

'The puffing billy of the hedgerows'

Colin Divall examines S&D Dorset halts closures, 1955-56

"The puffing billy of the hedgerows may one day achieve the romantic aura of the stage coach. Accountants today hold that each are equally an anachronism."
Bournemouth Daily Echo
(23rd March 1956)

Although by the mid-1950s BR's Western and Southern Regions were scrutinising S&D finances and the 'twigs' to Wells and Bridgwater had closed completely, the 'main line' passenger service ran much as it had done for years.¹ Local trains stopping at wayside stations and halts still offered the small towns and rural communities useful, sometimes essential links with the wider world – connections into long-distance trains for the occasional journey to the city, a fortnight's holiday by the sea or farther afield; the weekly trip to town for shopping, cinema or football; daily trips to work, college or school; and not forgetting the mail, parcels and perishable foodstuffs, like fish, that still sometimes came by train.

Casing Charlton

With publication in January 1955 of BR's optimistic Modernisation Plan, some country folk perhaps thought they would soon be riding over the S&D in

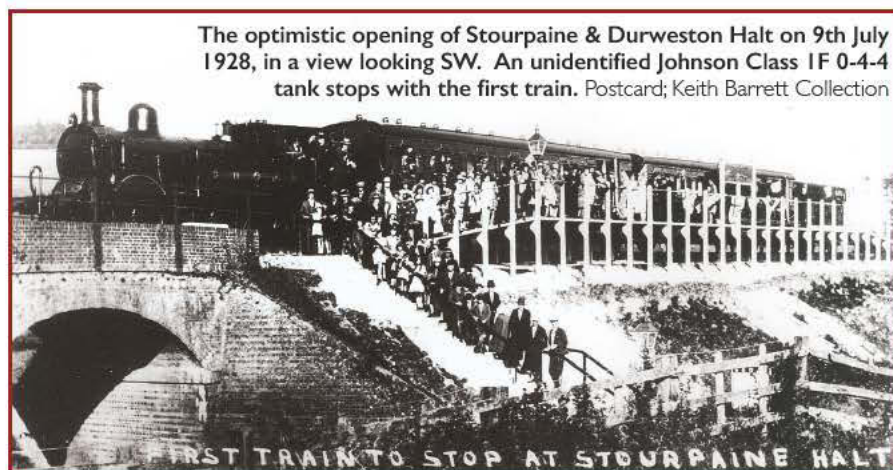
new, smarter, quicker and cleaner diesel units.² But in March 1956 the *Echo* sketched a darker future, as 'Richmond' took readers on a trip from Bournemouth West to the recently threatened halt at Charlton Marshall.³

Contrasting the expresses that 'thunder from one great town to another, along the great railroad arteries... holding the country together' with the local trains of 'what remains of rural England... losing money', 'Richmond' painted a frank, if sympathetic, picture of the run-down rural railway that was the S&D. Against the attentiveness of staff and the advantage of 'personal service' on the 'leisurely' journey were the poor state of the sparse facilities at wayside

Top The end is nigh, or has it passed? Stourpaine & Durweston Halt looking eastwards on 28th December 1965. The halt is intact and might even appear to be in use, but this was nine years after it closed and little more than two months before the S&D itself closed. BR Standard Class 4MT 2-6-4 tank No.80037 passes with an Up train.

Unknown; Keith Barrett Collection

stops and the worn-out rolling stock – part of a window frame dropped onto the platform at Poole, while at Broadstone a group of schoolboys had to call for help to open the carriage door! Alighting at Charlton Marshall, 'Richmond' found the halt and village deserted, the only sound



The optimistic opening of Stourpaine & Durweston Halt on 9th July 1928, in a view looking SW. An unidentified Johnson Class 1F 0-4-4 tank stops with the first train. Postcard; Keith Barrett Collection

A NEW S. AND D.J. HALT



CHARLTON MARSHALL HALT

is on a double line of railway, between Blandford and Spetisbury, and was opened on July 9, 1928. It serves a village with a population of 500 and is well patronised

that of rooks in the elms, all the cottage doors closed. Perhaps everyone had left for town, for the 'cheap and easy' train had 'robbed rural England of its isolation' nearly a century earlier while – this echoing the train's guard – a 'convenient network of buses... now links up the countryside'.

Not surprisingly, even among railway staff, "all the time there was an air of surprise that anyone should want to travel by rail to Charlton Marshall." Acknowledging the 'bloodless revolution' of the withdrawal of 'small trains', 'Richmond' thought that local opposition might delay matters but that the disappearance of the village halt 'is looked upon as inevitable'.

The other halts

The article noted the likely demise of two other Dorset halts – at Stourpaine & Durweston and Spetisbury, but not for some reason Corfe Mullen, also on a hit list BR had given the local councils in January. Was the latter's one-train-a-day service in each direction so sparse that 'Richmond' assumed it had already closed?

Dispensing with these four unstaffed, lightly-used halts must have looked an easy cut to the BR(SR) managers struggling to make the deep financial savings demanded by the British Transport Commission (BTC). Opened in 1928 – apart from Spetisbury, an 1860 station reduced to a halt in 1934 – the stops had been conceived as competition for the bus network, which since the early 1920s had rapidly spread out into the Dorset countryside from Poole and Bournemouth. Spetisbury and Charlton Marshall were at least fairly conveniently located for their communities of respectively 300 and 200 people, the others rather less so, but it is arguable that such wayside stops were obsolescent from the start: 1928 was also the year in which the Big Four finally got parliamentary approval to get involved in



Charlton Marshall Halt: the optimism and the reality. **Left** A newspaper clipping of the 1928 opening claims good patronage. **Above** The halt lingers on with all facilities apparently intact in December 1965, some nine years after closure. Clayesmore Preparatory School boarding pupils had continued to arrive and depart on special trains into the early 1960s. BR Standard Class 5 4-6-0 No.73068 passes with a Down service. Unknown; Keith Barrett Collection

buses and the Southern had quickly and shrewdly invested in several companies. In November 1929 the board authorised a substantial stake in the enterprising local operator Hants & Dorset, which had been running to Blandford for several years.⁴ Nevertheless the halts survived to be nationalised and, thanks to the SR's management files held at The National Archives, we can get a sense of their niche in the rural transport network of mid-1950s Dorset until their more or less inevitable closure on 17th September 1956.⁵

Southern Region's case

'Richmond's pessimism was echoed by stark figures contained in the SR's internal report of December 1955 on the halts' financial performance. By the mid-1950s the region's Branch Line

Committee, established shortly after nationalisation, had built up considerable expertise in costing individual stations and halts along with other elements of passenger and freight services.⁶ Its findings were not beyond criticism – not least because, as was appreciated at the time, allocating costs shared between different groups of services was always to some degree a matter of choice.⁷ But equally, the Committee's increasingly forensic approach meant that it could easily spot financially hopeless cases: where savings on directly attributable costs outweighed the likely loss of revenue. The Dorset halts fell squarely into this category although, even allowing for the very different value of money, the sums involved were small by comparison with the S&D's deficit, estimated in 1955 at over £215,000.⁸ In

Table 1 Actual (A, B, C) and estimated post-closure (D, E) receipts in £

	A Forwarded	B Received	C Total	D Estimated lost	E Estimated retained
Stourpaine & Durweston	39	16	55	27	28
Charlton Marshall	95	5	100	50	50
Spetisbury	89	36	125	65	60
Corfe Mullen	13	2	15	10	5
Total	236	59	295	152	143

Table 2 Estimated costs in £

	Civil engineering	Operating	Total
Stourpaine & Durweston	7	242	249
Charlton Marshall	9	394	403
Spetisbury	33	379	412
Corfe Mullen	6	91	97
Total	55	1106	1161

Note: Engineering costs include daily and periodic maintenance but not renewals or interest charges. Source: derived from 'SR Branch Line Committee...Stourpaine & Durweston Halt; Charlton Marshall Halt; Spetisbury Halt; Corfe Mullen Halt' (Dec. 1955), in TNA AN177/59.

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any case the Committee's report, based partly upon a passenger survey (there was no parcels nor goods service) in May 1955, estimated that just over £1,000 annually would be saved if all four halts closed, the greater part from not having to stop and start trains. Tables 1 and 2 give the breakdown.

While some of these statistics might be questioned, particularly estimates of retained revenue, even on the most charitable interpretation the halts were clearly losing money. Even assuming that no fares would be kept – because all passengers transferred to buses, decided to drive or perhaps stopped travelling entirely – the (estimated) annual savings would still have amounted to £866. To make any dent in this figure, one would have to show that the true operating estimates were different by around an order of magnitude, which does not seem likely. On the contrary, while it is not clear how the costs were derived here, by 1955 the SR's managers were trying to tailor estimates to particular circumstances rather than accepting the BTC's nationally derived averages.⁹ On balance it seems likely that the Dorset figures were reasonable approximations to the actual – but of course in practical terms variable (for instance, a driver might brake more harshly or accelerate more slowly) – costs.

Improvements rejected

Other possibilities could have been weighed in the (financial) balance. Obviously, a loss-making facility might be made profitable by cutting costs, increasing revenue, or some combination of the two. As was usually the case with rural railways in the 1950s, costs were far more significant than revenue: nearly four times as high.¹⁰ But since there were no staff and facilities at each halt were rudimentary, rationalisation would save very little money. Replacement-cum-automation would have saved the cost of sending someone from Blandford to operate platform lighting. But would it really have been worth the investment? On the other hand the SR's soon-to-be-delivered Hampshire diesel units would have reduced operating costs and probably lifted revenue, particularly if the



timetable had been radically overhauled.

We can only speculate about the outcome, but later experience on similar services elsewhere on the region, such as Andover-Romsey-Southampton/Portsmouth, suggests it is unlikely that the account would have moved into the black.¹¹ In any case, while the failure to experiment along these lines was to become a bone of contention when the S&D was put up for closure in 1963, I have found no evidence that in 1955-56 anyone suggested that diesels might save the halts – although Charlton Marshall Parish Council *did* ask for improvements to the train service.¹²

By early January 1956, C. P. Hopkins, the SR's general manager, and his senior operating, commercial and civil-engineering colleagues had agreed in principle to closure; the halts' 'extremely small' patronage, the existence of alternative bus services, and the lack of any prospect of local housing or other development made this virtually a foregone conclusion. However the process still had some way to go. Although under the 1947 Transport Act the BTC and railway managers had a great deal of discretion over the closure of stations and halts, in practice local authorities were always consulted first and, depending on the strength of local feeling, there was always the possibility that the statutory South Eastern

Above A well-known view of Spetisbury Station, looking NW circa the late 1890s, at the start of doubling of the line. The halt had station status from 1860 until 1934 and was conveniently situated for the village, except for a steep climb of the station approach or the long flight of steps on the Up side. A Down slow train (dep. Bath 7 a.m.) is about to call at 10.25 a.m., headed by a Vulcan 0-4-4 tank. Unknown; Keith Barrett Collection

Below right A comparable view of Spetisbury Halt, looking NW on 22nd August 1962, six years after closure. BR Standard Class 3MT 2-6-2 tank No. 82002 passes with the 3.35 p.m. Templecombe to Bailey Gate service. Buildings on both platforms had been mostly demolished prior to the halt's closure. H. B. Priestley; Keith Barrett Collection

Transport Users' Consultative Committee (SE TUCC) would get involved.¹³ In the early and mid-1950s, this body – upon which the SR sat – had been an important player in the sometimes sharp debates over the region's branch line policy, notably on the Isle of Wight, and hence its stance was of the first importance.¹⁴

Consultation - or not?

The key to keeping the TUCC at arm's length was the local authorities' attitude. It is not clear from the file whether the councils knew about the threat to the halts before being formally told in January 1956, although on balance it seems likely. Dorset County Council (DCC) was the most important authority – indeed a major objector to closure in 1963 – followed by Blandford Borough, Blandford Rural District, and Wimborne & Cranborne Rural District

“...even on the most charitable interpretation, the halts were clearly losing money.”

Councils. Corfe Mullen Halt fell within the boundaries of the last named; the others were part of Blandford RDC. The five parish councils (Stourpaine and Durweston were separate authorities) were also informed.

Unfortunately the Kew file only records the bare facts of the councils' responses, but the critical fact is that they were divided.¹⁵ Indeed DCC, Blandford BC and Wimborne & Cranborne RDC did not bother to reply at all. Blandford RDC merely supported objections raised by the parish councils in Stourpaine (Durweston did not bother) and Charlton Marshall; while Spetisbury Parish Council's objection apparently did not command the RDC's support. While, as already noted, councillors in Charlton Marshall wanted a better service, the other objections were based mainly on the inconvenience to the minimal number of existing passengers. Indeed, Corfe Mullen Parish Council could not be bothered to object to the withdrawal of the halt's paltry service – although ironically in May 1955, this was the only stop with a season-ticket holder.

Given the indifference of the most important local authority and the, at best, weak opposition from the others, it is scarcely surprising that in July David McKenna (to be SR's general manager when the S&D closed), acting on Hopkins' behalf, agreed with W. H. F. Mepsted, SR's chief commercial manager, that reference to the SE TUCC

was unnecessary. As a note, handwritten prominently in red on the memo, opined, the TUCCs should only be troubled with cases "which are important, are doubtful, or are liable to cause public protest." Hopkins and his colleagues were doubtless encouraged in their view that public protest would be muted by the resigned tone of the *Echo* article, pasted into the file. In any case it was decided to inform the objecting councils of the halts' impending closure and let them approach the TUCC if they wished. There is no evidence that any did; nor that the TUCC – which must informally have known about the SR's intentions – was at all interested in becoming involved. As far as officialdom and the local authorities were concerned, the halts' fate was sealed; on 23rd July Hopkins approved closure from the start of the winter timetable.

Personal journeys

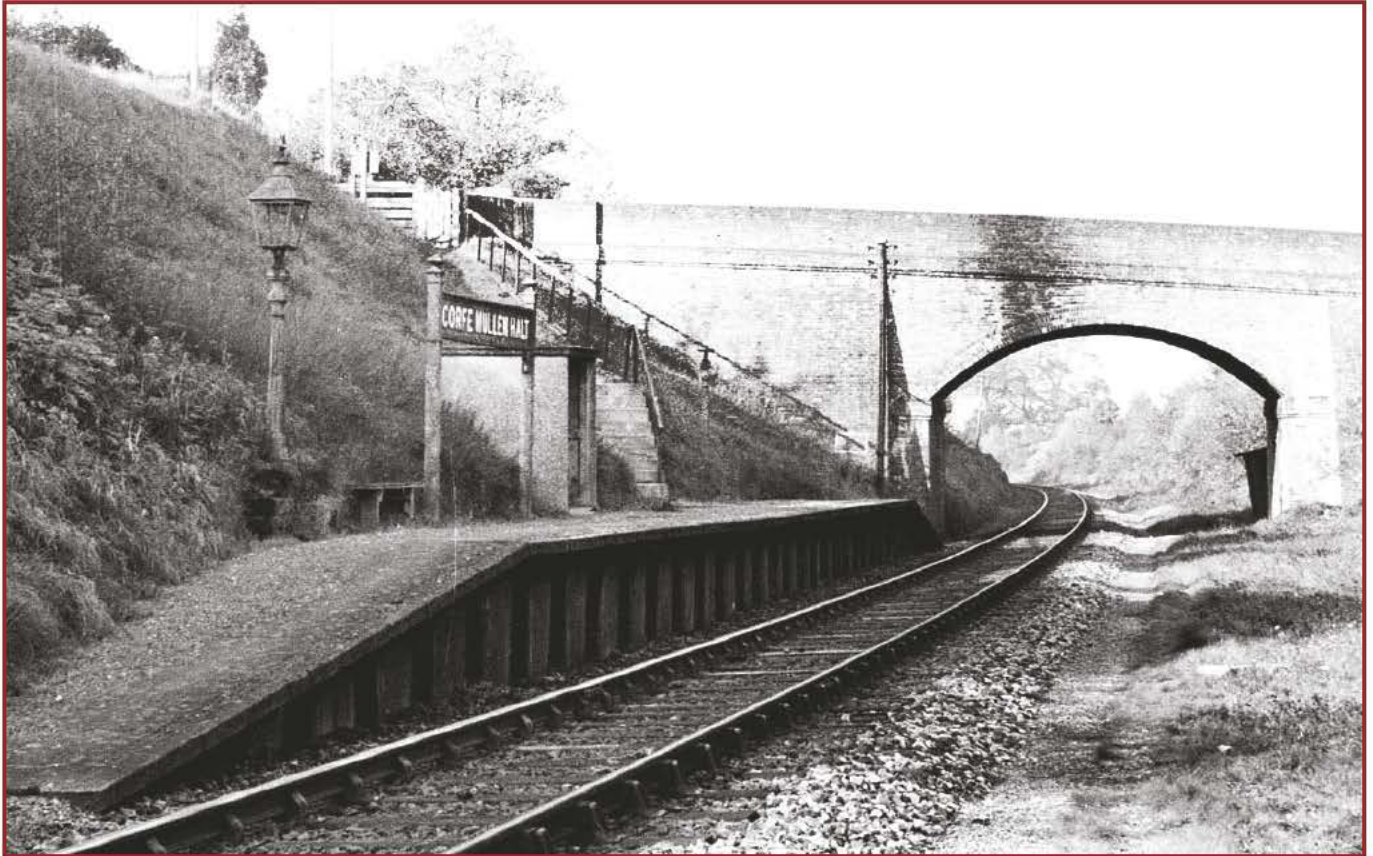
The downside of not involving the TUCC was that for the most part neither existing nor prospective passengers had the opportunity to voice concerns until it was too late. The SR had astutely anticipated one possible set of objections, from schools in Corfe Mullen and Charlton Marshall; in particular the private preparatory school (Clayesmore) in the latter village generated heavy traffic at each end of the term. By July 1956 the head teachers had been assured that school parties would continue to be catered for, as indeed they were for some

years. [*As late as the early 1960s with boarders coming typically from London. Ed.*] But other users were largely left in the cold. They were admittedly very few: the SR's traffic survey (May 1955) had suggested on average no more than one a day embarking and one a day alighting at each of the halts except for Charlton Marshall, which managed two in each case! The Blandford station master, A. Powis, interviewed for the *Echo* article, broadly agreed; he said there were solitary season-ticket holders at both Stourpaine and Charlton Marshall, with only another couple of users a day, rising to three or four at weekends (Corfe Mullen was not his responsibility). Many, perhaps most, of these were travellers to and from Blandford, Poole or Bournemouth, but others in May 1955 came from farther away, both on the S&D (Wincanton) and off it (Waterloo, Farnborough and Southampton).

The Kew file gives no further insights into the kind of journeys made using the halts nor the likely consequences of closure, with one exception. By July 1956, Master Peter Bryant, then aged eight, caught the train daily from Sturminster Newton to attend the prep school at Charlton Marshall. Because he travelled on a scholar's season ticket – by then the only season being issued – his trip was noted by Mepsted in the run-up to the closure decision. Although BR was not legally responsible for school transport – that was the local education authority's



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duty – as a rule managers did consider the effects of proposed closures. In Master Bryant's case however, Mepsted understandably felt that no action was appropriate: Peter was the only pupil affected and, perhaps more significantly, since the boy attended a private school, transport was the parents' responsibility.

Bustitution?

The problem was that in the morning the long-established Hants & Dorset bus for Charlton Marshall and points south left Blandford just four minutes after the Sturminster Newton train arrived a good ½-mile from the bus stop – not enough time to connect. (In the afternoon the gap was eight minutes, which was thought sufficient.) It is not clear whether Peter's parents took any immediate action when closure was announced, but the day after it took effect and again three days later a presumably irate Mrs Bryant was on the phone to W. H. Scutt, the District Traffic Superintendent at Southampton; her complaint escalated rapidly once her husband phoned the local Conservative MP, Robert Crouch, five days later. Mr Bryant was a small businessman – he ran a hairdressers and a tobacconist in Sturminster as well as the local taxi – and presumably thought that pointing out he was 'trying hard' to educate his children

at 'no cost to the Country' would play well with the Tory MP. For good measure, Mr Bryant also contrasted the cost, time and potentially lost business he suffered in driving Peter to Durweston Bridge daily (presumably for a service bus along the A350) with the fact that another bus was diverted 'several miles' to collect one child for the local school.

Since Mr Bryant acknowledged that the halts lost money I can only assume that he thought that in return for keeping his two children out of state schools, the state – British Railways – should subsidise Peter's travel by stopping two trains a day for his sole use! Of course this did not happen, although once the MP had raised the matter with the BTC's chairman, Sir Brian Robertson, the SR did approach Hants & Dorset – still under BTC control – about altering the morning bus times to give a connection. The company refused, arguing that its timings were long established and that there were 'important reasons' for not altering them.

Hard cases make for bad policy, and given the political pressure on the BTC and the SR in the mid-1950s to cut losses/, the closure of the Dorset halts to daily traffic was practically inevitable – even though any savings could have made no real difference to the S&D's financial viability. Indeed, as far as

Top Corfe Mullen Halt, looking westwards, probably in the 1950s, when either still in use with all facilities or just after closure. The surrounding settlement was called East End, Corfe Mullen's old village being over a mile away near the junction. Note the formation and bridge intended for double track; also the rudimentary shelter, the concrete panels for which seem evident in the earlier picture, and the steps leading down from Wimborne Road.

Unknown; Keith Barrett Collection

Below Despite its poor quality, this is included as a rare view of Corfe Mullen Halt in its early days, looking westwards – possibly even during construction in 1928, judging by the freshness of the installation and the materials lying around. An unidentified LMS Class 4F 0-6-0 heads towards Bournemouth with a lengthy train, probably not stopping here.

Unknown; Priest's House Museum, Wimborne



“Did the closure have more to do with the SR ridding itself of operating inconveniences?”

infrastructure was concerned, the SR's own post-closure estimates suggested that maintenance savings were not even half that originally envisaged (£24 against £54 annually), a sum that would take eight years to pay back the cost of recovering redundant equipment. It is also possible that the savings to be had from not stopping trains were smaller than managers assumed: there is anecdotal evidence that the halts were sometimes treated as request stops. Thus although there is no hard evidence in the file, it is plausible that closure had more to do with the SR ridding itself of operating inconveniences and, perhaps more importantly, being seen by the BTC to be doing *something* about the S&D's unsustainable financial position.

Dorset halts today

Political-cum-business factors continue to shape the fate of minor stations, although these days in the opposite way to the 1950s. Take for instance two request stops still open farther west in Dorset – Chetnole and Thornford. While by no means the most lightly used in the UK, in 2015-16 the estimated annual usage (entrance and exists combined) of these halts between Dorchester and Weymouth was 1,946 and 2,874 respectively.¹⁶ While Thornford comes out at an almost

respectable average of nearly eight entrances/exits a day, Chetnole manages just over five – a little higher than on the S&D in the 1950s, but then there are more trains and these days people have a much higher propensity to travel. The halts probably survive because their operating costs are unknown, and while they almost certainly lose money, the sums involved must be trivial in terms of the finances of the Great Western franchise in which they are submerged. And while closure would marginally speed up services for the vast majority travelling between Bristol, Bath and Dorset, it would be unlikely to do so enough to make it worth the political stink local objectors would doubtless cause. Yet cutting journey times by axing lightly used halts and stations was just the sort of policy advocated by those trying to save the S&D in the early 1960s!¹⁷

On the whole, the accountants of the mid-1950s who judged the ‘puffing billy of the hedgerows’ as anachronistic as the stage coach were right – but closing the S&D's four Dorset halts was merely fiddling at the edge of the real problem of how to provide public transport to rural communities at a price the nation was – and is – prepared to pay. ●



Corfe Mullen Halt, looking eastwards, July 1969, by which time it had been closed for 13 years, the platform almost reclaimed by vegetation, and remaining goods traffic on this southern stub of the S&D had ceased. Demolition trains would move in a few months later. Lamb's Green Lane Bridge (Br.236) is in the background. Peter Russell

Notes

- 1 Letter (16 March 1955), C.H. Loft (Senior Traffic Costing Officer, BTC) to C.P. Hopkins (General Manager, SR), in ‘Branch Line Closures’ (note 1 above).
- 2 T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways 1948-73: A Business History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), pp.256-304 esp. 258, 282.
- 3 *Bournemouth Daily Echo* (23 Mar. 1956).
- 4 Reg Davies, ‘Public passenger transport in inter-war Britain: the Southern Railway's response to bus competition, 1923-39’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of York, 2014). Available at etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/8905/ (accessed 12th Dec. 2016).
- 5 Unless otherwise noted, what follows is based on Chief Regional Office, Southern Region, ‘Review of Economic Circumstances at Individual Stations: Stourpaine and Durweston Halt, Charlton Marshall Halt, Spetisbury Halt and Corfe Mullen Halt’, TNA AN177/59.
- 6 See e.g. BR (SR), ‘Branch Line Closure Policy’ (1942-51), TNA AN177/2; and ‘Closing of Branch Lines: General’ (1951-53), TNA AN177/3.
- 7 C. Loft, *Last Trains: Dr Beeching and the Death of Rural England* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2013).
- 8 Memorandum, ‘Closing of Branch Lines’ (23rd Feb. 1955), in ‘Branch Line Closures’ (note 1 above).
- 9 Letter (16 March 1955), C.H. Loft (Senior Traffic Costing Officer, BTC) to C.P. Hopkins (General Manager, SR), in ‘Branch Line Closures’ (note 1 above).
- 10 David St John Thomas, *The Rural Transport Problem* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), pp.21-35.
- 11 BR (SR), ‘Withdrawal of Unremunerative Services:... Romsey-Stockbridge-Andover Line’, TNA MT124/776.
- 12 Branch Line Reinvigoration Society, *Unprofitable Lines? A Financial Study of Certain Railway Passenger Services in Somerset, Dorset and Hampshire* (London: BLRS, 1963), pp.5-13.
- 13 The SE TUCC covered the whole of Dorset – perhaps to the surprise of those who thought of the county as more part of the south-west. Responsibility for the S&D as a whole was divided since Somerset fell under the South Western TUCC. This would prove significant in the drawn-out closure process of 1963-65.
- 14 Loft, *Last Trains* (note 7 above).
- 15 Any surviving records of the individual councils might provide more detail.
- 16 orr.gov.uk/statistics/published-stats/station-usage-estimates (accessed 27th December 2016).
- 17 E.g. BLRS, *Unprofitable Lines* (note 12 above).

Colin Divall is Emeritus Professor of Railway Studies at York University, grew up around Wimborne, has retired to Bridport, and has been presenting talks to local groups about his research on the closure procedures affecting the S&D and other lines in Wessex. He has kindly offered this case study for T50, and may be publishing other findings in academic journals. Ed.