, designed by IK Brunel, opened in 1844 and closed in 1961**

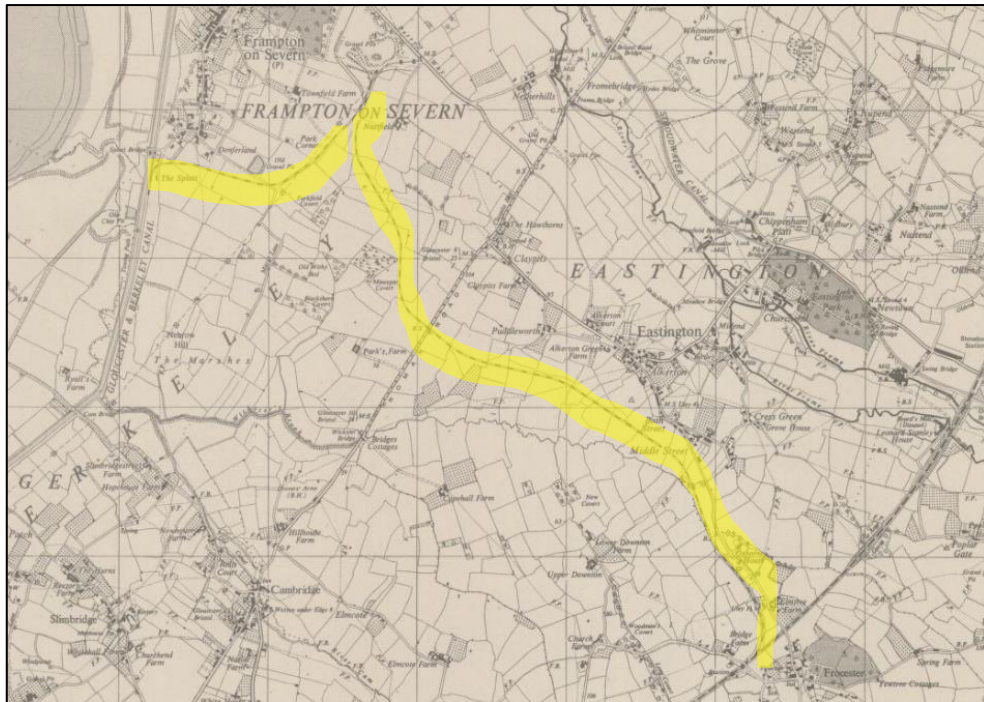
Sometimes known as the *Ballast Pit Branch*, it ran for a couple of miles from the Midland Railway station at Frocester. It crossed through open fields on the edge of Eastington before traversing the A38 Gloucester-Bristol road between Claypits and Cambridge via a level crossing, finally making its way to the extensive gravel pits at Frampton-on-Severn (Figure 2). Sand, clay, and gravel had been extracted in this area for at least several centuries, although it was mainly the gravel that led to the line's creation.

Gravel had been extracted as far back as the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, but the gravel-pits were significantly extended in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – although documentary evidence seems to be lacking, the line was probably built as part of this enlargement process. Local knowledge suggested that it was built by First World War German prisoners-of-war, although this is incorrect as it was opened before this – 1903 has been suggested. But a late Eastington resident recalled that:

*During the First World War, I remember seeing German prisoners of war marching from Frocester to Frampton, each wearing a great flat topped service cap* (Figure 3).

In Gloucestershire, German POWs worked in shipyards, quarries, and agriculture - around twenty POW camps were opened in the county, although it is not clear where the 'Frampton' prisoners were billeted. They may have been brought by train to Frocester station each day.

What is likely is that some probably helped maintain the line, although most worked extracting gravel. In the final year of the First World War, a detachment of the Royal Defence Corp was stationed near the gravel pits, along with several hundred German POWs. Doubtless many of the latter found this occupation preferable to life on the Western Front.



**Figure 2** Map showing the route of the line from Frocester to Frampton (courtesy OS)



Gravel was transported along the branch railway to the main line at Frocester, and also shipped along the Gloucester-Sharpness Canal, being moved along a rail spur and loaded into barges at The Splatt, south of Frampton. Large quantities were transported to Avonmouth Docks and Chepstow dockyard during their construction. The Chepstow dockyard was greatly enlarged during the First World War, with plans to build multiple modularised ships of up to 3000 tonnes, needed to replace losses caused by German U-boats.

**Figure 3** Typical First World War German POWs

At the Frampton end of the rail line, there were a number of short sidings, as well as lines that were sometimes moved closer to the gravel deposit being worked. There was an engine shed for the locomotive, and several storage buildings (Figure 4), as well as some form of conveyor system, possibly used for loading gravel directly into rail wagons. No less than seven different small steam locomotives were employed during the mineral railway's lifetime. Figure 5 show a Manning Wardle 0-4-0 close to the road to Frampton (The Perryway) in 1905.



***Figure 4 Some of the workers, possibly pre-WW I as no German POWs***



***Figure 5 The Manning Wardle locomotive and a rake of wagons***

Gravel extraction is thought to have ended by 1923, with the lines and the A38 level crossing removed within a few years. Apart from a few traces of earthworks that carried the track, little of this once-important enterprise is now visible. There are, however, a number of what appear to be wooden sleepers submerged in the hedge near the entrance to Park's Farm, where the line crossed the A38. These, plus a few lumps and bumps in the landscape may be all that remains of this generally forgotten and largely undocumented, once-important local enterprise.