

Winchester's Forgotten Second Railway Station

Intro: Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

Julie: Welcome to another episode of Hampshire HistBites. This week, I am joined by Clare Dixon, a Winchester Green Badge tourist guide, who will guide us through the history of the Chesil Railway Station in Winchester. Can you tell me a bit about the origins of the station, how it came to be, who was involved?

Clare: Well, yes, I think a lot of people don't realize that Winchester originally had two railway stations.

There's the one that we think of now, up, at the top of the High Street, which is a line from Waterloo through Winchester, down to Southampton and that came in about 1840. But after that in the 1880s, there was another railway line built, which was the Didcot, Newbury, and Southampton Railway Line. And that came through the Chesil area and it had a station where the Chesil Multi-story Carpark now is, and that was an alternative route to link the industrial Midlands with the port at Southampton. So you could transport goods up and down and it was also to serve all the agricultural districts to open up new markets for the livestock and what have you, that was being produced in that area. And so they decided to build a new railway that would link Didcot, Newbury, Winchester, Southampton. They got as far as Newbury in 1882 and then in 1885, they got to Winchester and that had cost them a million pounds, which in 1885, it was the most enormous amount of money. And so the Didcot, Newbury, and Southampton company, they'd used all their money, by the time they got to Winchester. And so you had a wonderful railway line that ran from Didcot to Winchester, which doesn't really make much money. They were stuck. They couldn't raise the money to get any further, but they couldn't make any money unless they got to Southampton.

There was of course already the existing line, the one that we know now down to Southampton, and that was run by the London and Southwestern Railway Company, and they didn't like the thought of somebody else muscling in on their territory. The other complication was that the Didcot, Newbury, and Southampton Company, hadn't even got enough money left to run any trains on the bit that they had got. So the Great Western stepped in and said they would run the trains and provide the staff from Didcot, Newbury to Winchester. London, and Southwestern are sitting there thinking, oh, we don't want the Great Western getting to Southampton and competing with us. They did the deal with Great Western that they wouldn't trespass into each other's territory.

So London and Southwestern paid to extend the line from Winchester to Shawford. It then joined the line that we now know down to Southampton. So it was London and Southwestern line from Shawford onwards and Great Western would do the bit down as far as Winchester. You can see that it's not going to be the most enormous success, even at that stage, because you've got three companies, you've got the Didcot Newbury Southampton who have paid for the line, as far as Winchester. You've got Great Western who are running the trains from

Didcot to Winchester, and you've got London and Southwestern who were running the train from Winchester to Southampton. It's not going to work very smoothly, particularly because the rivalry between the Great Western and the London and Southwestern was so strong, that they wouldn't let each other run their engines over the other one's line. So as you're coming South on the railway, you get as far as Winchester and then you have to change, and it made it a very slow and a — not a very efficient railway line.

Julie: Wow. That's quite a pain, isn't it? That's so interesting. I did not know you had to change trains just because they were so territorial.

Clare: And the additional complication was that as you came North out of Winchester station, you went straight into a tunnel that went under St Giles Hill and that tunnel is still there. The whole line was built to mainline standards, they made the tunnels and the embankment wide enough to carry two sets of rails so you could have trains going in both directions. But they didn't lay double lines at the beginning, they laid single track with passing places because that's cheaper, then it doubled out into the station so you would have an up platform and a down platform at Winchester.

But it means when you are coming North with your London and Southwestern train, you stop at Winchester on the up platform, the London and Southwestern engine gets uncoupled and goes into the tunnel, beyond the end of passing loop. So you're not only having to change engines, but you're doing it in the tunnel and that went on until eventually they doubled the track in the 1940s. Also of course, as a passenger if you are coming south, down the line and you're in the tunnel just getting into Winchester station, if there's any sort of delay and your train can't pull into the platform, you are sitting in the tunnel and there are no smoke vents. All the soot and the steam was coming in the windows and it was very unpopular because sometimes the train lights weren't very strong, ladies didn't feel safe. I think they've lost a lot of passengers because it was very slow and not terribly efficient service. When it was first opened, there were four trains a day in each direction, and the last one was late afternoon and there was one milk train on Sundays and it took about two hours to get to Didcot, cause you stopped at every little station along the way.

Julie: So Chesil has not always been named Chesil. Can you tell me about the history behind the name?

Clare: When the station was first opened, it was called Cheese Hill, but apparently everybody pronounced it Chesil anyway. There are different thoughts about the origins of the name. If it is Cheese Hill, it's at the bottom of St. Giles Hill. In medieval times, a big fair used to be held on St. Giles Hill and undoubtedly, they would have sold cheese up there. The alternative explanation is that Chesil is a Saxon word for the sort of pebbly bank that you get at the edge of river, and you've got the river Itchen just there. If you looked at a timetable in the late 1800's, early 1900's, both the stations in Winchester were just listed as Winchester station. I think in 1950, they officially changed the name to Chesil, because the railways have been nationalized in 1948 and they started to actually list them as Winchester City Station and Winchester Chesil Station.

Julie: That's quite confusing that they were both listed as Winchester station. So throughout the history of Chesil Railway Station, can you tell me a bit about the importance of locality and the use of it?

Clare: I think Chesil was chosen as the site for the station because they couldn't find anywhere else. Most railways had been built in the 1840s and they had taken all the nice sites for railway stations. And so, Chesil was cheap because it was the poor end of Winchester, but it's the edge of St Giles Hill and they actually had to cut the station out of the hill. And the cutting that they had to dig for the station is nearly a hundred feet deep. I think it was a less than ideal site for a railway station, but it was all that they could get. Today, if you stand next to the Chesel Rectory restaurant, just on that corner at the beginning of Chesil Street, the little stub road that you can't drive up, but you can walk up, is called Old Station Approach. And that was as much street frontage as the station had. They had been going to buy some of the other houses in Chesil Street, to make a much broader frontage so that you could see the station from the road, but the cost of the properties around there suddenly went up. And so they ended up with quite a narrow entrance. You could hardly even see the station from the road. And it said that there were people who lived in Winchester, who didn't realize there was a station there.

Having a very confined site meant that they only ever put passenger facilities at Chesil station and all the goods yards and the loco shed, the goods shed, a turntable and all that sort of thing was down at Bar End, where Bar End Industrial Estate now is, because there wasn't room for all of that on the station site.

Julie: Yeah, I've been to the car park and I did not know that there used to be a station there.

Clare: There's nothing really to be seen except the doors, which are the entrance to the tunnel, otherwise the station itself is entirely disappeared. But if you look up there is a footbridge that crosses the approach road to the multi-story car park, which is still painted in Great Western colours. You can still walk over that footbridge from Chesil Street and onto St Giles Hill. And if you do so, as you get onto St Giles Hill, have a little look at the fence posts. Some of the fence posts are old railway track.

Julie: I went up to St. Giles Hill for the first time before Christmas, me and my flat mate. And we saw that when we walked over that bridge and it's just amazing that they actually use some of that history, so you have a little piece of hidden heritage within the everyday use. I love that detail.

Clare: I think it was just being, what's the word, not spending any more money than you have to. Because the track is old broad gauge, so it isn't what would have been used at the Chesil Station at all. By the time the railway is being built, the broad gauge has all been taken up and lying around as strips of metal in the railway yard. And then when you need to build a fence, you think, oh well, we might as well use that.

Julie: It's quite clever reusing material that you already have.

Clare: It's nice these days, I think to know things like that, just look at it and think, Oh, there's look a bit of railway track. That's the sort of little detail of history which is really exciting.

Julie: So you were talking a bit about the tunnel and can we see the tunnel today? Can we go in there or is it shut or not even there?

Clare: The tunnel is still there. It goes under St Giles Hill; it comes out where the Jehovah's Witness Hall is in Winnall. The tunnel is now owned by Winchester City Council. It's a good tunnel. It's 440 yards long, and actually thereby hangs a tale because the definition of a tunnel, in railway terms, is something over 440 yards. And if you are the gangers who maintain the line and inspect the tunnels, you get more money for working in tunnels than you do for working on open track.

When they first measured the tunnel, it was 439 yards, which is a bit sad, really, to be just a yard short of being a tunnel. Then somebody looked at it and it actually bends. Somebody had the bright idea of measuring the outside of the curve instead of the inside, which made it 441 yards.

But it's a lovely brick-built tunnel, it's got the little recesses in the walls where you could stand back if a train was coming past. These days you can get in with Winchester City Council's permission at the Chesil Carpark end. And you can walk nearly all of the length of the tunnel, but you can't walk out at the other end because it's now used by a rifle club. So they have bricked off the last 40 yards of the tunnel and they used it for rifle shooting. So if you're coming on a tour with the Winchester tourist guides and you're coming into the tunnel from the Chesil Carpark end, you eventually get to a breeze block wall, then you have to turn around and walk back again.

Julie: Absolutely brilliant. I love the idea that they measured the outer side of the tunnel and that made it a tunnel. This is the railway has been used for a lot of things. And as I understand it, it had some importance during the World Wars. Can you tell me about the war effort?

Clare: Well, I think the railway was always more of a success as a goods railway than it was as a passenger railway. And it came into its own, you're right, during the two World Wars, because all of a sudden, just what you wanted was a link from the industrial Midlands to the South coast ports. So in the First World War, there were a number of extra sidings built for the railway. And that carried on in the Second World War. They also built sidings from the North end of the tunnel, out to Winnall and Addington and Morn Hill, because there were big, tented encampments of Commonwealth troops. So the population of Winchester at this stage is about 20,000 and these tented encampments could hold 50,000 troops awaiting to go across to the continent. A special side track was built to serve those encampments. So it didn't transport troops, but it transported goods for them. In August 1914, they ran continuous troop trains down to Southampton, taking men and materials. A little later they started running ambulance trains in the other direction from Southampton into Winchester and then wounded would be unloaded and taken to the hospital.

So that was the First World War, the Second World War, particularly in the build up to D-Day, that was when the railway really came into its own. I said that they originally built all the embankments and the bridges and everything wide enough to have double tracks, and in the buildup to D-day, this is when they thought they needed the capacity that two lines would give them. They increased the length of the passing loops and they put double tracks through the tunnel, and they also made the Hockley Viaduct. The line came South out of Winchester, it went over to the viaduct, which is still there, over the River Itchen Water Meadows, and they were very worried that that might get bombed, an obvious way of cutting the whole line was to bomb that viaduct. And so they made an additional link between, what we now think of as the main line and the Didcot, Newbury, and Southampton line to the North of

Winchester. And it carried 16,000 military trains in the 12 months leading up to the Normandy landings. So that was when everybody was glad to have this railway line, before and after, it was a somewhat mixed success.

Julie: Yeah. So you could say that the railway had quite the strategic importance during the World War, can you tell me more about the viaduct?

Clare: When the London and Southwestern Railway agreed to create a link, the obstacle in the way was the River Itchen and its water meadows. And so they had to build quite a large viaduct. It looks as though it's built entirely of brick. In fact, it isn't, it has a concrete core, which was cutting edge stuff in the 1890s, this is 1891, it was opened. And it is one of the earliest concrete cored structures. But it has a fascia of brick, and the bricks came from Bishop's Waltham, and it carried the line across the water meadows and down to Shawford.

When the railway closed, there was talk, in the 1960's, of blowing the viaduct up, because obviously you've either got to maintain it, or you've got to get rid of it. But that didn't come to anything, it's such a solid structure, it was going to take the most enormous amount of effort to get rid of it. And then, most happily, about seven or eight years ago, it was reopened as a footpath and a cycle way. Winchester City Council, Hampshire County Council and Sustrans put some money in to repair the viaduct and to create a cycle and a foot path over the top of it. It's part of a very pleasant route that you can take out of Winchester, and once you get to the viaduct, you've got the most beautiful views across the Itchen Valley.

If you walk across the viaduct now, there is one railway signal which has been reinstated to remind us all that it was originally a railway viaduct. That was paid for by the Friends of the Hockley Viaduct. And it was put there particularly as the memorial to the part that the railway played in the lead up to D-Day.

Julie: That's absolutely amazing. Can you walk to this viaduct from Winchester City Center?

Clare: You can walk there, quite easily. The route comes around the bottom of St. Catherine's Hill.

Julie: All this stuff, I don't know, and I've lived here for a few years now. And I love that you have that sign to memorialize the war effort and the history of the railway.

Clare: It's got some beautiful bricks, because in those days they didn't just build sort of functionally, you know, they put a little bit of decoration in.

Julie: The tunnel and the railway buildings, some are not there anymore. Can you describe a bit about the tunnel and buildings, then and now?

Clare: Well, there are various bits of the railway left, which people can still explore. In Winchester itself, there is still the goods shed. If you walk down Barfield Close, from Chesil multi-story car park, you will come to a brick built single story building on your right. And if you stop and look at it, it yells railway at you. There's a certain style of building isn't there that you associate with railways and this is one of them. So we've talked about war time use of the railway. In peacetime, it carried a lot of coal, because of course coal was used for domestic heating and for a lot of industrial purposes as well, and it's, very heavy, very bulky stuff and a railway is the perfect way to move it about. Other heavy things that you're transporting, like chalk and limestone for building and for hardcore and whatever, animal

feed. Wharf Mill, which is just at the end of the weirs in Winchester, used to grind animal feed. And they would bring the raw materials into Chesil Station. There used to be livestock sales. And so you've got sheep and cattle being transported by rail as well. You've got horses going to the races at Newbury. You've got ordinary groceries. So people like Marks and Spencer's, Boots, Huntley & Palmer Biscuits in Reading. They all had their own deliveries in and out of Chesil Station or to be more strict, in and out of Bar End Goods Yard.

There was quite a lot of strawberry growing in the area and you want your strawberries to reach market as fresh as possible. So this is like the Watercress Line, which operated as a heritage line in Alresford. Watercress is something else that you wanted to get to market quickly. And they used to send by train up to London and beyond, up to Edinburgh. The goods shed had a lock up at one end of it where you could keep things like the mail or any high value goods that were being transported. What you can't see is that almost opposite where the goods shed is, there used to be an engine shed. And just down from that, there used to be a turntable and a coaling yard and sidings and those are all gone.

The only other building, which remains from the railway in Winchester is the Station Master's House. And if you stand outside the Chesil Multi-story Carpark, and you look at the big double doors of the tunnel entrance, then you look up, there is the station master's house. A red brick house with nice wooden carved barge boards on the edge of the roof and it screams 'railway'! You can see the Station Master's House from the station in a way that you haven't been able to for many years. His house is right over the tunnel entrance, up above the station. I always liked to think that perhaps he could sit up in bed and keep an eye on the station and whether the trains were coming and going on time.

Julie: Absolutely amazing. That says a lot about the profession during that time that they had the house so close to the railway station, it was basically on top of it.

Clare: Oh, absolutely. Yes. I think a Station Master, particularly at a station like Winchester, was a very responsible position and taken very seriously.

Julie: What happened after World War II with the Chesil Railway Station? When did it close and why?

Clare: Well, after the Second World War, generally passenger traffic on railways declined because more and more people are getting private cars and there were bus services and railways lose popularity. Passenger traffic on the line fell quite badly. It was always a slow line. Apparently, there was a saying amongst the railway men, that as you came up from Southampton and you turned off onto the Chesil Line, they said you turned right off the timetable and onto the calendar, which I think is lovely. It was meant to reflect all the delays that there were on that line and how slowly things moved. So passenger traffic decreased, but actually, goods traffic held up pretty well. There was obviously more competition from lorries on roads, but for example, one of the big sources of goods traffic after the war was from the Fawley Oil Refinery on Southampton Water. They ran special trains from there up to Birmingham, carrying hundreds of gallons of oil. So goods traffic was holding up, not too badly. But you've got Mr. Beeching¹ starting to think about cutting what he saw as

¹ Richard Beeching, Baron Beeching was the Chairman of the British Railways Board, from 1961-1965.

superfluous railway lines. And so the Newbury to Winchester section of our railway closed to passengers in March 1960.

If you're a real railway enthusiast, you will know that actually there were a few passengers who used it after that, if they were having trouble on the main line they still occasionally came to Chesil Station. As far as I'm aware, the last of those was in 1964, when the Pines Express got diverted because of trouble on the main line. And there are photographs of the Pines Express at Winchester Station in 1964. But you can see in those photos, they have already taken down the station canopy and the whole station as a passenger facility, obviously hasn't been used in years. In August 1964, it was actually closed to all traffic and by 1967 they are physically taking up the railway tracks.

Julie: So at the start of the sixties, we start to see the decline of the railway, but we can still see some evidence of it today, which is quite nice.

Clare: And now, part of the impetus for closing the railway was the need to improve the A34 as a road. And now if you drive up the A34, for some sections, you are on the old railway track cause some nice person has already dug the cuttings and the embankments and the bridges. And so they used the track bed from the old railway to improve the road and you can see in places that you are going over railway bridges, they are built in the old style of railway bridges, but it's now a road.

Julie: Is there anything else that you want to add about the railway station?

Clare: If you drive into Chesil Multi-story Carpark these days, you come off Chesil Street and you turn then left at a little mini roundabout, and just where that mini roundabout is, was the signal box. And if you think about it, you are out of sight there, of the station or at least of the tunnel mouth, which is beyond the station to your left. And you're out of sight of the goods yard at Bard End which is quite a long way to your right. And so signaling for Winchester Railway Station was always a bit of a problem. The poor signalman couldn't see what was happening at either end, and until they installed a phone system, it was all done with a code of bells. So when an engine wants to come out of the engine shed and wanted to know that the line was clear, you did it all by communicating with a signalman by bells. And if you go nosing around in the undergrowth by that mini roundabout, as I have done, you can find the original foundations of the signal box, but I don't know whether it really is or not.

Julie: That would be so cool if it really was. So I'm just going to put it out there. If any of our listeners actually know this, please contact us on social media because I would love to know.

Clare: I have to say it's one of the things I love about being a tourist guide in Winchester is that you get to notice things that a lot of people don't notice and to know the story behind them.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, www.winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you.

