

BLETCHLEY: THE INFLUENCE OF RAILWAYS ON TOWN GROWTH

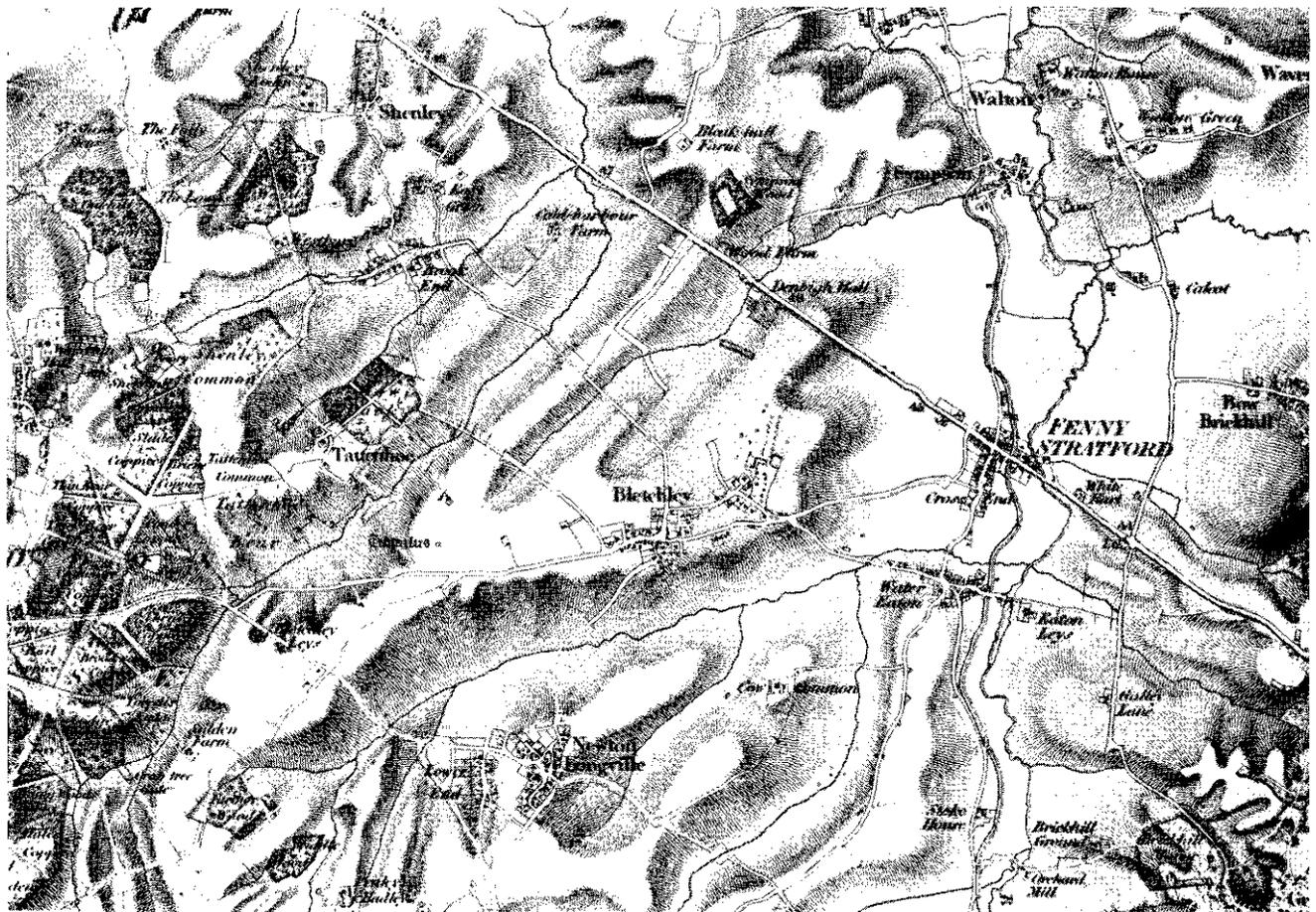
PETER RICHARDS

IN a previous paper an attempt was made to demonstrate the influence of railways on the growth of a Buckinghamshire town.¹ Wolverton, the town under consideration, grew largely because it was half-way between the two major towns of London and Birmingham, and the London & Birmingham Railway Company decided to locate their Grand Central Station and Workshops there. This paper analyses the effect of the railway on another Buckinghamshire town, Bletchley. This town grew largely because the railway offered transport facilities to potential industries. Many of these industries are concerned with heavy raw materials and the railway was an excellent means of transporting these. Today, however, road-vehicles have largely superseded the railway as a means of transport and now the town is much less dependent on the railway than it formerly was.

Bletchley, originally an Anglo-Saxon clearing in the forest (no mention is made of the existence of a settlement here), belonged in the seventh century to Blaecca who was a praefectus of Lincoln.² The old hamlet lay two miles to the west of the Watling Street. Two miles of countryside separated it from Fenny Stratford, a market town on the old Roman road. Bletchley was not mentioned in the Domesday Book; it was probably then part of the manor of Water Eaton. By 1831 Bletchley was a small village consisting of a cluster of houses that had sprung up around Tree Square, where several country roads met. (See Plate III.) There were only 376 inhabitants living in 83 houses.³

Originally the London & Birmingham Railway Company had not intended to build a station there. From 1837 to 1839 Denbigh Hall, a very small hamlet two miles north of Bletchley and on the Watling Street, was a temporary terminus while the section of the line between Denbigh Hall and Rugby was being constructed. The company decided not to make it a permanent station and today, the name, so far as the railway is concerned, survives only in the name of a signal box.

The Board of Directors of the London & Birmingham Railway Company, however, received a petition from the people living in the neighbourhood of Bletchley requesting a station; the Board referred this petition to their Committee of Administration, which dealt with the siting of stations.⁴ On 2nd



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PLATE III. Bletchley in 1834.



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PLATE IV. Bletchley in 1889.

November, 1838, the Committee of Administration decided that the Bletchley cross-roads might be made a stopping place, although they thought that the local population was insufficient to justify a station there. However, the Committee decided that, because the adjacent stations to Bletchley, Wolverton to the north and Leighton Buzzard to the south, were twelve miles apart, an intermediate stopping place should be provided. The body concerned with this matter recommended that one or two trains each way should stop there daily,⁵ and this recommendation was accepted by the Board of Directors and in June, 1840, Bletchley appears in a list of fourth-class stations,⁶ with just a wooden platform on either side of the line.⁷ Stables were also erected there for the use of passengers who, having travelled to the station on horseback, would need somewhere to leave their horses.⁸ A mounting stone is still preserved at the station as a relic of these days of horse travel.

In 1841 it was found that a wicket gate was needed at the crossing and the Coaching and Police Committee ordered one to be constructed.⁹ This fact is evidence of the increasing numbers of people and cattle that were crossing the line. Very probably many of the people and much of the cattle had either travelled or would travel by rail. In the same year the population had risen to 418, of whom 48 had been born in a different county. At the time (1841) there were 147 houses and four more were in the process of being built.¹⁰

In 1844 the railway company built several cottages to house some of their servants employed at Bletchley.¹¹ The traffic did increase and in 1847 a new station was erected there with the title of the Bletchley and Fenny Stratford Station.¹² The previous station had only been a temporary wooden structure; now that the need for a larger and more permanent structure had been proved, the company were willing to spend the necessary money. The population increased only very slowly and in November, 1851, there were only 433 persons living there. In November, 1851, the railway company authorised tenders to be placed for gas fittings for its works there.¹³ This marks the beginning of the movement to make Bletchley into an important railway centre; there was an engineering yard and permanent way maintenance depot; the latter has, however, been since moved to Northampton. The prefabrication of railway tracks was also carried out here. The signal and telegraph equipment for a part of the line are maintained from this centre.

Tenders were accepted for the construction of a refreshment room at Bletchley.¹⁴ Evidently more people were using Bletchley station and the railway company, encouraged by this fact, provided more amenities for the comfort of travellers. It would also seem that the crossing over the line, protected by wicket gates, was proving insufficient for the numbers of people using it, and thus it was decided to build a tunnel under the railway at Bletchley on the road leading to Fenny Stratford.¹⁵ In 1861 the population of Bletchley was 426 and there were 97 houses.¹⁶ A contemporary account described Bletchley as a mean-looking place, consisting mainly of poor thatched cottages.¹⁷ Bletchley village lay half a mile to the west of the railway station; Bletchley park stretched right to the railway line. The 1889 map (Plate IV) shows settlement growing up east of the railway. For the next few decades the population remained almost static and for a time actually decreased.

The Civil Parish of Bletchley		
Year	Population	Inhabited Houses
1871	478	109
1881	514	103
1891	456	98
1901	497	114
1911	748	—
The Urban District and Metropolitan Borough of Bletchley		
1921	5,688	—
1931	6,338	—
1951	10,919	3,014

Between 1901 and 1911 the town started to grow more rapidly than previously in both area and population. Round Bletchley station and the goods and locomotive sheds a new town east of the railway line grew up, which linked the old village of Bletchley to the ancient township of Fenny Stratford.¹⁸ At this time much agricultural produce was transported from Bletchley; large quantities of milk were sent to London. Most of this traffic now goes by road.

The growing demand for cheap building material in the south-east of England which had insufficient building stone led to the development, at various points in the great clay vale, of brick-making of a much larger scale than merely local needs required. These were naturally developed close to one or other of the great trunk lines of railway, and especially where there is a reasonably short haul for bricks and tiles to London.¹⁹ Bletchley, situated in the Oxford Clay Vale and also on a main trunk railway line, was well situated for brick manufacture. Messrs. Flettons set up their works south of Bedford alongside the London & Birmingham Railway line. The London Brick Company had constructed their works alongside the Bletchley to Oxford railway line; they also took over another set of works adjacent to the London & Birmingham Railway Line south of Messrs. Flettons' works. The London Brick Company had been in production for some years when Flettons opened up their workings in 1934. Two factors caused these brickworks to be located there. In the first place the beds of the Lower Oxford Clay are very near the surface and the over-burden is only 12 ft. This rock is really made up of laminations of clay and shale and contains bituminous fuel matter which assists the firing of the bricks. In fact, once the brick has been fired it will burn of its own accord and this reduces fuel consumption to less than 2 cwt. per 1,000 bricks. The Lower Oxford Clay, the basic raw material of brickmaking, is quarried from the ground by mechanical excavators. Wet weather does not hinder the production of bricks, they are just gently heated first to drive off some of the water. The slopes of the Fletton Brick Company's clay pit are so arranged that the slope with the least rain gets the least sun and wind to dry it out and the slopes with

the most rain (south-facing slopes) get most of the drying sun and wind. (See Fig. 1.)

The coal used for fuel and the completed bricks are very bulky products to transport: hence the second influence on the siting of a brickworks was the proximity to rail communication. However, in 1934, shortly after they were opened, the Fletton Brick Company started to transport their bricks by road. This was found to be more economical than rail transport. There was less handling of the bricks, they reached their destination more quickly—a very important consideration when there is competition for markets. In 1939 the

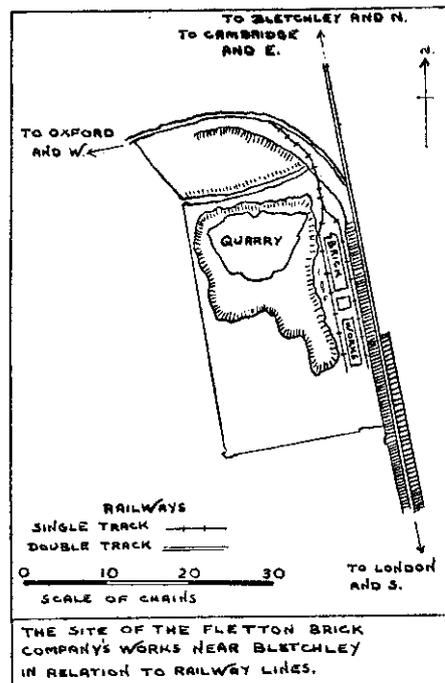


FIG. 1.

Fletton Brick Company boasted that a telephoned order for bricks before 10 a.m. could be completed before 4 p.m., when bricks could be on the building site ready for use. By road transport there was less risk of damage to the bricks: shunting had caused much damage to the bricks when they were transported by rail and today very few bricks are transported by rail. The sidings of the Fletton Brick Company are hardly ever used and today they form rather derelict features of the landscape. This company receive their fuel from Desford Colliery, in Leicestershire, and it comes in tipper lorries which can make the double journey twice daily. The coal used is called “smudge” (slack is the householder’s term for it), which before the Second World War was very cheap.²⁰

The London Brick Company also have some brickworks adjoining the London & Birmingham Railway Line; these works are about a mile south

of the Fletton Brick Company's works. The London Brick Company bought out the firm of Bletchley Flettons which owned them. Formerly known as the Skew Bridge Brick Works and now the Jubilee Brickworks, they have railway sidings adjoining the kilns and still use the railway for the long-distance transport of bricks. The London Brick Company quarries the Lower Oxford Clay and, like many other firms, uses lorries for short-distance transport. A recent article has discussed these works in great detail and the reasons for

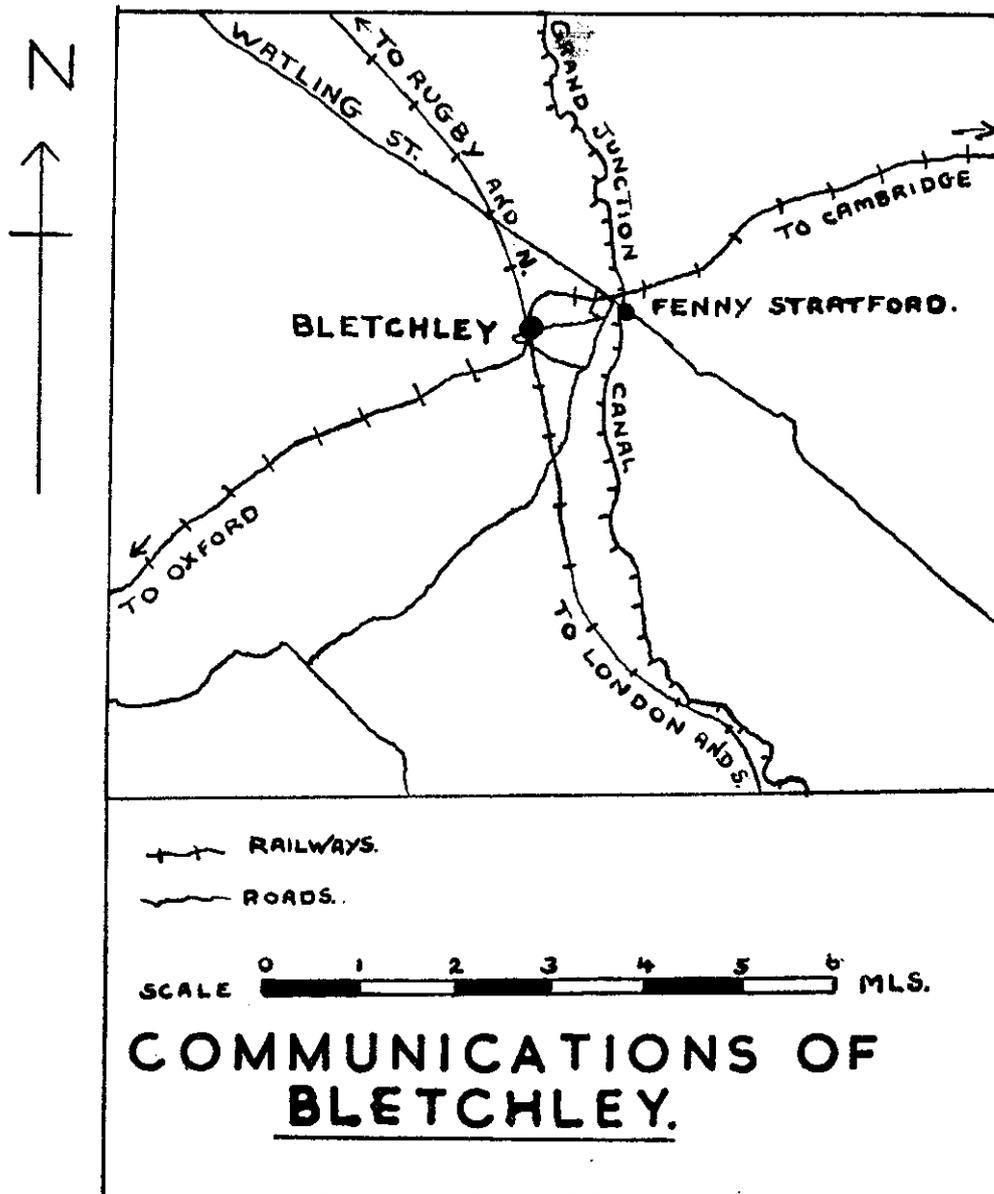


FIG. 2.

their location, which are similar to those applicable to the Fletton Brick Works.²¹

Bletchley had, in 1944, according to the report of the Greater London Plan some light industries, mainly concerned with clothing and electrical goods. These industries made little use of the railway and relied on road transport. Professor Abercrombie suggested that Bletchley might well take a part of London's surplus population. He pointed out that the town had excellent rail, road and canal communications (see Fig. 2) and suggested that these excellent communication facilities made it eminently suitable for people and industry. Abercrombie stated that the best site for this location was on the north-east of the present town; this part of Bletchley was not residentially attractive and would need a large amount of improvement, such as the provision of shopping facilities, before people could live there.²² It was hoped that the eventual population of Bletchley and North Buckinghamshire would be about 50,000, but drainage difficulties have limited this planned figure to 20,000. Sewage disposal into the Ouse and the provision of sufficient drinking water (obtained from the Greensand Ridge) were the problems that caused this figure to be reduced. The old sewage works were situated near the London Brick Company's works and adjoining the railway line; although the line formed part of the boundary of the sewage works, these had no connection with the railway. Since 1950 the works have been removed to the north-east side of the town, but are still insufficient to cope with an increase in population such as that, originally intended.²³

The official estimate of the population in 1955 was 13,500.²⁴ At the census of 1951 the population was 10,916; large housing estates have been built on the outskirts of the town to provide homes for the people who have migrated there. This recent increase in population, as has been shown, is the result of a deliberate policy by the Ministry of Town and Country Planning and the Bletchley Local Authority. In August, 1952, the first Londoner moved to Bletchley,²⁵ but financial considerations, as well as physical problems, have held up the progress of settling London's overspill population in Bletchley at a rate intended.²⁶ The supply of labour at Bletchley is still a problem and people who have migrated there from the Metropolis are not remaining there.

The railway does not seem to have much influence on Bletchley today; most of the industry does not rely for transport on the railway which does not appear to have attracted many people to Bletchley recently, although the recent growth of Bletchley was the result of deliberate policy which was based on its excellent railway facilities. The railway does not seem to be very much used by the industries that have been sited there as a result of post-war planning policy. Road transport has permitted the growth of residential suburbs and industrial establishments away from the congested parts of large towns, as here and elsewhere.²⁷ It is interesting to note that most of this growth authorised by the Town Planning Authority's policy has taken place in the north and north-east of Bletchley away from the brickworks and railway; no further extension of the brickworks and building near them is intended because of the interference of fumes.²⁸

Today road transport provides Bletchley with most of its communication

facilities (see Fig. 3); the United Counties Omnibus Company, whose headquarters are at Northampton, provides the town and surrounding country with passenger and parcels services. Most of the trains on the London & Birmingham Railway Line pass through Bletchley without stopping.

Thus, despite the fact that Bletchley is an important railway centre, its

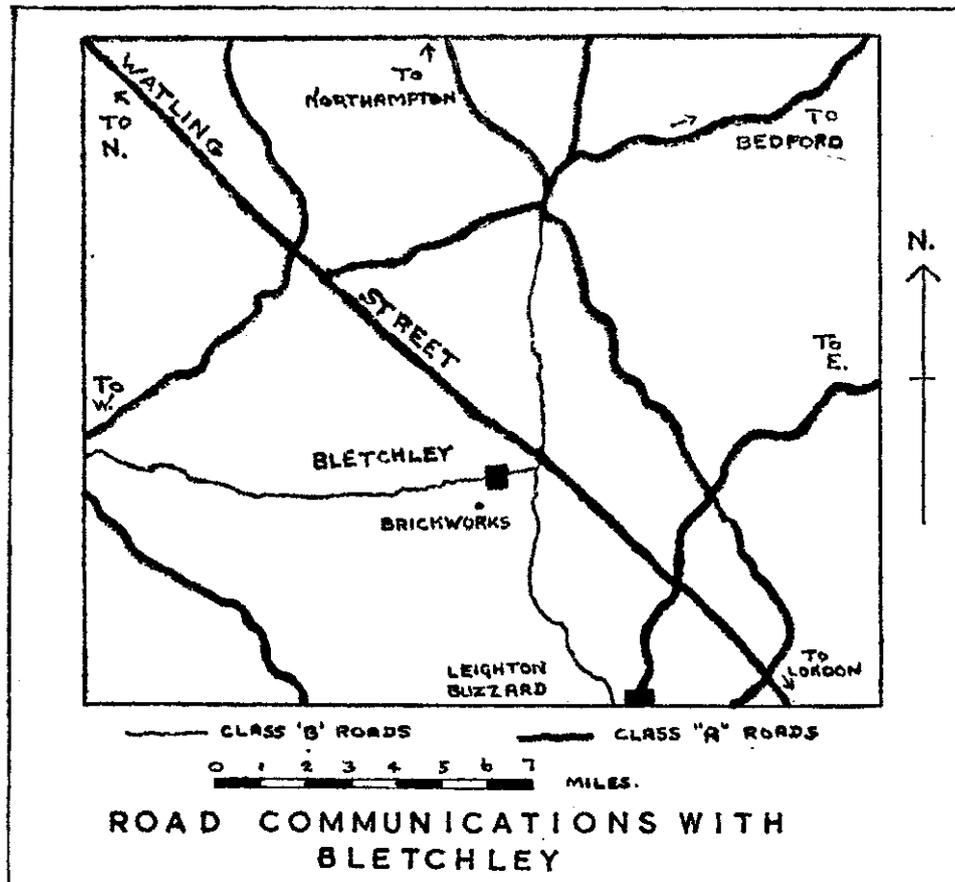


FIG. 3.

growth in recent years has been the result of deliberate planning policy made possible by the facilities provided by road transport which opened up areas for industrial and residential settlement away from the railway line.

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To the Chief Archivist to the British Transport Commission for permission to quote from records in the Commission's possession. I am indebted to Mr. Chatwin, formerly chief booking clerk at Bletchley, for his help.

¹ Peter Richards, "Wolverton: the influence of railways on Urban Growth", *Record of Bucks.*, Vol. XVII, Part 2, 1962, pp. 115-26.

² Mawer and Stenton: *The Place Names of Buckinghamshire*, Vol. 2, English Place Name Society, C.U.P., 1925, p. 17.

³ *Census Returns*, 1831.

⁴ *Minutes of Board of Directors of London & Birmingham Railway*. Entry dated October, 1838.

⁵ *Minutes of Committee of Administration of London & Birmingham Railway Company*. Entry dated 2nd November, 1838.

⁶ *Minutes of Board of Directors of London & Birmingham Railway*. Entry dated 26th June, 1840.

⁷ *Minutes of Coaching and Police Committee of London & Birmingham Railway*. Entry dated 10th June, 1840. Entry reads: a wooden platform is to be erected on the opposite side of the line.

⁸ *Reports to Proprietors of London & Birmingham Railway*. Entry dated 17th February, 1838.

⁹ *Minutes of Coaching and Police Committee of London & Birmingham Railway*. Entry dated 19th May, 1841.

¹⁰ *Census Returns*, 1841.

¹¹ *Committee of Ways and Works of the London & Birmingham Railway*. Entry in *Minute Books* dated 7th March, 1844.

¹² *Minutes ibid.* Entry dated 9th February, 1847.

¹³ *Ibid.* Entry dated 12th November, 1851.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* Entry dated 10th December, 1851.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Same date.

¹⁶ *Census Returns*, 1861.

¹⁷ Sheanan: *History and Topography of Buckinghamshire*, Cited in *Victoria County History*, Vol. IV, p. 274

¹⁸ *Victoria County History Buckinghamshire*, Vol. IV, p. 274.

¹⁹ H. O. Beckitt, "The South-east Midlands" in *Great Britain, Essays in Regional Geography*. Ed. by A. G. Ogilvie, C.U.P., 2nd ed. 1930. Reprint 1937, p. 145.

²⁰ P. S. Richards, "A note on the Fletton Brickworks at Bletchley", *East Midland Geographer*, June, 1956.

²¹ Healey and Rawstron, "The Brickworks of the Oxford Clay Vale", *East Midland Geographer*, December, 1955.

²² Abercrombie, *The Greater London Plan*, London, 1944, section 456.

²³ *Bletchley, the Official Guide*, Bletchley, 1955. I am indebted to J. F. Smithie, Esq., M.I.Mun.E., M.R.San.I., M.S.I.A.

²⁴ *Bletchley, the Official Guide*, Bletchley, 1955.

²⁵ M. J. Wise, "The Role of London in Industrial Geography", *Geography*, November, 1956, p. 226.

²⁶ *The Times*, 19th January, 1956. Cited by M. J. Wise, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Royal Commission on the Distribution of the Industrial Population, *The Barlow Report*, H.M.S.O., Cmd. 6153, 1940, reprinted 1953, pp. 45-6.

²⁸ Abercrombie, *op. cit.*, Section 456.