

An Illegal Beeching-Era Closure in Dorset*

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In 1956 the British Transport Commission (BTC) famously fell foul of the law when the courts ruled that the closure of the Lewes–East Grinstead railway was contrary to the line's original act: the BTC was forced to secure parliamentary approval before it could finally withdraw the passenger trains.¹ While these legal shenanigans were but a footnote to the more serious political manoeuvrings in the late 1950s over the railways' mounting deficit, they do serve as a reminder that the statutory closure procedures introduced by the 1947 Transport Act were not definitive. Indeed the messy division of responsibilities between the BTC, the Minister of Transport (MoT) and the consumer bodies established by the act – the Central Transport Consultative Committee (CTCC) and the regional Transport Users' Consultative Committees (TUCCs) – had left plenty of scope for objectors to seriously hinder cuts to the network by attempting to turn the committees' public hearings into full-blown legal tribunals.² As an essential prelude to Beeching's sweeping reforms, the 1962 Transport Act was in part intended to prevent such tactics: section 56(7) spelt out the British Railways Board's responsibility to publicise all proposed passenger closures while other provisions specified the minister's sole responsibility for deciding whether a closure should proceed and restricted the TUCC hearings to matters of individual 'hardship' that might follow withdrawal.³

This did not, of course, prevent controversy over subsequent proposals once the floodgates opened in the wake of the Beeching Report. Nevertheless despite the extensive and often critical commentary – not all of it very well-informed – on the Beeching-inspired closure programme up to the mid 1970s, I have not found any suggestion that a line was closed without having been put through the statutory process.⁴ This note argues that in the case of the withdrawal of passenger services between Broadstone and Hamworthy Junction in Dorset the process was not followed and that therefore the line's effective closure in May 1964 was, strictly speaking, illegal.

The route and its services

By the early 1960s this 3½-mile section of the original route from Southampton to Dorchester – Castleman's Corkscrew or Snake – was very much a backwater, although since it carried a weekday passenger service it fell squarely within the remit of the 1962 act. Opened as a single line in 1847 and then doubled in 1863, the route had lost its mainline status in 1893 when the LSWR opened the Holes Bay curve, the last link in the direct route from Brockenhurst through Bournemouth and Poole to Hamworthy Junction and beyond.⁵ Nevertheless before the First World War a handful of through passenger trains continued to run via the Old Road through Broadstone, Wimborne and on to Brockenhurst; since the gradients were less severe, goods traffic also tended to pass this way.⁶ In 1932 the volume of through traffic was so small that the Southern singled the Hamworthy Junction–Broadstone section; by January 1935 the advertised weekday passenger service was down to

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one train in each direction and the following year closure was apparently considered. The line survived, largely for diversions and goods and by summer 1939 only the up train was running.⁷ Passenger trains were now rare enough for special workings to be noticed occasionally by railway enthusiasts, although matters picked up a little in the 1950s as the line proved useful in the busy holiday season for bypassing Bournemouth; the concentration of Channel Islands boat trains on the ex-LSWR route also meant a little extra traffic, although not enough for specials to go unremarked.⁸ Crucially, in 1963 there was an advertised weekday down passenger train, the 3.17 am Salisbury to Weymouth, and an up train, the 6.35 am Weymouth to Brockenhurst: these called respectively at Broadstone, and Hamworthy Junction and Broadstone. In high summer, a daily (SuX) service between Salisbury and Weymouth used the route in both directions (calling at Broadstone), as did the non-stop SO Channel Islands boat train; Saturdays also saw two down and one up Waterloo–Swanage services. There were no regular trains from the Somerset and Dorset.⁹

The closure

The Beeching Report listed the three main sets of passenger services through Broadstone for closure along with the station and, not surprisingly given that all had been under investigation for some years, the Southern Region lost no time in issuing closure proposals in June and early July 1963. North of Broadstone these services ran over the Somerset and Dorset, the Salisbury & Dorset Junction and the Old Road via Wimborne.¹⁰ South of Broadstone (and as the proposals stated) these trains ran to and from Bournemouth (West or Central), using the line opened in 1872–74, although a handful terminated at Poole. Conspicuous (in retrospect) by its absence was any mention of services over the Hamworthy loop: indeed a map of the lines under consideration provided by the Southern Region to the TUCC and the MoT showed the route as unaffected.¹¹



Map 1: Extract from Southern Region closure proposal. Source: TNA MT124/777.

Although the Southern Region had prepared these three proposals separately the Salisbury and Old Road services were dealt with as one by the South Eastern Tucc and the MoT; the Somerset and Dorset was more complicated (it involved both the South Eastern and South Western Tuccs) and, as it proved, much more controversial and drawn out. The SE Tucc knew about the daily trains over the Hamworthy loop (it even had details of the loadings), and the Tucc/MoT were aware of the local importance of the summer-dated trains to the coast.¹² But public opposition, which in any case was not very marked, was never going to dissuade Ernest Marples from relieving what were by any reckoning heavy loss makers, and on 12 March 1964 the Southern Region gave public notice in accordance with the Minister's letter of consent of the withdrawal of 'all railway passenger services between Brockenhurst and Bournemouth via Ringwood and between Salisbury and Bournemouth via Fordingbridge'.¹³ Broadstone was to remain open for the time being since it was served by Somerset and Dorset trains and the Minister had yet to decide about this proposal.¹⁴ Closure was set for 4 May 1964.

There was however no mention of withdrawing trains over the Hamworthy loop. Of course the Southern Region had no intention of continuing to run passenger trains over the line: managers had made it clear from the start that any surviving long-distance holiday trains would be diverted. But what about the local trains? As the relevant files have not survived (at least at Kew) it is impossible to say how managers regarded these services. The high-summer trains from Salisbury were not due to start running for some weeks (they were included in that summer's public timetable), and if any consideration was given to the legality of withdrawing the two weekday services one can only assume that managers thought they were covered by the ministerial consent.¹⁵ It is also quite likely that they were simply overlooked until the last minute: on Tuesday 28 April 1964 – just four days before the last trains were due to run – the Southern Region issued a press release announcing that closure of the Bournemouth services would 'also affect some trains from other routes in the area that normally run over these lines'; among other changes the 3.17 am from Salisbury was withdrawn and the 6.35 am from Weymouth diverted to Bournemouth West.¹⁶ The last regular passenger trains thus ran over the Hamworthy loop on Saturday 2 May.

The withdrawal of these lightly used trains did not attract any local comment, at least in newspapers, and there was certainly no legal attempt to restore services. Nor was the MoT concerned, although civil servants had been worried enough about legalities to question whether the Minister had the power to defer closure of Broadstone station until a decision was taken about the Somerset and Dorset.¹⁷ But it is difficult to resist the conclusion that the Hamworthy loop's closure to passenger trains was strictly speaking illegal, particularly given that the stations at each end – Hamworthy Junction and Broadstone – remained open, the latter until 6 March 1966. The procedures required by the 1962 act had simply not been followed: no notice had been given of the proposed withdrawals and no ministerial consent given.¹⁸

The line existed in something of a limbo for the next two years. It was still shown in the working timetables as open to passenger-rated traffic until at least April 1966, although without any scheduled trains.¹⁹ It is just possible that excursions off the Somerset and Dorset used the line until that route closed in

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March 1966, although there is no record of this happening.²⁰ Not even this closure regularized the situation: the minister's letter of consent in September 1965 did not mention the Hamworthy loop, although Broadstone station was finally closed at the same time as the Somerset and Dorset under the authority of the Old Road procedure.²¹ Even the date of the Hamworthy loop's closure as a through route is not entirely clear: the line's historian suggests that the track was severed '[t]owards the end of April 1965' but was only taken out of use on 5 June 1966!²² Given the evidence of the working timetables and other authorities, the 1966 date seems more likely, although by then the only trains were local freight trips.²³ For such a lightly used railway one more surprise awaits: Terry Gourvish notes that it was the subject of a rare informal request to British Railways by the MoT (probably in 1966) to close a goods line in order to reduce the cost of highway construction.²⁴

Conclusion

The illegality of the withdrawal of passenger trains over the Broadstone–Hamworthy Junction route was obviously not as significant as with the Bluebell line: nothing happened. Yet the episode reminds us that even the apparently straightforward provisions of the 1962 Transport Act were not always properly followed, adding grist to the mill of the argument that Beeching-era railway managers made numerous errors in preparing closures.²⁵ Whitehall needs to be added to that charge sheet. And as Charles Loft has observed, the 'sad irony of the Beeching years is that having struggled with a [pre-1962] closure procedure that made mountains out of molehills, the government abandoned it just as it got to the mountains', denying adequate scrutiny of proposals 'that really did deserve the sort of in-depth analysis objectors called for.'²⁶ This was arguably true of the wider set of services of which the Hamworthy section was but a small part; and in any case a later generation of objectors, notably those to the Settle–Carlisle proposal in the 1980s, would become adept at using the provisions of the 1962 act, including mounting or threatening legal challenges when it was not strictly followed, to widen the terms of debate.²⁷ There is a huge quantity of material accessible at Kew about individual line closures, including the ministerial files to which Gourvish was refused access in the 1980s: who knows what else might be discovered if we look more thoroughly?²⁸

¹ T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways 1948–73: A Business History* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.210.

² Charles Loft, *Government, the Railways and the Modernization of Britain: Beeching's Last Trains* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp.21–4, 30–33, 63–5, 80–83; *Last Trains: Dr Beeching and the Death of Rural England* (Biteback Publishing, 2013), pp.37–73, 96–173.

³ Transport Act 1962, 10 & 11 Eliz. 2 c.46, s.56 (7–11) available online at legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/10-11/46/contents. Accessed 7 July 2015.

⁴ Gourvish (1986), pp.436–60; Loft (2006), pp.90–133; Loft (2013), pp.196–264; G. Freeman Allen, *British Rail After Beeching* (Ian Allan, 1966), pp.1–44; R.H.N. Hardy, *Beeching: Champion of the Railway?* (Ian Allan, 1989), pp.86–9; David Henshaw, *The Great Railway Conspiracy: The Fall and Rise of Britain's Railways since the 1950's* (A to B Books, 3rd edn, 2013), pp.126–97; Richard Faulkner and Chris Austin, *Holding the Line: How Britain's Railways Were Saved* (Oxford Publishing Company, 2012), pp.24–62; David N. Clough, *Dr Beeching's Remedy: A Cure for Century of the Railway's Ills* (Ian Allan, 2013), pp.136–56. Since this paper was first published in 2016, several authors have revealed details of other illegal closures.; notably Stephen G. Abbott, 'In the Wake of Madge Bessemer: A Review of Illegal Rail Closures', *Backtrack*, part 1, vol.35/1 (Jan. 2021): 26–31; and part 2, vol.35/3 (March 2021): 146–52.

⁵ The National Archives (TNA), MT6/27/60; R.A. Williams, *The London & South Western Railway, Vol. 2 Growth and Consolidation* (David & Charles, 1973), p.171.

⁶ LSWR, *Working Timetables of Passenger and Goods Trains* (1 Jun. to 30 Sep. 1909) (rep. Ian Allan, n.d.), pp.138–79; B.L. Jackson, *Castleman's Corkscrew including the Railways of Bournemouth & Associated Lines, Vol. 1 The Nineteenth Century* (Oakwood Press, 2007), p.215; Vol. 2 *The Twentieth Century and Beyond* (Oakwood Press, 2008), p.23.

⁷ 'Brockenhurst to Wareham via Wimborne', *Railway Magazine* vol. 72 (Apr. 1933): 290; 'Little Used Southern Lines', *Railway Magazine* vol. 73 (Aug. 1933): 142; Southern Railway, *Standard Time Tables* (6 Jan. 1935 UFN), pp.154–63, 167–9; *Summer Time Tables* (2 Jul. to 24 Sep. 1939), pp.324–38a; Jackson (2008), pp.68, 83–5.

⁸ E.g. *Railway Magazine*, vol. 78 (Apr. 1936): 307; vol. 98 (Dec. 1952): 850; D.W. Winkworth, 'Summer Saturdays at Broadstone', *British Railways Illustrated*, Vol. 2(1) (Oct.–Nov. 1992): 11–16.

⁹ Southern Region, *Passenger Services Timetable: Main Line and Suburban* (17 Jun. to 8 Sep. 1963), tables 34, 36; *Working Timetable of Passenger Trains* Section E. (17 Jun. 1963 UFN).

¹⁰ TNA, MT124/769; MT124/1196; *Western Gazette* (East Dorset edn) (14 Jun. 1963); TNA, MT124/775; MT124/777; *Bournemouth Evening Echo* (5 July 1963).

¹¹ TNA, MT124/775; MT124/777.

¹² TNA, MT124/777.

¹³ *Bournemouth Evening Echo* (12 Mar. 1963).

¹⁴ TNA, MT124/777.

¹⁵ Southern Region, *Passenger Services Timetable: Main Line and Suburban* (15 Jun. to 6 Sep. 1964), table 34.

¹⁶ Press release (28 Apr. 1964), TNA MT124 775.

¹⁷ TNA, MT124/775.

¹⁸ My thanks to Dr Simon Gibbs for guidance on the legal position.

¹⁹ Southern Region, *Working Time Table of Passenger Trains Main Lines* Section A (11 Jun. 1964 UFN; 14 Jun. 1965–4 Sep. 1966; 18 Apr.–11 Jun. 1967).

²⁰ I am grateful to Mike Arlett, the late Dr Peter Cattermole and Peter Russell for responding to my enquiries.

²¹ TNA, MT124/1196; MT124/775.

²² Jackson (2008), pp.160, 161.

²³ G.A. Pryer and A.V. Paul, *Track Layout Diagrams of the Southern Railway and B.R. (S.R.)* Section S.1. *Bournemouth and East Dorset* (R.A. Cooke, 1980), S1/8, S1/9. The 1975 appendix to R. H. Clark, *A Southern Region Chronology and Record 1803-1965* (Oakwood Press, 1964), covering the decade from 1964, is silent.

²⁴ Gourvish (1986), p.433. The text implies that this was in 1969, but the references suggest early 1966.

²⁵ E.g. Gourvish (1986), pp.436-8.

²⁶ Loft (2013), p.288.

²⁷ James Towler, *The Battle for the Settle & Carlisle* (Platform 5 Publishing, 1990).

²⁸ Gourvish (1986), p. 438. Loft (2006, 2013) has made an excellent start. See also note 4.