

More on doubling the Corfe Mullen cut-off

From Peter Russell

Part 1



Like Peter's follow-up to David Grimwood's feature on the S&D at Wimborne, this article began as a letter in response to Jonathan Edwards' feature in PE 304, but has again developed into a sequel – here's the first part.

I enjoyed Jonathan Edwards' feature in *PE 304* on the proposed doubling of the S&DJR's Corfe Mullen to Broadstone link, and he has prompted me to dig more deeply into my knowledge of it. I grew up around Wimborne and this stretch has long fascinated me, albeit less than the little-studied original loop to Wimborne Junction. Both now fall inside the territorial scope of the current study of East Dorset's railways that Colin Divall and I are co-directing (see eastdorsetrailways.org). I knew of the later (1925) proposals for doubling the 'cut-off', but not the much earlier attempts (1893, 1895, 1903) to secure approval by the S&DJR Board or Officers. Had the earlier proposals happened, Corfe Mullen Junction might have come into being as early as 1893, not 1905.

My observations should add significantly to the story; they focus on the following areas:

- The various names applied to the cut-off and their historical relevance;
- The wider context of the cut-off's planning in relation to the development of the western approaches to Poole and Bournemouth;
- The consequences of its opening, the growth in local and through traffic, and the pressure for doubling;
- Some mystery features of the Broadstone Junction layout, including two sidings – this will appear in the next issue.

Whenever trying to unravel such detailed history, there are more queries, contradictions and nuances than might first appear, but that's part of the fascination of research. Colin Divall has contributed some observations and I have incorporated them with due

credit. He's also checked my drafts with his expected academic rigour (remaining slips being entirely mine!).

Which 'Cut-Off'?

Firstly, while it has only indirect bearing on the proposed doubling, the title of the cut-off varies a lot, depending on sources consulted. Without wallowing too much in nomenclature, there may be some historical significance in the variations. Jonathan notes that it was commonly called the 'Corfe Mullen Cut-Off', and also the 'Corfe Mullen Curve Line' by S&DJR management. I have not traced the documentary origins of these but, being deliberately pedantic, I argue that none is an accurate descriptor: it didn't start at Corfe Mullen Crossing, nor did it cut off Corfe Mullen (the old village), nor was most of it strictly *in* Corfe Mullen (except at the west end, where it passed beside St. Hubert's Church), and nor was it entirely curved!

Strictly speaking, the start of any doubling from that west end - had it occurred at any time between the cut-off opening in 1885 and the eventual creation of Corfe Mullen Junction in 1905 - would have stemmed from as far west as the nearest existing physical connection – the passing loop at Bailey Gate Station. Admittedly, the two single lines would only have needed integrating

Photo this page: Had the doubling occurred, this view would have shown a three-track section, also passing under the Junction bridge behind the camera. Both the Wimborne and Broadstone lines would have been eased out to accommodate the new Down line between them. The S&DJR Johnson 'small' 4-4-0 is heading towards Bath sometime in the early 1920s, when the Wimborne line was still in use. Note the materials piled up on the clean, spare trackbed, almost as if doubling is about to start. [Photographer unknown; H V Tumilty Collection (L&GRP 19563), © National Railway Museum.]

into a properly engineered and signalled double-track section, with some marginal realignment immediately east of what would become Corfe Mullen Junction. Bailey Gate to Blandford was not doubled until 1901, with authorisation for doubling between Bailey Gate and Corfe Mullen in early 1902. Why didn't the S&D include the cut-off then, to make up a job lot? From 1885 to 1905, two bi-directional single lines ran *in parallel* to their divergence point east of Bridge 223 (i.e. not as operational double track and with no physical connection near Corfe Mullen). Arguably, a section of the cut-off *was* actually doubled - in 1905; or it might be said that the cut-off was shortened to start at the new junction. Prior to that, the first Corfe Mullen 'signal box' just controlled the level crossing over Knoll Lane, and was a small, primitive affair. From map evidence, it was sited close to the cottage on the north side of the line but, despite its survival until 1905, to my knowledge no photo has emerged.

In passing, it's worth noting that, even in the late 1850s, the Dorset Central Railway's land-take and construction from Wimborne to Blandford (St. Mary) had generally allowed for doubling (including over-bridges), no doubt in optimistic anticipation of extension to points west and north and substantial growth of through traffic. Apparently, doubling of the Wimborne Junction to Bailey Gate section was not planned at any time between 1863 and 1885 and was then obviated by the cut-off opening. The only double-track DCR section east of Corfe Mullen was at Wimborne Junction from 1878, where an S&DJR holding loop and a separate 'Wimborne Single Line' signalbox was built to ease the operational conflicts with the L&SWR at the junction.

Back at Corfe Mullen, my second point about naming the cut-off is that both single lines passed near the ancient Corfe Mullen village beside the River Stour and the cut-off belatedly included Corfe Mullen Halt, built in 1928 to serve the 'East End' part of the growing newer village to the south, after much petitioning by local people. So the cut-off *passed* close to Corfe Mullen initially, rather than bypassing it.

Thirdly, the cut-off was only significantly curved - in one continuous sweep - from the hamlet of Brog Street to near the summit at Ashington, only about one third of the total three miles. From Ashington to just before Broadstone Junction it was remarkably straight by comparison. So the 'Curve' appellation is questionable in geometric terms!

All those points made, such subtleties probably had little bearing on what the company (and others) chose to call the

cut-off; they simply highlight the vagaries of naming railway places in ways that all employees, communities and others involved would understand and share!

Legislative background

So much for geometry and geography, but why and how did the cut-off come into being, and what bearing did this have on the eventual need for its doubling? The Wimborne reversal proved increasingly awkward as soon as through traffic from Highbridge and Burnham to Poole got going from 1863, and worsened dramatically from 1874 with the single-line extensions to Bournemouth West and Bath (Midland). In the next decade, it must have become nigh-on intolerable as traffic boomed on both the S&DJR and the Southampton & Dorchester lines. With the L&SWR and Midland effectively taking over after two major S&DJR financial crises, action became paramount.

The enabling Act for the cut-off sheds a bit more light. Unusually, the line was authorised not by its own separate Act, but as part of the *South Western Railway (Bournemouth, etc.) Act* of 1883, which included the Bournemouth Direct line (Lymington Junction to Christchurch Junction, plus associated links in and around Bournemouth that were to complete the new through coastal route to Weymouth. The 1870s and 1880s were a period of intensive planning and development for railways around the burgeoning 'new' town of Bournemouth, and the traffic priorities of the various local links were thus being reordered.



A spectacular and rare westward view from the top of the cutting's north-east side, this shows the vast extent of the earthworks needed for the single-line cut-off and its proposed doubling (a stark contrast to the gentle Stour Valley route of the original Wimborne line). This could be an industrial landscape except for the light tone of the exposed heathland minerals – simply sand and gravel. Landslips were as frequent here as at Ashington Cutting, hence the wide cutting, but no serious revetment was provided beyond the partial low fencing visible on the Down side. The track alignment can be seen running back to the summit near Ashington Bridge. Class 4F 0-6-0 No. 44560 is coasting down-grade at 11.15 am with the 6.35 am Evercreech Junction-Poole goods. 6 April 1964.

[Photo by Tim Chapman.]



While the tall, elegant three-arch brick bridge close to the summit of the cut-off was often photographed, the views from it to south-east and north-west were rarely captured. This looks back towards Broadstone and again shows the clear space for the doubling that never happened. Unrebuilt West Country Pacific No. 34040 Crewkerne hauls an eight-coach train up-grade on a warm day in the early 1960s. [Photo by Colin Caddy.]

For Wimborne, the cut-off's opening in 1885-86 began the long, slow decline of the town as the important railway centre it had been for Dorset from 1847. That decline was reinforced in 1888 by the opening throughout of Lymington Junction to Branksome Junction, and finally in 1893 by the completion of the curve from Holes Bay Junction to Hamworthy Junction. Thereafter, most through passenger traffic between Southampton and Weymouth used the completed coastal route, while Lymington Junction to Hamworthy Junction via Wimborne became known as 'The Old Road' for L&SWR staff – a nickname perpetuated into SR and BR(SR) days. Both Wimborne and Broadstone thus became less important traffic-wise, but at least the latter saw most of the growing S&DJR traffic from 1885 and hence some justification for doubling the cut-off, even if the first attempt didn't happen until eight years after its opening.

Here, nomenclature again rears its head. Lawrence Popplewell in his remarkably authoritative and well-referenced *Bournemouth Railway History* (1973) states that the S&DJR cut-off was originally called the 'Western Loop' – perhaps as another official title or a nickname, and given by whom is unclear. Being pedantic again, that makes me

wonder what it was precisely west of and where other compass-point-based loops might have been in the locality!

To back-track from 1885 and muddy the waters even more, the New Poole Junction to New Poole drop-line had been authorised in 1866 (renewed 1870) as part of the 'Poole & Bournemouth Railway'. Despite this apparently unified title, it initially comprised two railways under two different administrations: New Poole Junction to New Poole (essentially L&SWR) and New Poole to Bournemouth (effectively under the S&D's control, despite being isolated from that company's then anchor point of Wimborne Junction). In 1859 the S&DR had also tried to get authorisation for its own line from Wimborne into Poole proper, directly

competing with the L&SWR on a closely parallel alignment, but the L&SWR had seen it off with little effort.

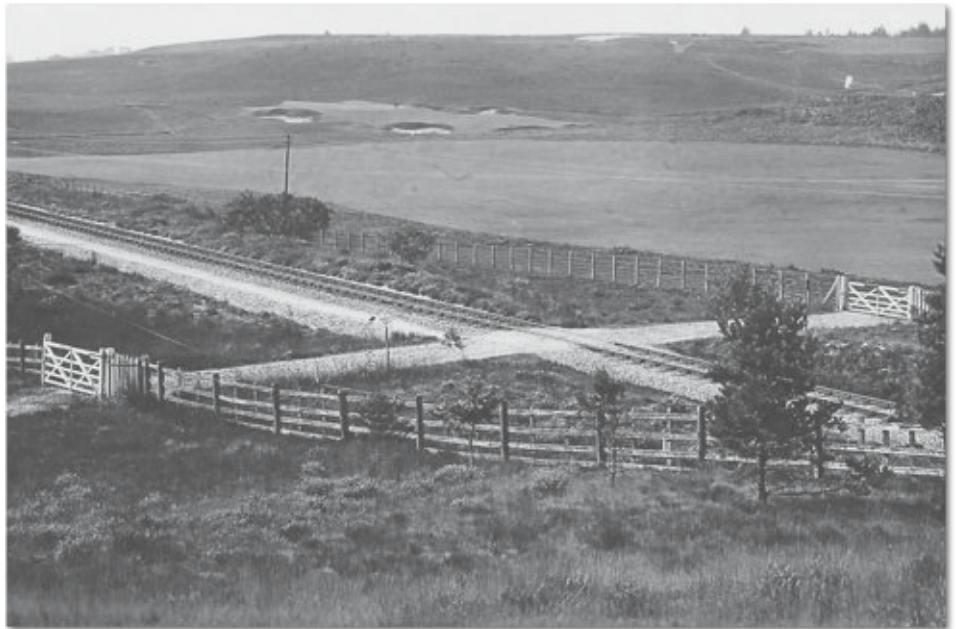
In this context, the 'Poole & Bournemouth Junction Branch' name for the cut-off makes some sense, as it was a 'junction' link between the pre-cut-off S&DJR at Bailey Gate and the 'Poole & Bournemouth Railway' as outlined above. The latter had experienced a troubled



Another dramatic view, this time south-eastwards over Golfers' Crossing and down to Broadstone Junction. The space available for doubling is obvious here and at this date was remarkably clean, almost suggesting residues of snow. The conifer plantation atop the Up side was a notable landmark for some distance around this locality. LMS Class 5 4-6-0 No. 5440 seems to be making fairly light of the eight-coach Up 'Pines Express' on the 1-in-97 in September 1938.

[Photo by G W Puntis; courtesy and © R. Puntis.]

and drawn-out gestation, caught up in local politics. Also, the similar titles possibly reflected the driving involvement in both schemes of the notorious railway contractor, politician, general 'fixer' and one-time S&DR Chairman Charles Waring, with his quest to outwit the L&SWR right across Poole and Bournemouth. By the late 1870s, the early role of 'New Poole Junction' was already fading after the 'drop-line' had extended through to Bournemouth West in 1874 and plans were firmly afoot to link up the western and eastern approaches to Bournemouth (completed 1888), thereby changing the whole district network. Its significance would again drop by 1893, when the Holes Bay Curve opened and most through L&SWR traffic switched to the coastal route.



This high-level, inter-war view from Sand Cutting looking down towards Broadstone is included mainly for the clear indication of the wide land-take for the cut-off (with fences and crossing gates set well back) and the ample formation width allowed for double track. The crossing at track level was a favoured viewpoint for photographers like Ivo Peters and Norman Lockett in their infrequent excursions to the southern end of the S&D. [Unknown photographer; © Broadstone Golf Club.]

Most of the emerging district network would soon be doubled to cope with booming traffic, which leaves the cut-off as something of an anomaly.

As Colin Divall and I noticed, the later Ordnance Survey 25-inch maps also do little to clarify the cut-off's name, although the OS was probably just following the railway's own nomenclature. The 1886 survey (published 1888) still labels it as the S&DJR's

'Poole & Bournemouth Junction Branch'. 'Branch' might perhaps seem demeaning for such a key link in a long-distance route, but at the time it was arguably a branch off the original main line to Wimborne. The name also seems a geographical misnomer, as the cut-off isn't in or particularly near either town, albeit that it reorientated the S&DJR towards both and formed a 'junction' with the Poole & Bournemouth Railway. By the 1900 survey, it appears as 'S&DJR

Corfe Mullen Curve' and by the 1928 and 1935 editions it has no specific name, perhaps reflecting the Southern Railway's takeover of S&DJR infrastructure. What is clear is that from 1885-86 it cut off Wimborne for the S&DJR, at least as far as most longer-distance passenger and some goods services were concerned, avoiding the inconvenient reversal of passenger trains at Wimborne Station and reducing the distance to Poole by about three miles. As a Winburnian, I may be biased(!) but, in one last flourish on this somewhat esoteric matter, I think the unofficial name 'Wimborne Cut-Off' is therefore the most appropriate logically and territorially, although this seems to appear less frequently than others in official and published sources.



In this eastward view from the early 1960s, the double-track formation is once again clearly evident, including the double-width arch of Lamb's Green Bridge in the background. After the halt closed in 1956, the curvature of the single line was eased slightly away from the platform edge, possibly when the flat-bottom rail was laid.

[Photo by John Eyers; South Western Circle, Eyers Collection, ref. JE 3220.]



Here we see the double track at the junction merging into the single line of the cut-off just north of the junction in the early 1920s. The second (Up) line would have been added beyond the coaches. Note the gravel (ballast?) trap to the left. This alignment had earlier held a siding extending 500 feet towards the north end of the Up (Hamworthy) platform, and possibly used for berthing 'tail-end' traffic off Up trains, pending moving to the yard. S&DJR blue-livery 'large' 4-4-0 No. 67 (later LMS No. 324 and BR No. 40324) brings a Bournemouth-bound train into the station. [Photographer unknown; R. J. Essery Collection, via S&DRT.]

Operational issues

How did the staged, 1885-86 opening of the cut-off alter local train operations in the short and longer-term, and therefore subsequent pressure for doubling? Any notion that the cut-off at that date was temporal as well as physical, i.e. with S&DJR traffic to Wimborne dropping off dramatically straightaway, would be misleading. The resultant immediate 'sharing' of S&DJR traffic between the Wimborne and Broadstone lines probably helped off-set the shorter-term need for doubling, but traffic was booming all around the district. Many passenger and goods services continued via Wimborne after 1885-86, albeit with declining frequency until the final through closure west of Wimborne Junction in June 1933. As well as through S&D workings and residual local services, there had even been oddities such as a local Blandford to Bournemouth service via Wimborne, Ringwood, Hurn and Christchurch. Had the cut-off doubling been implemented prior to June 1933, the sorting of some S&DJR goods traffic for Poole at Wimborne might have been less necessary. It might have helped doubling it even as late as the other local infrastructure upgradings in World War II, notably at Poole Yard and its western approaches.

Jonathan noted that: "Broadstone could be quite a busy crossroads at times", i.e. presumably meaning after the cut-off opened. It had already become busier from its opening as New Poole Junction in 1872, and the S&DR/S&DJR traffic mostly routed through Wimborne until 1885-86 caused operational headaches in meshing with growing L&SWR traffic on the Southampton & Dorchester route at both Wimborne and later

Broadstone. Our East Dorset Railways group's investigation into the working timetables and signalling after 1863 is revealing just how problematical this became in a few years. One of our group associates, Graham Bowring, has examined these in detail; the turn-arounds at Wimborne and train intervals between there and Broadstone were sometimes barely believable for their brevity. He published some of his findings in the *South Western Circular* in January 2022, and, as I write, is also finalising a new book on the development of L&SWR signalling that should include material on the two stations.

Even after the cut-off opened, the traffic levels and hold-ups should have been adequate justification for its doubling within a few years. The cost to the S&DJR of this proposal is cited as the main constraint

leading to rejection, but it leaves pertinent questions. The earthworks to take the cut-off up and through the Corfe Hills were massive and costly – with heavy embanking away from Corfe Mullen and at Rushcombe Bottom (the latter impressively high even when walking this section nowadays), plus excavations of increasing depth through Lamb's Green, Ashington and Sand Cutting. Having made such an expensive double-track formation, why did the S&DJR not lay a second track in 1885 at marginal cost in the overall budget, especially as the S&DJR management might have anticipated substantial traffic growth continuing into the 20th century? Not doing so then looks now like a false economy, and pressures on railway finances ratcheted up noticeably once the effective freeze on freight rates kicked in after the 1894 Railway & Canal Traffic Act. If the extra cost was considered critical, why not have asked the L&SWR to contribute on the basis of shared benefits at Broadstone? Not to consider doubling seriously until eight years after opening seems lax. Did repeated national crises of capital supply have a braking effect, or was the S&DJR management getting parsimonious again, perhaps influenced by the near-existential shock of the costly Bath extension in the early 1870s? If so, that doesn't seem to explain procrastinating over doubling when it would be happening between Bailey Gate and Blandford by 1900-01. The constraints of the single-line working had clearly not gone away by 1903 and even 1925. I have no real answers yet.

Looking at physical details of the earlier plans for doubling the cut-off, I'm particularly impressed by the prospect of three running lines of track passing under a widened Bridge 223 at Corfe Mullen. I've tried to

identify a similar situation planned or built anywhere else on the S&DJR and I'm fairly sure there was none, although there were places where two running lines and one siding passed under a bridge – as under the GWR just south of Shepton Mallet. Other features of the 1903 plan include changes to the connection of the Wimborne line to a new Corfe Mullen Junction. While the layout is not entirely clear, it appears that the single line from Wimborne would double just before the junction, allowing direct connections to both Up and Down lines. Awkwardly, perhaps, this would have been closer to the level crossing than the eventual 1905 Junction, which included a lengthy trap siding for the Wimborne line at a higher level than the running lines, requiring a stone retaining wall.

Although it's not directly relevant to the cut-off doubling, Jonathan also mentioned the original, early 1920s proposal, for working Carter's Clay Siding (officially 'Corfe Mullen Siding') from the Wimborne Junction end after closure of the through loop to passengers and later goods. This always seemed odd, because it would have involved a longer line and the continued existence of Lake Crossing, albeit unstaffed by 1925. For reasons yet to be ascertained fully, the decision was soon reversed to the shorter arrangement from Corfe Mullen, although this would have involved some realignment of its connection at Corfe Mullen Junction, had the 1925 doubling proposal gone ahead.

After 1885, much remaining freight off the S&DJR into Wimborne would be re-marshalled there for onward distribution to points east, possibly also to points west (given that Poole Yard was relatively small until World War II), or it would even terminate at Wimborne. Such traffic via Wimborne remained significant well into the 20th Century, with a substantial boost provided by World War I, especially in terms of movements of troops, equipment, fuel and other supplies towards Southampton and other points east. There is even evidence of lengthy S&DJR goods trains still coming into Wimborne from Corfe Mullen for re-marshalling as late as 1929, despite the main regular traffic by that time being the residual milk trains from Bailey Gate. Curiously, the exigencies of World War II were still not seen as sufficient incentive to reopen the S&DJR's link into Wimborne*, so eastward goods traffic to Southampton and beyond presumably reversed at Broadstone, or took the greater risk of disruption and even bombing by passing directly through Poole and Bournemouth. Also, the intensity of this traffic still didn't seem to warrant doubling the cut-off after 1939.

To conclude, the cut-off story still raises many unknowns. I am left wondering how much easier operations might have been through and around Broadstone had the doubling been implemented, even as late as the early 1940s, when wartime traffic might have justified it, and after 1945, when the holiday passenger traffic surged. The cost would probably have been even more of a constraint by then. Similarly, would early doubling have eliminated Wimborne's S&D traffic much sooner? We may never know.

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There will be further thoughts on this subject from Peter in Part 2 in the next issue.

*[*PE 299 p.27 notes that the Joint Committee had agreed to sell the trackbed in 1936. Ed.]*