

The *Illustrated London News* engraving

Colin Divall

Part of a full-page article marking the Southampton & Dorchester's partial opening on 1st June 1847, this well-known engraving is the earliest image of Wimborne station:



What can it tell us about the railway's earliest years around Wimborne? The *Illustrated London News* (ILN) was first published just five years earlier, the world's first illustrated weekly. It was broadly conservative in outlook, and often included features on railways and other technological achievements among its eclectic spread of news from around the world. It was popular, at least among the middle class who could afford 6d (2½p – around £3 now) a week, each edition selling tens of thousands in the 1840s.¹

This context is vital to understanding the engraving's strengths and limitations. Some people point out that the image is distorted – particularly vertically. We cannot rule out the possibility that the engraver simply misinterpreted the preparatory sketches. But this kind of 'distortion' was quite common in the ILN. Just as, say, today's estate agents use wide-angle lenses to flatter the properties they're selling, so the ILN played with perspective to encourage its readers to 'see' railways in a particular way. Railways were in many ways both an opportunity and a threat to the mid-19th century establishment and

¹ britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/illustrated-london-news;
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Illustrated_London_News (both accessed 9 Mar. 2022).

the burgeoning middle orders. By picturing railways in certain ways, the ILN could laud the opportunities they opened up while at the same time suggesting these would not overthrow the existing social and political order.

Dr Jill Murdoch, an expert on the depiction of Victorian railways, describes the engraving as “a fabulous picture. Classic and charming.” It uses several of the ILN’s common visual tropes. Emphasizing the height of the buildings, embankment and viaduct impressed upon readers the engineers and navvies’ tremendous achievements – and by implication, the power of the landowners, industrialists and bankers who financed and controlled the Southampton & Dorchester.

On the other hand, the railway’s arrival was not allowed to overwhelm the natural or, again by implication, social order. The railway slots quietly into the scene. As Dr Murdoch says, all the “ingredients of making it fit discreetly into the landscape are there: the lazy peasants and the cattle undisturbed, no-one even looking at the passing train (in this, an illustration of effectively the first train ever along the line!). The smoke is very definite, which I think does deliberately anchor the train into the landscape, but it echoes the line of the trees on the distant hill and tails off towards the clouds.” All in all: “It’s a calm and peaceful pic with no apparent triumphalism. The station appears to be in a lovely snug position.”

Which indeed it was, built on riverside fields an unthreatening three-quarters of mile from the town centre of Wimborne and its historic Minster. Moreover the train’s curious depiction fits this story of the railway slotting in to the existing social and political order. In terms of conventional perspective, either the viaduct must have been fifty feet or more high (it was “about twenty-seven feet”, according to the ILN), or the top of the locomotive’s chimney an implausible seven feet or lower above the rails. In short, these two elements of the scene had been ‘distorted’ in contrasting ways; the engine and its four coaches are ‘too small’ for the viaduct, and indeed in relation to the station buildings, while the viaduct is, like those buildings, too tall.

Why? Again we can’t dismiss the possibility that the engraver misinterpreted the artist’s sketches, or was careless in maintaining a consistent perspective. But that’s unlikely, as the ILN quite often used multiple perspectives to create superficially naturalistic scenes – we’re not talking here about Picasso-style images! – in which the contrasting elements subtly conveyed important cultural-cum-political meanings. The size of a locomotive in relation to infrastructure, like bridges, or the landscape varied in 19th-century pictures depending on the message(s) the artist wanted to get across. Jill Murdoch suggests that here the reduced scale of the engine and train was perhaps intended to downplay the shock of change coming – as literally did the train – from outside the county. You might have another interpretation!

Seeing 'against the grain'....

Even though the engraving wasn't meant to be a straightforward picture, we can still draw some conclusions about Wimborne's earliest facilities. First let's 'correct' some of the vertical perspectives in and around the main buildings:



Now we can look in more detail at some of the station's features:

Station house and booking hall Passengers almost certainly bought ('booked') their tickets in a hall accessed through the front door, set in a porch. Note the oriel (suspended bay) window above, perhaps a good vantage point for the station agent (or master) to keep an eye on things. By 1864 this elevation was mostly hidden by a two-storey, flat-roofed extension which lasted until the station closed to passengers a century later.



Wimborne's booking hall extension in 1982, shortly before demolition. The small vertical window seen in the engraving can just be made out 135 years later. Photo: C. Divall.

Behind and at a right-angle to the booking hall was the station agent's house, built, like the booking hall, in a neo-Tudor style in red brick with yellow brick dressings at the corners. As the station agent was an important figure, responsible for both representing the railway and managing most of the workforce in the area, he (and it would have been a man) had to live at, or near, the station.

How do we know this? Philip Brown has shown that William Moorsom, the Southampton and Dorchester's engineer, used a small number of standard, neo-Tudor designs for station buildings. The company's minute book tells us Wimborne was a '1st class' station. So too was Christchurch Road (later Holmsley) in the New Forest, the station for Christchurch. Once the direct line to Bournemouth opened in 1888, Holmsley became little more than a wayside halt and its buildings hardly changed. They survive as part of the Old Station Tea Rooms Holmsley <stationhouseholmsley.com/>. There are very striking similarities between the ILN engraving, these surviving buildings, and older photographs of Holmsley.



Seen here in 2015, the entrance porch with the booking hall beyond survives at Holmsley, although the oriel window has gone. Render obscures the original brickwork. Photo: C. Dival.



The oriel window at Holmsley was still present in 1963. The decorative brickwork at the corners is also evident. Photo: M. Bailey.

The original building at Wareham, also a 1st class station and demolished in the 1970s, was very similar to Holmsley.

The extension at Wimborne is shown on a LSWR plan, dated November 1864 and probably surveyed earlier that year. The new building might have been finished in time for the opening of the Dorset Central Railway in 1860.

The ILN's report tells us about the original building materials, confirmed by later photographs – and memories! However the engraver has over-emphasised the brickwork at the corners, making it look more like stone.

Carriage shed This structure was almost certainly a carriage shed, probably housing the LSWR's stock, or perhaps used to berth the privately owned vehicles of local landowners such as the industrialist Sir John Guest at Canford Manor.

How do we know this? The railway's 'terrier' (land-ownership map), which probably dates from shortly after the line's opening, shows a structure in this position. A LSWR committee minute from February 1848 mentions a carriage shed at some distance from the goods warehouse, but it's possible the former was built after the station opened as another minute dated July 1847 authorized the construction of carriage sheds at certain unspecified stations the Dorchester line.

Coke shed This has often been described as a shelter for passengers on the 'down' (Dorchester-bound) platform. It does bear some resemblance to the open-fronted shelters at Wareham and Wool probably dating from around the line's opening and surviving long enough to be photographed. On the other hand, this structure seems too low – even allowing for the ILN's idiosyncratic perspective – and arguably too far back for this to be convincing. Moreover there is no other evidence that Wimborne had any waiting rooms on the down side until the 1870s.

This is more likely to be a coke shed. All railway engines burnt coke, a smokeless fuel, rather than coal in the 1840s. Unlike coal, coke had to be kept dry if it was to burn well, and so it was stored under cover. Engines usually had to be refuelled more frequently than coal-burning engines later would, so Wimborne, along with many other stations on the Southampton and Dorchester, had a coke shed from the start.

How do we know this? The Southampton & Dorchester's minute book tells us which stations had coke stores, while the LSWR's committee books narrates how coke would be made and supplied. Information on waiting accommodation at Wimborne also comes chiefly from these sources.

Embankment The station was built on an embankment so that the gradient up towards Poole wasn't too steep for the small locomotives of the 1840s. This meant the River Stour had to be bridged by the timber viaduct partly shown in the engraving – at around 27 feet above the water, this was higher than most other bridges on the line. The embankment also allowed the railway to go over the Ringwood turnpike at the north end of the station. The earthworks might have made use of spoil from the deep cutting at Merley, itself dug to lessen the gradient. The embankment had to be considerably widened later in the 19th century to fit in extra tracks and buildings as the railway got busier.

How do we know this? The railway's promoters had to deposit plans and sections with local officials as part of process of gaining a parliamentary act to set up a company. These show the proposed gradients around Wimborne, and the crossings of both the river and the turnpike. However later railway diagrams and the surviving earthworks tell us that the railway wasn't built exactly to the original plans. The height of the viaduct is given in the ILN's report. Drawings of the first bridge over the turnpike have survived. Later plans, maps and railway committee books tell us about extensions at the station.

Goods shed This is Wimborne's first shed, or warehouse, for valuable, perishable or fragile goods which couldn't be handled outside. Because the shed was at an angle to the main tracks railway wagons would have been moved by shunting horses, or possibly men, via a small turntable probably located on a siding alongside the running line. Access for road vehicles is more of a puzzle. The drawing suggests the building might have been two-storey, with rails at the upper level. Cranes would have been used to move goods to and from horse-drawn wagons at ground level. But this all seems unlikely given the embankment's height and other ground levels at that end of the station. It's more likely the shed was single-storey, with road vehicles gaining access via a ramp.

How do we know this? The company's minutes confirm a 'warehouse' was built at Wimborne, although it is not clear whether the shed was fully operational when the line opened. The company's 'terrier' (land-ownership maps), which probably dates from the line's opening or shortly thereafter, show a structure located roughly in the same position as that depicted here. So too does the LSWR's plan of the station dated November 1864. This plan also suggests that a ramp for road access ran up one side of the warehouse.

The original, single-storey goods shed at Wareham survives. Although modified over its long life, it is still similar to that in the engraving, apart from the difference in height. The same is true of photographs of the 1847 warehouses at Ringwood and Dorchester, both of which lasted well into the 20th century.



Wareham good shed in 1972. Photograph: G. Bowring

Signal This is the 'station signal', almost certainly the only signal on the site. Its height allowed drivers to see it from a distance, a particular challenge at Wimborne as the station was on a tight (30 chain) curve. The design was commonly used by the LSWR in the 1840s and 1850s. The large disc at the top – usually five feet in diameter – was pivoted at its centre and could be revolved by an operator – then called a policeman – from the base using a system of handles, wires and pulleys. There were three positions: the solid, red-coloured semi-circle could be to the left, as depicted here; to the right; or across the top.

When the red section was vertical, approaching drivers knew that the track on that side was blocked and the other side clear; red horizontally across the top meant both lines were blocked. It was also possible to rotate on its vertical axis the post on which the disc was mounted – when the disc was edge-on to drivers, they knew that both tracks were clear. Trains would wait outside the station until the driver got a clear indication.

At night oil lamps took over the disc's function – they were mounted on a separate post nearby. This can just be made out in the engraving, which is a remarkably good sketch of this kind of signal. Whether by accident, observation or prior knowledge, the engraver has shown the disc in the correct position for the departing train – it would almost certainly have taken the left-hand of the two tracks in the station when it came off the single line from the Ringwood direction.

When it opened Wimborne probably needed two 'policeman' to operate the signal and points at any one time.

How do we know this? Gordon Roberts has researched the design and operation of these early disc signals. Our associate Graham Bowring is working on a wider history of LSWR signalling, including the early days at Wimborne. A list appended to the Board of Trade's inspection report gives the number of 'proposed staff' at each station.

Waiting room No-one seems to have taken much notice of this structure, poking out from behind the main station building. Perhaps this is because nothing like it seems to have survived into the photographic era, either at Wimborne or elsewhere. It is probably a waiting room, accommodating passengers and their luggage until their train arrived. There was no subway at Wimborne until 1870, so passengers heading towards Poole and Dorchester would have crossed the tracks on foot: one waiting room almost certainly served both directions.

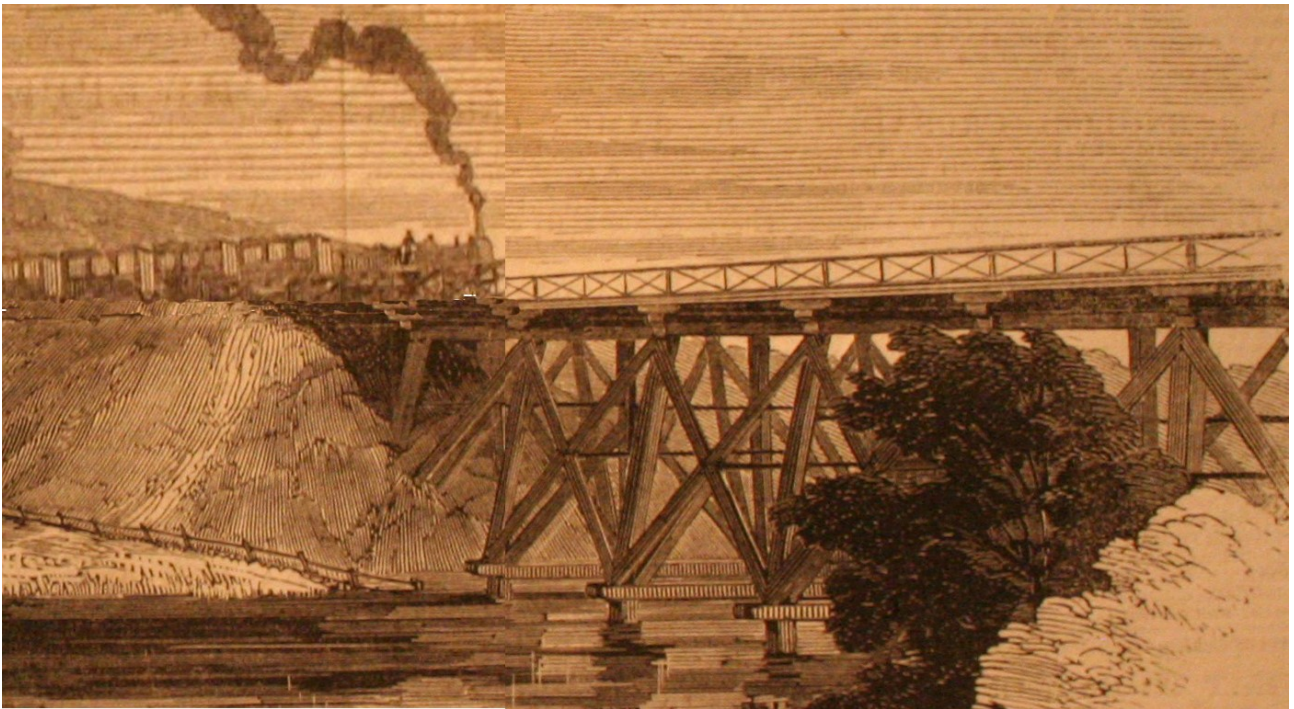
How do we know this? The railway's 'terrier' (map of land ownership) probably dates from shortly after the railway's opening. It shows some kind of a structure at right angles to the end of the 'up' (Southampton-bound) platform. This was probably the building seen here. A structure is also shown in roughly the same position on the LSWR's plan from November 1864.

The building's function is more speculative. However the Board of Trade report mentions that waiting rooms had been provided at all the stations. Given that at Wimborne passengers had to walk some distance from the booking office to the platforms on the embankment above, a waiting room at the higher level would have been convenient.

The late Mick Hutson researched the history of subways and bridges at LSWR stations, including Wimborne. We also know from newspaper reports that passengers crossed the line on the level as late as 1869.

The Viaduct

We can get a rough-and-ready idea of what the viaduct 'really' looked like by 'correcting' the engraving's perspective. Here the viaduct has been reduced in height and the train made taller (and longer) so they're approximately in the right proportion, given what we know from other evidence such as engineering drawings, research on early LSWR locomotives, and the ILN's written account of the station.



How accurately is the viaduct now portrayed? We've researched this viaduct's history and that of its brick-and-iron successor. This is probably a good broad brush picture, but some of the details are questionable.