

The Rise & Demise of Blandford's Railway

H Danby Seymour, Esq., M.P., for Poole, then bearing a decanter of wine and wine-glass, addressed Lady Smith as follows:- "Lady Smith, allow me to present you with a glass of wine in which to drink success to the Dorset Central Railway. You have this day performed an important duty in turning the first sod of this great undertaking, which we hope through the blessing of God will be fraught with benefit both to agriculture and commerce, by connecting the Bristol and English Channels"

Dorset County Chronicle 20th November 1856

A Railway 'Fraught with Benefit'

After Lady Smith's turf-turning ceremony came a grand lunch in Blandford's Assembly Rooms, where the main speech was given by Henry Danby Seymour, then Chairman of the Dorset Central Railway and the Salisbury and Yeovil Railway. His speech set out the benefits of connecting Dorset with the rest of the country, such as the advantages to commerce, agriculture and individuals of obtaining cheap coal direct from the pit mouth in South Wales. This coal would fuel the steam threshing machine of a Blackmore Vale farmer, who could sell Dorset corn to the mining-rich but agriculturally-poor South Wales, which currently purchased its produce mainly from Bristol. He spoke of bringing clay to the new potteries in Poole instead of sending the recently-found Poole clay up to Staffordshire potteries; he prophesied increased travel by passenger steamer to Cherbourg (with its new rail connection to Paris), made possible via the railway line to Poole. The Dorset Central Railway would bring new jobs, wealth and a rise in the standard of living for all.

The Post-Railway Housing Boom

Below Left: a pre-railway document delineates parcels of land and extant houses affected by the construction of the railway with property values, presumably for purchase by the company. The railway, cutting and embankment have been outlined in brown. The station outline is based on the 1887 OS map and tinted sepia in the three OS maps.



Many new houses were built around Blandford following the railway's arrival. Left, Top & Bottom & Below: OS Maps from 1887, 1900 (revised 1902), and revised 1938 show the increase in new housing on the former pasture lands east of the railway line.



Military use of Blandford's Railway. Railways have always been a strategic asset for the fast deployment of troops and equipment. Until recently one design constraint for a tank was that it must fit through a railway tunnel.

Autumn Manoeuvres August 1872

This exercise brought 16,000 officers and men and 4,500 horses to Blandford following a week's build-up of stores and equipment arriving almost hourly by special trains from Templecombe and Wimborne. The station master and soldiers from the Royal Engineers, Royal Artillery Transport and Army Service Corps organised and distributed everything to the various camps. Troops arrived, most having marched, but 1300 infantry, including the Dorset Rifle Volunteers, arrived by train - the one for Grenadier Guards being forty carriages long. The 3rd Dragoons, rode straight to Camp Down (now Blandford Camp), so-named after the Dragoons' earlier presence during the Blandford Riots of 1830-31, when Dorset labourers wrecked mechanical threshing machines in protest at their contribution to their poverty. C Telegraph Troop, forerunners of the Royal Signals provided communications for the exercise.

The Great War

1914 Travelling back to Blandford Camp from sick leave in Canford, Rupert Brooke may have looked out on Dorset fields from the Wimborne to Blandford train and added a phrase to his best known poem, 'The Soldier'.
1915 (Exhibit in Blandford Museum) George V and Winston Churchill arrived at the station to inspect the Hood Battalion at Blandford Camp, who marched two days later to Shillingstone Station for a train to Avonmouth; their destination was Gallipoli.
1916/17 A POW camp was established on the Milldown.
1918 A timber yard was established to be worked by German prisoners and a siding was laid, becoming operational on June 4th 1918

World War II

(Full exhibit in Town Museum and interpretation panel by Crown Hotel)
June 1940 Churchill designated Blandford a strategic 'anti-tank island' against a German rapid advance to capture the West Country and establish invasion ports at Plymouth and Portland. If the road and railway bridges over the Stour were blown up, the railway's embankments and cuttings would provide effective anti-tank structures to the East of the town, needing only road blocks at the railway arches and further defences to the West.
February 1942 King George VI arrived to visit troops at Blandford Camp.
1944 The line from Bath to Bournemouth became very busy in the build up to D Day, military trains taking precedence over scheduled trains.

Post-war military transport.

(Photo, Right by David Wigley 22nd July 1966)
A double header pulls twelve Morris and Humber 1T radio trucks and one 1T radio trailer above Spetsbury going South. The trucks came from the Royal Signals camp and were loaded in Blandford goods yard and as nothing worked north of the station from March 1966, freight went to Poole and on to other destinations. These trucks may have been destined for refitting or rebuilding at military depots at Bulwell, Notts or at Donnington on the Shrops/Staffs border.



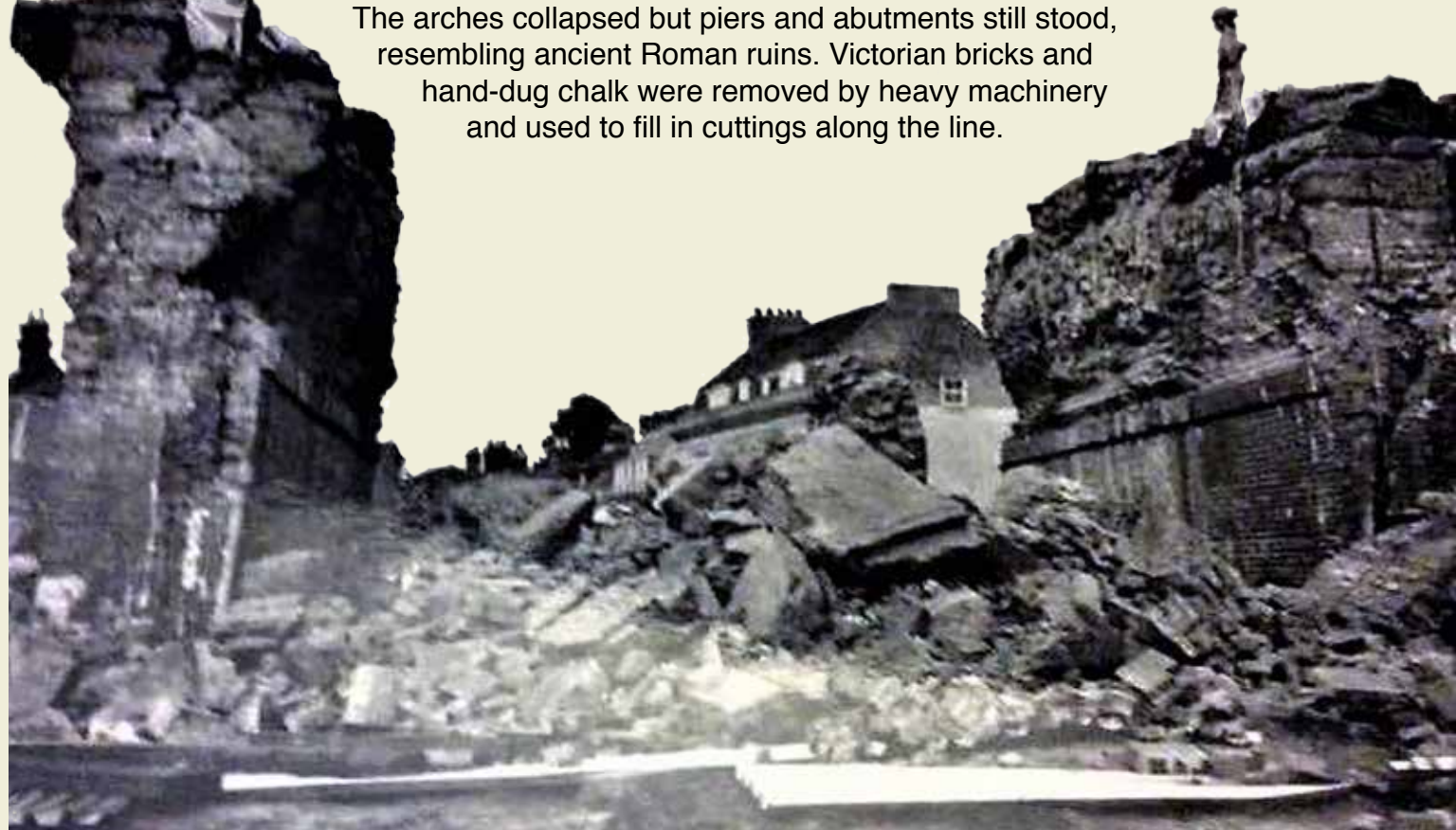
Blandford Camp branchline included on the sister panel

Sources:
Blandford Museum; Blandford Forum Civic Society; Blandford Railway Club
Newspaper Archives:
Poole & Dorset Herald 21st October 1875
Salisbury & Winchester Journal 5th September 1863; 12th March 1870
Sherborne Mercury 22nd September 1863; 7th Feb 1865
Southern Times and Dorset County Herald 8th April, 20th May 1871; 10,17 August, 7th September, 26th October, 23rd November 1872; 18th April 1874; 12th June 1875
Western Gazette 13th September 1872; 16th June 1950
Dorset Life March 2015 (Hood Battalion & Rupert Brooke)
The S&D Telegraph: issue 36 August 2010; issue 51 Spring 2018, articles by Peter Russell & Andrew Cramer-Webb
<https://www.1900s.org.uk/1940s-trains-tickets.htm>
<https://wessexwfa.org.uk/pimperne-and-the-military-2/>
David Cash; Chris Brown

The Finale

Damory Court Bridge Opened Summer 1863, dynamited 25th July 1978

The arches collapsed but piers and abutments still stood, resembling ancient Roman ruins. Victorian bricks and hand-dug chalk were removed by heavy machinery and used to fill in cuttings along the line.



Reprieve for goods traffic until 1969

The Down line continued to be used for goods after passenger services had ceased, carrying coal, animal feeds, parcels and general merchandise. The parcels depot closed in 1967, the same month as the line to the North was cut. A new freight depot at Bournemouth limited Blandford-bound goods to bulk fertiliser and wagon-loads of specialist goods; with no traffic north of Blandford, these arrived by circuitous, round trips (as with the train carrying military radio trucks in the colour photo), until the final freight run in January 1969. Tank engines were still common until Southern Rail ended its use of steam in 1967. From then, Crompton diesels headed all goods trains until January 1969, after which they spent the year hauling the dreary demolition trains as the railway was dismantled.



Passenger Travel 1863 - 1966

'Why, you've all your travelling to do yet; and if these new-fangled railways spread, as they say they will, we shall all be spinning about the world sitting on tea-kettles ... Miss Hornblower was going to travel by railroad for the first time ... one piece of advice was not to sit on the boiler.'

From 'Wives & Daughters' by Elizabeth Gaskell, C1830s, serialized in Cornhill Magazine from August 1864 to January 1866.

1863 Blandford Station opened with Mr F Nichols as its first Station Master. An inaugural special return ticket of 2s 6d gave passengers the chance to travel all the way to Burnham on Sea.

1865 the Crown Hotel had a horse-drawn omnibus to deliver or meet train travellers at the station.

1871 April, forty agricultural labourers from villages such as Stourpaine and Child Okeford boarded the train at Blandford to join ships going to Canada and the USA. Many had their outbound fares paid for by the gentry of their villages, or the Board of Governors of The Blandford Union.

1871 May, newly weds Mr and Mrs Okeden of Turnworth House returned from their honeymoon to Blandford Station.

1875 June, a horse drawn hearse waited at the station to convey the coffin of Lord & Lady Pitt Rivers' youngest daughter to Steepleton House, where twenty year old Charlotte was laid to rest in the family vault.

1910 a passenger express now ran daily between Manchester and Bournemouth, named in 1927 as the Pines Express. It took six hours to complete the journey between the two termini, with some of the steepest gradients on the line. In the Fifties it became an iconic sight, bringing holiday passengers from northern cities through beautiful Dorset scenery to the Bournemouth seaside.

The 'new-fangled' railway took people to Sturminster market, on day trips to the seaside and Christmas shopping in Bournemouth; soldiers departed to join regiments or travelled home on leave; newlyweds left on honeymoon and grandparents arrived to meet their first grandchild; Victorian children waved at the colourful, friendly trains running along the embankment above the playground at Spetsbury School; twentieth century boarders at Bryanston and Claysmore Prep schools came and went home by train each term - and no one ever had to sit on the boiler.

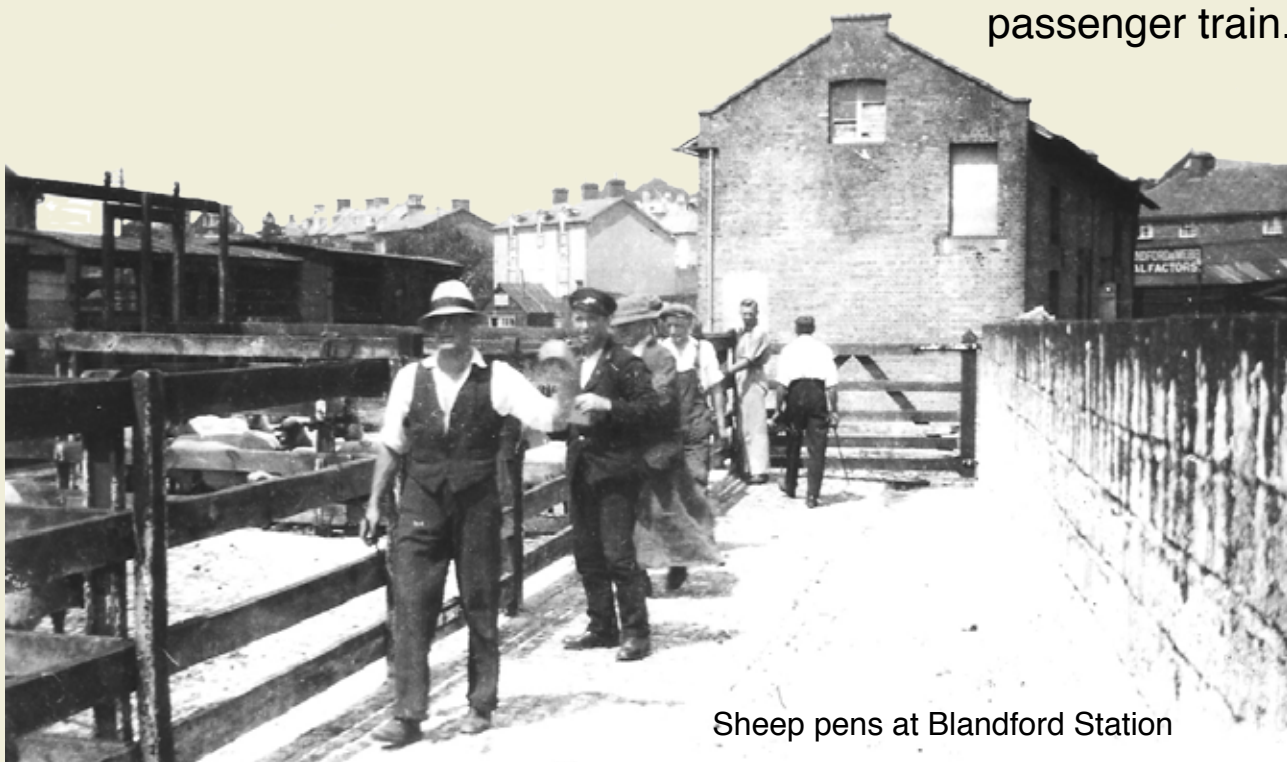
Carriage of Goods

As the Chairman prophesied, a huge range of goods came and went through Blandford Station: agricultural fertiliser, animal feeds and grain; fresh produce such as cheese, milk, beef, fish and watercress; building materials like fir timber, stone from Corsham, salt-glazed drain pipes and other architectural ceramics from Poole Pottery; there was beer, cider and sacks of goods; private possessions, such as chests of Japanese jewellery and cloth from someone's travels in the Far East; the mail train carried letters and parcels of all sizes - one containing tea stolen from Blandford tea merchant H.Gill by his employee, who tried to send it by mail train to his female accomplice in London.

The railway brought coal for domestic fires and stoves, for steam engines working in the fields, for the new gas works to produce coal gas. From 1870-1920 Rickman's steam-driven flour mill, (becoming Rickman & Bishop late 1882), had coal and grain delivered by wagons running on a dedicated line from the station to a tunnel 5 m high by 4 m wide under the junction of Edward and Albert Streets. Rickman & Bishop were also coal merchants to the public.

Fertiliser and animal feeds were handled by Blandford & Webb, whose Blandford warehouse carried ICI fertilisers and animal feeds from Blandford's BOCM Pauls (later ForFarmers) mill at Blandford Heights.

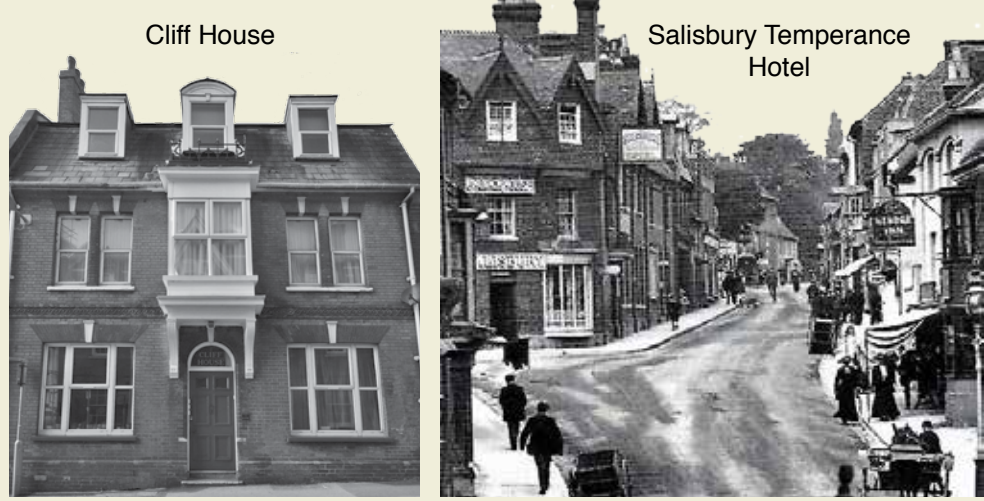
Pigeon Special trains could be very long, pulling coaches fitted out with cages for homing pigeons from the North to be released in the South. Sheep, poultry, pigs and rams were often railway passengers; someone's dog was sent labelled from Bournemouth to Blandford in the guard's van of a passenger train.



Life Before Coffee Shops.

Arriving at the temporary station at Blandford St Mary, the richer traveller probably took a carriage into town to stay at the Crown or Greyhound; for the poor but respectable pedestrian however, in the absence of caf  s the only tavern on the route was the New Inn (later the Stour Inn) on the Blandford St Mary side of the bridge, probably no place for respectable ladies and gentleman. With the arrival of the railway in town, several new taverns sprang up around the new station, (Map, Far Right). Apart from the Railway Hotel, most of these were pretty rough, more suited to the beer-drinking labourer or railway worker than to genteel passengers, for whom a walk past such rough, rowdy places must have been intimidating. The Temperance Movement had spread since the late 1850s and by the time the railway arrived in Blandford St Mary in 1860, a local railway

carter and carrier, Thomas Hammond, had already established the Temperance Refreshment House next to the Kings Arms in Whitecliff Mill Street. Those travellers wanting a quiet cup of coffee might have been recommended to visit Hammond's establishment. It closed in 1910 and the building was renamed Cliff House. Meanwhile in 1878, at the fork of Salisbury and Whitecliff Mill Streets, the Rev Fynes-Clinton founded the British Workman's Coffee Rooms, the building later being extended to three floors as it is now, becoming in 1910 The Salisbury (Temperance) Hotel which was still in business in 1939.



Trouble at the Three Choughs (reported in the Salisbury & Winchester Journal 13th November 1858)
The rough, tough navvies lived up to their bad reputation one evening in Blandford when, two years after the turf-cutting ceremony, navvies were drinking in the Three Choughs in West Street. One accepted a shilling from a militia sergeant in the pub and enlisted, then refused to give his name and tried to get away, so the soldier called a policeman, who arrested the navvy and took him to the lockup. The other navvies tried to free him and a fight broke out, needing two policemen and bury locals to take them all into custody. Sentences ranged from prison for the failed soldier to four weeks hard labour for his friends, but to these work-hardened men their real punishment was going without pay while they served their sentences.

The Sleepers Sleep * Tracing the railway today.

On the Trailway, visitors can follow the railway cuttings and embankments. Mossy railway structures and materials can still be seen along the track: a wrecked platelayers' hut (Below Right), a lampholder (Below Left), or a flight of steps down from a small, concrete platform on the edge of an embankment. You might spot a square metal structure, which used to carry a signal post (Below Centre). Round-topped, concrete fence posts give you a clue as to where the railway land ended, while concrete sleepers still lie where they were left after lifting. Black metal railings and blue bricks on top of a brick wall, glimpsed through greenery, show where a bridge once carried a farm track over the railway, the cutting filled in long ago. The Trailway runs through the same, beautiful countryside, which delighted railway passengers and staff for more than a hundred years.

Northbound Trailway starts in the old Blandford Station Yard, accessed from Damory Court, Edward and Alexandra Streets; southbound route starts over the old railway bridge at Wards Drove, Charlton Marshall

* *The sleepers sleep* is a line from Flanders & Swann's 'Slow Train'



This project is part funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development



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Visit Blandford Museum
We are in Beres Yard, Market Place.

Blandford
Railway Archives Trust

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