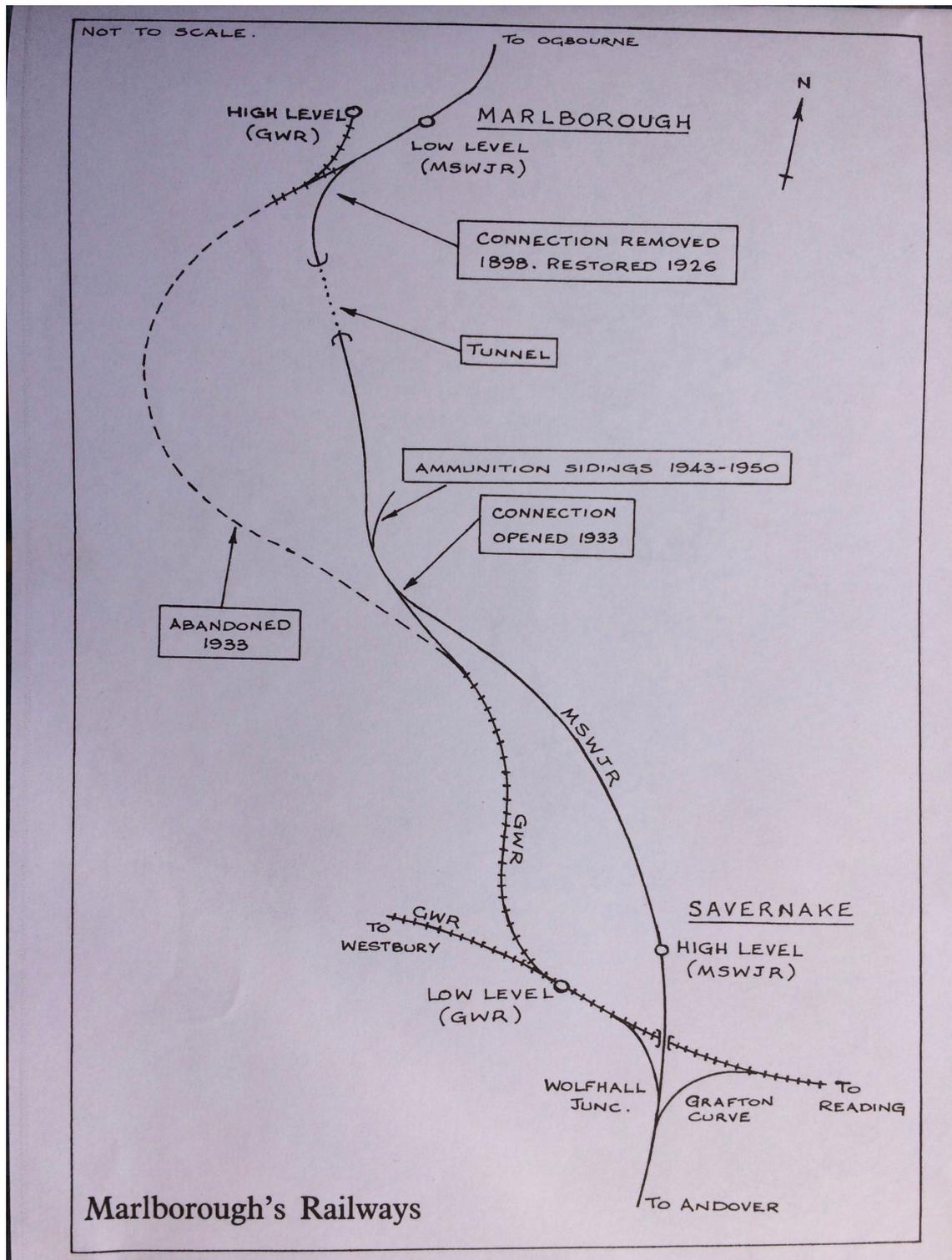


Line Closure: All rail access to Marlborough, Wilts, 1961-4, by closure of the Andover-Cheltenham line and related link lines



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¹ Brian Bridgeman, David Barrett & Denis Bird, *Swindon's Other Railway*, (Stroud: Sutton, 1990), 83

Until 10 September 1961 Marlborough (1961 population: 4,852²) officially had a rail link to the north via Cheltenham, to the south via Andover, and to London or the South-West by changing trains at nearby Savernake station. From that date, all rail passenger services ceased, except for a 'start (or end) of term' special that continued to run for Marlborough College until 1 May 1964, after which freight services ended too. Evidence that anyone seriously minded very much is hard to find. Even in its supposed heyday the line had not made a profit, as it provided an additional but unneeded (except in wartime) north-south through route,³ hence 'rail enthusiast' authors have acknowledged that the announcement of this pre-Beeching closure of a whole through-route "caused no great surprise when it finally came in 1961".⁴ Accordingly both comparisons and contrasts can be made between the closure of this line and the fate of other lines in the period 1950-62, when the passenger network shrank by 3,000 miles nationwide.⁵

After the Great Western Railway [GWR] had first connected Marlborough with the Berks-and-Hants line at Savernake with a 5½-mile single-track branch-line spur in the 1860s, a rival Swindon, Marlborough & Andover Railway had built a line from Swindon to Andover in the 1880s that during a later period ran its through-route over a duplicate track from Marlborough to Savernake serving two separate stations. As the Midland & South Western Junction Railway (M&SWJR) this completed line had also gone on to duplicate the GWR's Swindon-Cheltenham route, offering an alternative arterial route from the south coast to the industrial north. In this endeavour it had been commercially unsuccessful, though it had become extremely busy for military purposes during the Boer War and both World Wars⁶. After its forced takeover by its rival GWR in the 1923 'Grouping' the link from Marlborough to Savernake had been rationalised back to a single line, which after 1945 was being used by some freight services, some occasional through services from Andover to Cheltenham, and by a local shuttle informally known as the 'Donkey'.

² Wiltshire census figures, Wiltshire County Council website:

<https://history.wiltshire.gov.uk/community/getcensus.php?item=Marlborough>, accessed 25/12/2016

³ JA Patmore, "The British Railway Network in the Beeching Era", (*Economic Geography*, 41: 1, 1965), 76, would surely tag as "Competitive duplication... that was scarcely justified even at the time of construction".

⁴ Brian Bridgeman, David Barrett & Denis Bird, *Swindon's Other Railway*, (Stroud: Sutton, 1990), 61

⁵ Loft, Charles, *Last Trains: Dr Beeching and the Death of Rural England*, (London: Biteback, 2013), 3

⁶ T.B. Sands, *Midland & South Western Junction Railway*, (Headington: Oakwood Press, 1990), 35

Many 'obviously' uneconomic lines had already closed by 1961– in Wiltshire alone the Little Somerford to Malmesbury branch line ceased passenger services in 1951, as did the Swindon-Highworth line in 1953.⁷ Gourvish cites 1960 Central Transport Consultative Committee [CTCC] data of 919 closure proposals to date, mostly unopposed,⁸ though only the aspirations in the 1955 *Modernisation Plan* and the regional lists following its 1959 *Reappraisal*⁹ constituted any announced 'national closure plan' before 1962.¹⁰ Subsequently, the 1962 Transport Act enabled a formal national plan under Beeching and also, by making "hardship" the sole possible grounds for objection,¹¹ closure procedures to be speeded up.¹²

The 1961 Marlborough closure(s) preceded Beeching, and therefore also the 1960s closures of two other arterial routes to the south coast, the Somerset & Dorset (S&D) and the Didcot, Newbury and Southampton (DN&SR) routes. But it followed the very strong but ultimately unsuccessful anti-closure campaigns for the Isle of Wight¹³ and 'Bluebell'¹⁴ lines, and the shock ending of the entire former Great Northern & Midland network in East Anglia. Although the 'Bluebell' became a successful heritage line, and nostalgia for the 'S&D' continues, no one seriously advocates reopening any of these lines – the difference in Marlborough is that then as well as now the redundancy seems to have been largely accepted. This acquiescence also contrasts sharply with the contemporaneous lively but fruitless campaign (1961-2) to save the Westerham line.¹⁵

Prior to closure, the reduction of the through service from Andover to Cheltenham to just one train per day could open the customary question of whether reduced provision caused decline or vice-versa;¹⁶ certainly the change of Cheltenham terminus station from Lansdown to St James in 1958¹⁷ (harder for

⁷ Justin Bailey, *Lost Railways of Wiltshire*, (Newbury: Countryside Books, 2006), 148 and 84

⁸ T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways 1948-73*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 206

⁹ T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways 1948-73*, 441

¹⁰ Charles Loft, *Last Trains*, 92-102, describes earlier aborted policy developments

¹¹ David Henshaw, *The Great Railway Conspiracy*. (Dorchester: A to B Books, 2013 edn), 116-117

¹² Charles Loft, "Reappraisal and Reshaping: Government and the Railway Problem 1951-64," (*Contemporary British History* 15, no.4, 2001), 79-82

¹³ Charles Loft, *Last Trains*, 34-52

¹⁴ Charles Loft, *Last Trains*, 69-85

¹⁵ Charles Loft, *Last Trains*, 104-123

¹⁶ Charles Loft, *Last Trains*, 83

¹⁷ T.B. Sands, *Midland & South Western Junction Railway*, 113

connections northwards) could feed the Henshaw school conspiracy theorists.¹⁸ Yet this closure was not seriously challenged.

The *Marlborough Times* was the weekly local newspaper, and a trawl of all its editions for 1961-2 reveals a marked contrast with the concerted local campaigns that had been fought to save the previously-mentioned lines in the 1950s. Although the 17 January 1961 edition contained a National Union of Railwaymen letter advocating the improbable case that the route should be retained as the best north-south arterial line, it also lengthily featured a local National Farmers' Union debate where members said they were happy for it to close (it was "completely uneconomic"¹⁹). The next edition reported that the Devizes MP Mr Percivall Pott had said that closure was inconvenient but necessary "if we want to save this country from ridiculous taxation." This was at the foot of a longer piece quoting BR on the estimated sums to be saved, and how buses would be running instead: "...minimum savings per year at £125,196 on working expenses and provision for removal, [less] estimated loss of gross receipts (£5,734) and estimated cost of providing alternative road services (£6,344)," plus a potential £184,990 on renewals from 1961-5.²⁰ In this pre-1962 climate, when the economic argument was still legitimately deployable (as with Westerham²¹), no challenging of these figures appeared then or later.

The tone changed somewhat on 21 April when a short piece briefly stated that Pewsey Council would support Marlborough Council's opposition to the rail closure, but gave greater attention to their joint desire to safeguard the future of the Kennet and Avon Canal. A 26 May letter stated that the Transport Users' Consultative Committee [TUCC] meeting was scheduled for 9 June in Swindon, and invited correspondence on the subject. But silence then reigned until July, when Councillor Seamer's speech at the Council meeting was reported at length (with a supportive editorial comment), saying that he was not defending the whole line, but just asserting the need for the 'Donkey' to Savernake - and the inconvenience and probable unreliability of the proposed bus service.²²

¹⁸ David Henshaw, *The Great Railway Conspiracy*. (Dorchester: A to B Books, 2013 edn), 146

¹⁹ *Marlborough Times*, 17 January 1961

²⁰ *Marlborough Times*, 24 January 1961

²¹ Charles Loft, *Last Trains*, 106-7

²² *Marlborough Times*, 7 July 1961

Subsequently Councillor Seamer reported at a Council meeting that the TUC had confirmed that the 'Donkey' would be closed along with the rest of the line, as arrangements for bus services for schoolchildren and special trains for Marlborough College, alongside a general bus service, were deemed satisfactory;²³ the formal British Transport Commission notice of closure appeared in the 18 August edition. On 8 September a single published letter claimed that Marlborough had been "shabbily treated" – because the alternative bus to Newbury was unsatisfactory - and the 15 September edition extensively covered the 'Last Train', with a single reply to the earlier letter saying the writer should have supported the Council's campaign.

The bus did indeed prove unsatisfactory – it couldn't negotiate the slope at Savernake station²⁴ – but, excepting a major nostalgia feature briefly mentioning the former railway in June 1962²⁵, the only further local newspaper coverage was about the merits of Bedwyn and Pewsey as alternative railheads²⁶. As for the 'social railway' argument, not yet widely heard in 1961, the authors that found the 'disadvantaged' people of New Alresford²⁷ who grieved the inconvenience of their own 1973 closure could probably have found similarly aggrieved individuals in Marlborough, but in 1961-2 such voices were almost inaudible.

Contrasting with the fuss over the closure of certain other lines at the time the loss of Marlborough's rail service seems to have registered barely a whimper. Even in this pre-Beeching era, the Andover-Cheltenham line was recognised as uneconomic²⁸, with no special 'social' claim either. Although a 4-mile heritage stretch has been opened at Blunsdon,²⁹ north of Swindon, no case is being made even now for its theoretical value as a north-south artery.³⁰

[1251 words, plus 62 in footnotes]

²³ *Marlborough Times*, 4 August 1961

²⁴ *Marlborough Times*, 5 January 1962

²⁵ *Marlborough Times*, 29 June 1962

²⁶ *Marlborough Times*, principally 16 February and 20 April 1962

²⁷ Mayer Hillman & Anne Walley. *The Social Consequences of Rail Closures*. (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1980), 7,11,113,127 etc: Alresford, Hants, 43 miles from Marlborough, broadly comparable with population 2,159 in 1961 (http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10016253/cube/TOT_POP Accessed 29/12/16)

²⁸ JA Patmore, J.A. "The Contraction of the Network of Railway Passenger Services in England and Wales, 1836-1962", (*Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 38, June 1966), 114: "Over-provision of railway facilities" exemplified

²⁹ Taw Valley to Hayes Knoll: <http://www.swindon-cricklade-railway.org/line.php#top> Accessed 9/12/16.

³⁰ Chris Austin and Richard Faulkner, *Disconnected! Broken Links in Britain's Rail Policy* (Aldershot: Oxford Publishing Company, 2015), 65-71: Highlights the former DN&SR route, mentions the S&D, but is silent on the M&SWJR.

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