The Railway Comes To Blandford

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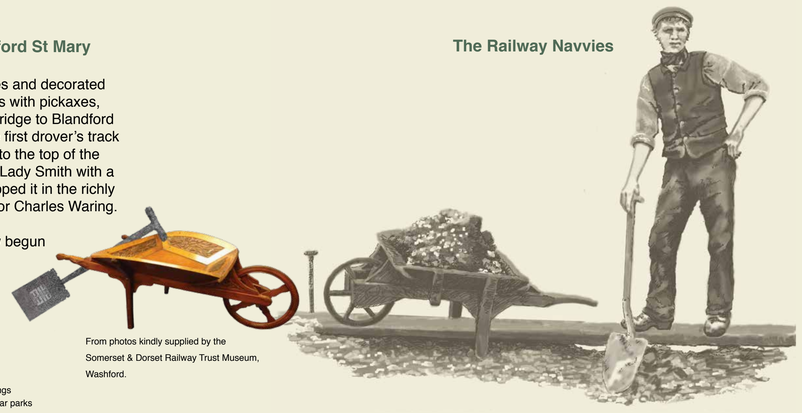
Blandford
Railway Arches Trust

1856 Dorset Central Railway turns first turf at Blandford St Mary

On 13th November, 1856 a procession of horse-drawn carriages and decorated carts left the Town Hall in Blandford, followed by railway navvies with pickaxes, crowds of townspeople and schoolchildren. They crossed the bridge to Blandford St Mary and took the turnpike road to Poole, turning right at the first drover's track where they entered an archway of decorated hoops, which led to the top of the field. Company engineer, Charles Gregory presented Frances, Lady Smith with a ceremonial spade, with which she dug a loosened turf and dropped it in the richly carved, mahogany wheelbarrow, presented by railway contractor Charles Waring. (Spade & barrow, Right)
Formed only two years earlier, Dorset Central Railway had now begun work on the line from Wimborne to Blandford, linking Blandford to the London & South Western Railway.

The Railway Navvies



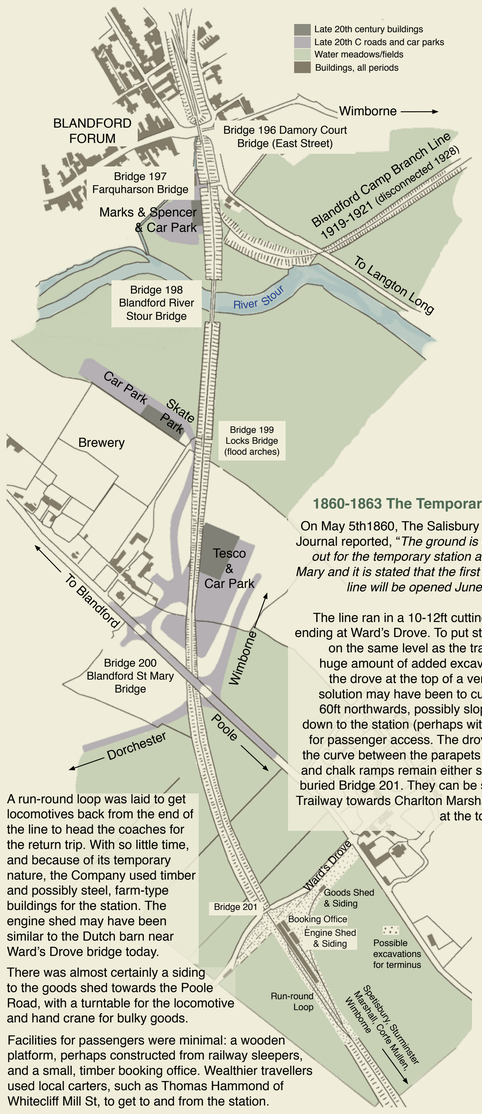
From photos kindly supplied by the Somerset & Dorset Railway Trust Museum, Washford.

While Lady Smith was carried off to lunch in Blandford's Assembly Rooms, the railway navvies from the procession returned to work elsewhere. It would be many months before they worked near Blandford. These men followed the railway line as it progressed through the countryside, living in tents, rough wooden huts with canvas roofs or even grass-roofed dugouts. They earned about 15s per week (around £60 in 2019). Ninety percent of them came from around the British Isles, others came from Europe and Ireland and some were local men, who wandered in from the road to ask the overseers for work. A Select Committee report of 1847 investigated the navvies' dangerous working conditions, where safety protocols were almost non-existent and many navvies were injured or killed on the job. For each mile of rail laid, there was an average of three work-related deaths, causes ranging from tunnel collapse to being struck by runaway trucks.
Despite the dangerous work, many navvies put their sons to work on the railway: a seven year old could earn a few pennies taking a pickaxe to the blacksmith for repair; a thirteen year old might work with horses hauling tipper trucks of soil and chalk away from a cutting to tip on a rising embankment; an eighteen year old could join the digging gangs and, by the time he was fully fit, would shovel twenty tons of chalk a day into the waiting trucks, filling seven trucks a day. As well as digging cuttings, navvies prepared the track bed (illustration of Bridge 198, Below, Centre), constructed wooden falsework to shore up the new brickwork in tunnels and arches and laid the track, known as 'the permanent way'. Over the next seven years, working under the railway contractors, Waring Brothers, the navvies achieved extraordinary feats of landscaping across the North Dorset countryside, many of which exist today. The railway embankment at Stourpaine still stands as firm as it did when the first train ran along the top of it, now over 150 years ago.

Vive la difference!

In the mid 1840s, English navvies went to France to work with French navvies on the new railway between Le Havre and Paris. The big, uncouth, wild, Englishman was an awesome sight to the French; scorning their delicate, wooden tools, he brought his Herculean iron pickaxe and shovel with him, along with an impressive work rate. He consumed vast amounts of beer, bacon and beef, while his French counterpart drank wine and ate bread and fruit.

Blandford's Stations 1860-1969



A run-round loop was laid to get locomotives back from the end of the line to head the coaches for the return trip. With so little time, and because of its temporary nature, the Company used timber and possibly steel, farm-type buildings for the station. The engine shed may have been similar to the Dutch barn near Ward's Drove bridge today.

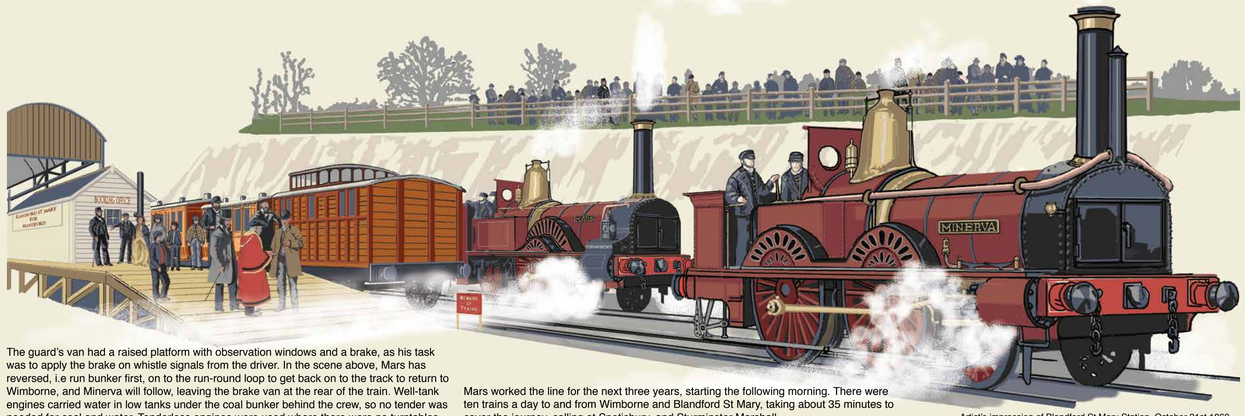
There was almost certainly a siding to the goods shed towards the Poole Road, with a turntable for the locomotive and hand crane for bulky goods.

Facilities for passengers were minimal: a wooden platform, perhaps constructed from railway sleepers, and a small, timber booking office. Wealthier travellers used local carters, such as Thomas Hammond of Whitecliff Mill St, to get to and from the station.

1860 'The train now standing at the only platform ...'

In late October, the Board of Trade's railway inspector pronounced the track ready for use. October 31st dawned fine and the church bells rang as Blandford's residents again processed to Blandford St Mary to welcome the first train into the new, temporary terminus. At last it arrived: two tank engines in the Indian Lake livery of the London & South Western Railway, pulling three elegant coaches. The local band played the National Anthem and officials from the L&SWR stepped out of a First Class coach to be greeted by the mayor. Among these men was the great railway mechanical engineer, Joseph Hamilton Beattie (talking to the mayor in the scene, Right), travelling to Blandford St Mary with locomotives and coaches of his own design. The lead locomotive was Minerva a 2-4-0 Beattie WT (Well-Tank) of the Minerva Class, followed by Mars, a 2-2-2 Beattie WT of the Sussex class. The Beattie carriages were four-wheeled with teak panels and oil lamps in cylindrical holders on the roof.

Speculative temporary terminus layout in railway map (Left)



The guard's van had a raised platform with observation windows and a brake, as his task was to apply the brake on whistle signals from the driver. In the scene above, Mars has reversed, i.e run bunker first, on to the run-round loop to get back on to the track to return to Wimborne, and Minerva will follow, leaving the brake van at the rear of the train. Well-tank engines carried water in low tanks under the coal bunker behind the crew, so no tender was needed for coal and water. Tenderless engines were used where there were no turntables.

Mars worked the line for the next three years, starting the following morning. There were ten trains a day to and from Wimborne and Blandford St Mary, taking about 35 minutes to cover the journey, calling at Spetisbury, and Sturminster Marshall.

Artist's impression of Blandford St Mary Station, October 31st 1860

1860-1863 The Temporary Terminus

On May 5th1860, The Salisbury & Winchester Journal reported, "*The ground is being marked out for the temporary station at Blandford St Mary and it is stated that the first section of the line will be opened June or July next.*"

The line ran in a 10-12ft cutting, temporarily ending at Ward's Drove. To put station facilities on the same level as the track involved a huge amount of added excavation, leaving the drove at the top of a vertical cliff. The solution may have been to curve the drove 60ft northwards, possibly sloping the chalk down to the station (perhaps with a staircase) for passenger access. The drove still follows the curve between the parapets of the bridge, and chalk ramps remain either side of almost-buried Bridge 201. They can be seen from the Trailway towards Charlton Marshall, near trees at the top of the field.

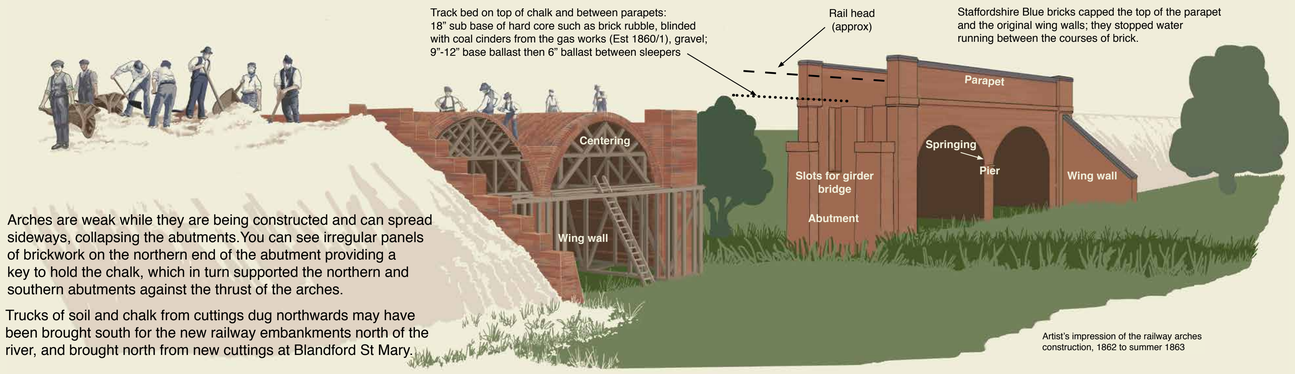
31st August 1863. Blandford gets a Town Station.

Dorset Central Railway operated on a shoestring to construct the Wimborne to Blandford St Mary line, and joined forces in 1862 with the Somerset Central Railway, forming the Somerset & Dorset Railway for the next stage of the work. Once again the Waring Brothers contracted to continue the line northwards from Blandford St Mary and southwards from Templecombe into the new Blandford Forum station, finally connecting Hamworthy (Poole) to Burnham on Sea. The biggest hurdle lay in crossing the Stour.

Bridge 198

Construction of these arches began in 1862. Brick abutments rose each side of the river, supported by chalk embankments at their northern and southern ends, and wing walls were built against the free ends of the huge earthworks. 'Timbermen' built radial, wooden 'centering' to form the arches and installed wooden scaffolding for the many bricklayers.

Brickworks along the line may have helped meet the huge demand for bricks now able to be transported north and south by rail.
The Southern Times & Dorset County Herald reported in March 1863 that, 'The abutments and piers were up to springing height, and the girders ready for delivery.'
Monday 31st August,1863 saw the opening of Blandford's town station with the arrival of a green and brass locomotive built by George England. It was customary to greet an inaugural train with Handel's 'Hail the Conquering Hero', but no papers report anything other than 'a great waving of hats'. Robert Eyers' Blandford Band played for the ball following the turning of the first turf in 1856; they played on the platform for the inaugural trains in 1860 and won first prize at the 1863 Crystal Palace Brass Band Contest only three weeks before Blandford's town station opened, so it is tempting to imagine the band in the new station, playing Handel's tune as the first 'iron horse' came in.



Artist's impression of the railway arches construction, 1862 to summer 1863

Arches are weak while they are being constructed and can spread sideways, collapsing the abutments. You can see irregular panels of brickwork on the northern end of the abutment providing a key to hold the chalk, which in turn supported the northern and southern abutments against the thrust of the arches.

Trucks of soil and chalk from cuttings dug northwards may have been brought south for the new railway embankments north of the river, and brought north from new cuttings at Blandford St Mary.

Track widening C 1900

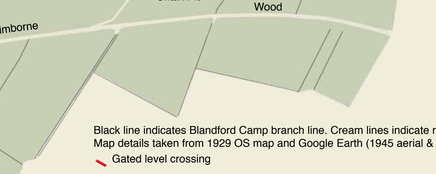


Photo: 24th May 2019 during restoration work

It was soon apparent that a second track was needed, so the task of 'doubling' the track began at Blandford and continued south of the river, but was abandoned north of the town. North Dorset Trailway users can see that the bridge over the Stour north of Stourpaine was widened to take a second girder bridge but was never completed. The original, single track into Blandford Station from the South became the Down line after doubling.

Upstream parapets and wing walls were removed and abutments and arches widened upstream. Inside the arches there is a vertical join where a different brick meets the redder, downstream brick of the 1863 single track bridge. The embankment was widened too, the chalk now arriving by train from cuttings widened to the south. The photo (Above) shows the original parapet and abutment to the left and the new abutment, parapet and wing wall to the right. A second girder bridge was then installed to cross the river.

New, upstream wing walls were built to support the new embankment, just as in the original construction. The forward lean of the upstream wing wall and zig-zag panels of brick on its northern face suggest that the first course was built leaning against a backward-sloping wall of chalk, then fair-faced vertical courses were built in front. The upper limit of the chalk is marked by a shallow overhang in the brickwork just below the soldier (top) course of the upstream wing wall.

Sources:
Early locomotives and carriages: National Railway Museum, York; LSWR Carriages Volume 1, 1838-1900 / GR Weddell; Oakwood Press "Castleman's Corkscrew", History of the Southampton to Dorchester Line; Industrial Railway Society; DL Bradley's Illustrated History of LSWR Locomotives - The Early Engines 1838-53 & The Beattie Classes; LSWR at Nine Elms, The Curl Collection Vol 1; Adrian Stapley (private research).
Temporary Terminus and Blandford Camp Railway: Peter Russell, Somerset & Dorset Railway Heritage Trust; Steph Gillett, Somerset & Dorset Railway Trust; David Cash, Bob Downes; London Bus Museum
Stour Arches & railway construction: Robert Adams (ret'd bridge engineer); Phil Easton, Bob Downes; Blandford Museum; Dorset History Centre; Railway Labourers & Labourers on Public Works (Select Committee Report) Charles Knight & Co 1846; Life & Work among the Navvies, Daniel William Barrett, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1883; Brooke, David (1989-01-01); www.railwaymuseum.org.uk; "The Railway Navvy—a reassessment". Construction History. 5: 35–45 JSTOR 41613664. "Navvyman" by Dick Sullivan, http://www.victorianweb.org/history/work/sullivan7.html
Newspaper Archives: Salisbury & Winchester Journal 15th Nov 1856; The Southern Times & Dorset County Herald 3rd Nov 1860, 7th March 1863; Sherborne Mercury 11th Aug 1863; Western Daily Press 1st Sept 1863; Dorset County Chronicle 3rd Sept 1863. Northern Whig 16th March 1918; The Taunton Courier & Western Advertiser 13th Aug 1919. The Western Gazette 26th Dec 1919, 18th July 1924. Bournemouth Guardian 26th March 1921.

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Blandford Camp Railway 1919-1921

Construction began close to the end of the Great War in 1918, and the three mile, 150 yds long, standard gauge, light railway opened in January 1919. It mainly carried materials to the camp for the building of new barracks for the Royal Flying Corps (becoming the RAF), whose service records office became based there. The camp employed about 1,000 women, some WRAF and some civilians from Bournemouth and Blandford, all of whom relied on charabanc and bus transport up to the camp until the new line was built.

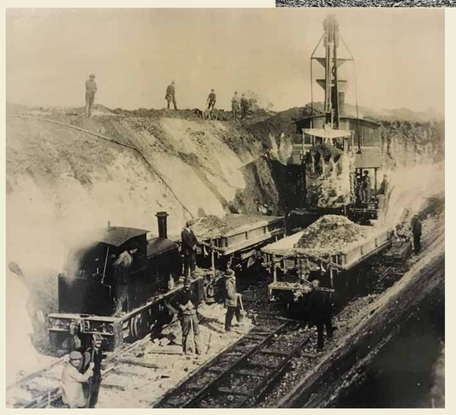
The contractor was Robert McAlpine, 'Concrete Bob', one of whose concrete bridges (a cattle passage or 'creep') still passes through the surviving embankment on Hungry Down. Construction workers this time benefited from technology unavailable 60 years before, such as the marvellous 'steam navvy', (Below, Right). Local historian Ben Cox received a letter from Miss E Blandford, who was seventeen in 1918 and watched the steam shovel create the embankment for the branch line, still visible near the railway arches. (Below, Left)

Standard gauge, light tank engines worked the line, apparently arriving daily from the Wimborne shed. An 800ft passing loop was laid just before the camp 'station' and the surveyor's plans show two tracks entering the station. Personnel would alight at the long, straight platform north of the track, but the function for the second track is unclear, and it may never have been laid. Supplies entered the camp further south, near the Quartermaster's stores and a second siding entered the inward draft camp (located near the Black Lane entrance) for new recruits.

The photograph (Right), is of unknown origin and location. It shows the creation of a cutting using a steam navvy. An early 20th century, 0-4-0 tank engine, works on a temporary track laid directly on the chalk; a standard gauge track (with a narrow track within it) runs in the foreground. The tracks of the steam navvy suggest it has scooped fallen chalk from the newly cut, vertical cliff in the backgound and turned to tip it into the truck beneath. The trucks are American, side-tipping 'dump trucks' often used in mining. Perhaps they were shipped from the USA to Europe during the Great War, and came to the UK when the war ended. Sleepers and rails are ready to be laid as the excavation moves forward. The most significant cutting on the Camp Railway was near Blandford (Photo, Top Right), where Langton Crescent is now; the creation of Langton Cutting would have looked very much like this scene.

London B-type bus was built from 1910 onwards by the London General Omnibus Co. Requisitioned for troop transport during Great War and seen here transporting female staff from Blandford Station to the camp before branchline construction.
In the background are some of the camp huts, possibly near the Black Lane entrance to the camp. See map of camp railway, (Far Right)

Looking southwest along the Langton Cutting towards Blandford St Mary with the brewery chimney between the trees. The cutting ran where Langton Crescent is now. Photo C 1923 British Geological Survey



The RAF, WRAF and the Ministry of Transport were criticised in the press in August 1919 over their 'squandering' of public money. On the 13th Aug The Taunton Courier & Western Advertiser questioned the daily practice of ferrying 400 women by train from Bournemouth to Blandford Camp to work in the Records Office with 'short hours, high pay and notorious inefficiency'. Disgruntled locals dubbed the daily train to the camp, 'The Powder Puffer', and the branch line, 'The Scented Line'. On 26th Dec 1919 the Western Gazette published the Minister for Transport's defence of the travel costs, and his reported tonnage of transport to and from the camp. No further newspaper articles appeared.

The RAF Record Office moved away in 1921 and the branch line was little used from that time, apart from bringing materials and equipment away from the camp. In July 1924, during the dismantling of the track, six trucks heavily laden with sleepers and rails broke free. They ran all the way down the gradient back to Blandford, the level crossings luckily free of traffic, animals and pedestrians. On reaching the junction with the main line the trucks hit a metal gate shut against the branchline and derailed, tumbling down the embankment, scattering their contents over the flood plain.

Timeline for Blandford Camp Railway

1917 Royal Naval Division leaves Camp, Royal Flying Corps takes over, becoming Royal Air Force.
1918 (March) Camp used for RAF Recruitment, Personnel & Records Office
1918 (Late) Work begins on branch line at cost of £75,224 (£59,877 after plant sold or returned to contractor)
1919 (12th Jan) Railway opens. Worked by L&SWR. Carries military personnel, munitions, stores, supplies, civilian personnel
1921 (Late) Line closes. Line handed over to Somerset & Dorset Joint Railway
1924/5 Langton Cutting becomes municipal rubbish dump
1928 (Dec 18th) Line disconnected from S&DJR
1928-1930s Track lifted

Black line indicates Blandford Camp branch line. Cream lines indicate roads/tracks.
Map details taken from 1929 OS map and Google Earth (1945 aerial & current images)
Gated level crossing

BLANDFORD FORUM TOWN COUNCIL

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