

DISCONNECTED!

Broken Links in Britain's Rail Policy



CHRIS AUSTIN & RICHARD FAULKNER



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390

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INTRODUCTION

*'The only function of economic forecasting
is to make astrology look respectable.'*

JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH²

This book looks at the contraction of the British railway network over a 50-year period and its subsequent expansion and development from the mid-1990s onwards. In particular, it reviews lines that were lost and that today would have formed a valuable part of the national rail network. It includes some positive stories where lines have been restored, and some unhappy stories where lines have been lost for ever. It chronicles the seismic changes in the approach to rail planning in Britain over the last 60 years and draws some lessons for the future.

It is not a criticism of Dr Beeching³ or his report, which we subjected to detailed analysis in our first book, *Holding the Line*. Indeed, it draws on some of his prescient words reflecting a clear view on his part of the railway's strengths and weaknesses. Its purpose is to set out the facts on some of the most significant examples of disinvestment in transport infrastructure from the 1950s to the 1980s. We then move on to record the steps taken to reinstate the routes or the capacity destroyed, and readers may draw their own conclusions on the merits or otherwise of the original closures. We also identify those routes and stations that would have brought real benefits to passengers, freight customers and to the British economy today, and, perhaps more controversially, identify a few key routes that we believe fail the test and would not justify reinstatement.

In general, our aim here is not to criticise those railway managers who brought forward the proposals for retrenchment, for they could not foresee the subsequent revival in the fortunes of the railway or the huge latent demand that would develop for rail travel. Criticism could rightly be levelled at some of the decisions made, notably those on the closure of Birmingham Snow Hill, which had to be recreated at huge expense just 16 years after closure. We should also criticise the lack of strategic direction that was a failing by ministers, civil servants and the British Transport Commission. Perhaps the most significant failure throughout the period of British Railways' existence was that of civil servants and ministers who never identified the role of the industry that had been nationalised in 1948. Throughout the period we review the railwaymen were working in something of a policy vacuum. The main point though is to learn the lessons of history, the most significant of which is that it is impossible to forecast the long-term future with any degree of accuracy, and that this leads inevitably to the conclusion that the only tenable strategy is to keep options open to deal with change that may be unexpected, or contrary to the trend of previous years. One example is the way in which smaller market towns lost their self

sufficiency from the 1960s onwards, and became ever more dependent on a nearby major town or city. Supermarkets replaced local shops, schools and hospitals were concentrated in ever larger units and local manufacturing was lost as Britain moved to import its basic requirements. The story of the Minsters' Line in chapter five is an illustration of this phenomenon and the significance of this change is that it creates the need for more trips between towns which, in the absence of a railway, tend to be made by car on increasingly inadequate roads.

We also pay tribute to the whistleblowers, the courageous people who put their careers on the line or risked prosecution to bring the secret plans on clandestine rail closures to the attention of the press and the public. Without them, we would have a smaller network to develop today.

One of the surprises in researching the material for this book has been the large number of lines that would today form a valuable part of the national network. They might add access points to the network in areas currently remote from a station. They might provide a useful alternative route during engineering work or train or infrastructure failures. They might provide relief for a busy route that can then accommodate more services itself. Or they might serve two or even all three of these functions.

The national network run by Network Rail was 10,625 miles in 2014, of which 780 miles were freight only.⁴ The conclusions of our study, described in this book, would increase that mileage only by 530 (5%), and is a modest aspiration that would deliver a big improvement in accessibility and resilience for the current network. Our analysis also suggests that a further 680 miles would have formed a useful part of today's network but are probably not capable of restoration. If the 330 miles of high-speed route are added, that brings the total of new mileage to be built to 860, which would increase the network size by just 8% to 11,485 route miles, an entirely achievable figure. Adding in those that are beyond recall would have made the ideal network size just under 12,200 miles. The actual list of lines we think would have value today is set out in Appendix A.

In saying this, we know (from past experience) that our figure will be wrong, and that the requirement may be for more or less than this. We therefore conclude that action needs to be taken to safeguard the routes that will be required, and plans drawn up for their protection. For tomorrow's planners, the rail link has to become the basic building block for today's development and regeneration, just as the 'spine road' or trunk road junction improvement was seen as essential in the past.



It is significant too that most of the lines that would be useful today are those that were excluded from Dr Beeching's first report, and their closure came later, after Beeching had left BRB. In some cases they were put forward when the Department declined to pay support for the lines concerned, and in others by BR managers who were desperately trying to shed costs to meet Government financing limits.

It is also significant that the decline of the network and its rapid reduction in size took place under BR, while the growth has taken place since privatisation. Latterly BR, to its credit, did reopen many stations and lines, the greatest number being through the initiative and funding of the PTEs⁵. The great surge in demand, however, and the more ambitious expansion programmes to deal with growth have come with the privatised railway, and this too has changed the attitude of Government to the industry. This is not so much a political polemic as an observed fact, and is discussed in more detail later.

MEMENTOES

So many towns still have a Station Road although they have not seen a train for 50 years. This example is at Clevedon, which had two stations.
Chris Austin

Our conclusion has to be that Beeching's 'Reshaping' report was less damaging than is sometimes claimed. The real damage came from the second report, which identified selected lines for development and condemned the rest of the network to a twilight period of no investment or development, and during the dark days of the decade after Beeching's departure in 1965 many withered and died.

It is also worth noting that a number of these later closures were of lines that have subsequently become successful heritage railways for at least part of their length.

demonstrated, together with the need for a second platform at stations and fully accessible footbridges.

The first part of the Okehampton route, from Exeter to Yeoford, is in a flood plain and would require work if it were to become the resilient all-weather alternative route that is required.

In July 2014, Network Rail published its study¹¹⁰ into providing a resilient rail link west of Exeter and considered a number of options including:

- Providing greater protection for the existing coastal route
- Rebuilding the Teign Valley line as a double-track railway
- Restoring the Okehampton route
- Five options for a new line bypassing Dawlish, a similar approach to that for which the Great Western secured powers and on which the company started work in 1939, stopping short on the outbreak of the Second World War

The estimated cost of providing a double-track main line from Cowley Bridge Junction to the junction at St Budeaux was £875 million, although this includes a 66% contingency, making the base cost £527 million. The cost of a single-track route with dynamic loops to allow trains to pass at speed was estimated to be £655-700 million (£395-422 million without the contingency).

The estimated non-stop running time for a Class 220 'Voyager' between Exeter and Plymouth via Okehampton would be only 53 minutes, just 4 minutes longer than the run via Dawlish. A time penalty would apply for reversing trains at Exeter, however, and at Plymouth for trains continuing to Cornwall.

Clearly, the first priority is to protect the existing Great Western route with its large population centres. However, the added value of the Okehampton route is clear and, had it not closed, it would today be both a valuable line of regional significance serving areas of Devon and Cornwall that are today remote from a railhead. With rising sea levels, and the need for higher levels of maintenance of the coastal route, it would also have had a clear added value as a diversionary route.

Apart from that, Plymouth with its population of a quarter of a million is the only city in Britain of that size with just a single rail link with the rest of the country. In 1968 that was not seen as an issue. In 2015 it is, and a second line is needed, not just because of the vulnerability of the single route at Dawlish, but because from time to time it will be closed as a result of failure or incident, and quite frequently for maintenance. Something better than the present arrangement is needed for the 21st century.

Salisbury-Exeter

The eastern end of the Southern main line to the West remained open and has prospered. East Devon and Dorset are thriving and the line from Exeter Central to Salisbury and Waterloo is busier than ever with passenger trains. It was not listed for development in the second Beeching Report, and was singled between Pinhoe and Wilton in 1968, after the local stations had been closed (in 1966). The Western Region wanted to provide a good semi-fast service to London to remain competitive with road (the A303 was to be upgraded and parallels the railway), and allocated 'Warship' diesels to achieve this. Local opposition to retrenchment left too many

stations and a rather slow and definitely second-class service. Gerry Fiennes¹¹¹, the General Manager at the time, recorded his frustration in his autobiography:

'We drew up timetables to introduce as soon as the small stations were closed, accelerating the expresses by up to 20 minutes and giving the remaining stations an express to and from London every two hours. Dorset started to manoeuvre. Keep Yeovil Junction open as well as Crewkerne and Sherborne within three or four miles on either side. Templecombe must stay... Tisbury, of course... I got fed up with them; and they have got what they deserved: an express service far slower than before: and to my belief uncompetitive with road.'¹¹²

Indeed, in 1968 the best time between Waterloo and Exeter was 3hr 23min with eight intermediate stops. In fact, road speeds deteriorated faster, while rail speeds have subsequently improved, and the railway now enjoys double the level of service – an hourly service to London. Interestingly, the present service takes 3hr 17min from Waterloo to Exeter Central, with 14 intermediate stops, a little quicker than the 'Warship' service of 1968 and just 12 minutes longer than the 'Atlantic Coast Express' in 1959, which made just two stops at Salisbury and Sidmouth Junction. The market is probably large enough now to contemplate two trains an hour, one fast and one semi-fast, to meet local and long-distance markets, not only to London but also for South Coast destinations via Salisbury.

The right decision was taken to retain the line in the 1960s, and only with the benefit of hindsight could one criticise the lack of capacity resulting from the singling. In 1968 nobody expected the business to grow, and everyone thought, together with Gerry Fiennes, that the A303 would make further inroads into rail passenger numbers.

The pattern of loops left was matched to the requirements of a locomotive-hauled 2-hourly service, a solution designed for the technology of the time, but setting the service pattern in aspic. More frequent services required the additional loop at Tisbury, while the newer generation of Class 159 units, with faster acceleration, meant that the loops were in the wrong place. This has been addressed with a new 3-mile loop at Axminster, but inevitably further increases in services or the next generation of trains will mean more investment in future capacity.

This was a feature common to all the singling schemes such as the Cotswold line, East Suffolk, Bolton-Blackburn and the Glasgow & South Western route via Dumfries. All have proved inadequate and significant investment in the first and last have been needed to meet the requirements of today's business (and in the case of the Cotswold line, more is needed to complete the redoubling between Evesham and Norton Junction, and Wolvercote to Charlbury).

* Through the Vale of Evesham: Cheltenham-Honeybourne-Stratford *

The lost opportunities of Cheltenham's stations are set out in Chapter 10, but the route to Honeybourne and Stratford is a story of incompetence and prevarication that would strain credulity, even as an episode of *Yes, Minister*.

Like the Great Central, the Great Western's route from Cheltenham to Birmingham via Stratford-upon-Avon was a late

arrival on the scene, opening throughout in 1906, with through expresses starting in 1910. It was one of a series of cut-off lines in which the company invested to reduce journey times and provide for expanding business. Like the Great Central, it was a competitive route designed to give the company an edge over a rival, in this case the Midland Railway.

In terms of intermediate traffic, the new line only served a string of small villages in Gloucestershire and Worcestershire, although Broadway generated quite a bit of traffic for the local auto-train. However, it was as a through route from the West Midlands to South Wales and the South West that the line had real value. While not a fast route, it provided plenty of capacity and avoided the constraint of the Lickey incline on the Midland route. While linked to the North Warwickshire line, the through trains ran via the Hatton north curve, giving them a fast run into Birmingham over the four-track section from Lapworth. Its high point was in the 1930s when it carried a substantial service of expresses from Birmingham and Wolverhampton to the West Country and South Wales, some of the latter being operated by the streamlined Great Western diesel railcars. Between 1952 and 1962 'The Cornishman' used the route between Wolverhampton and Penzance.

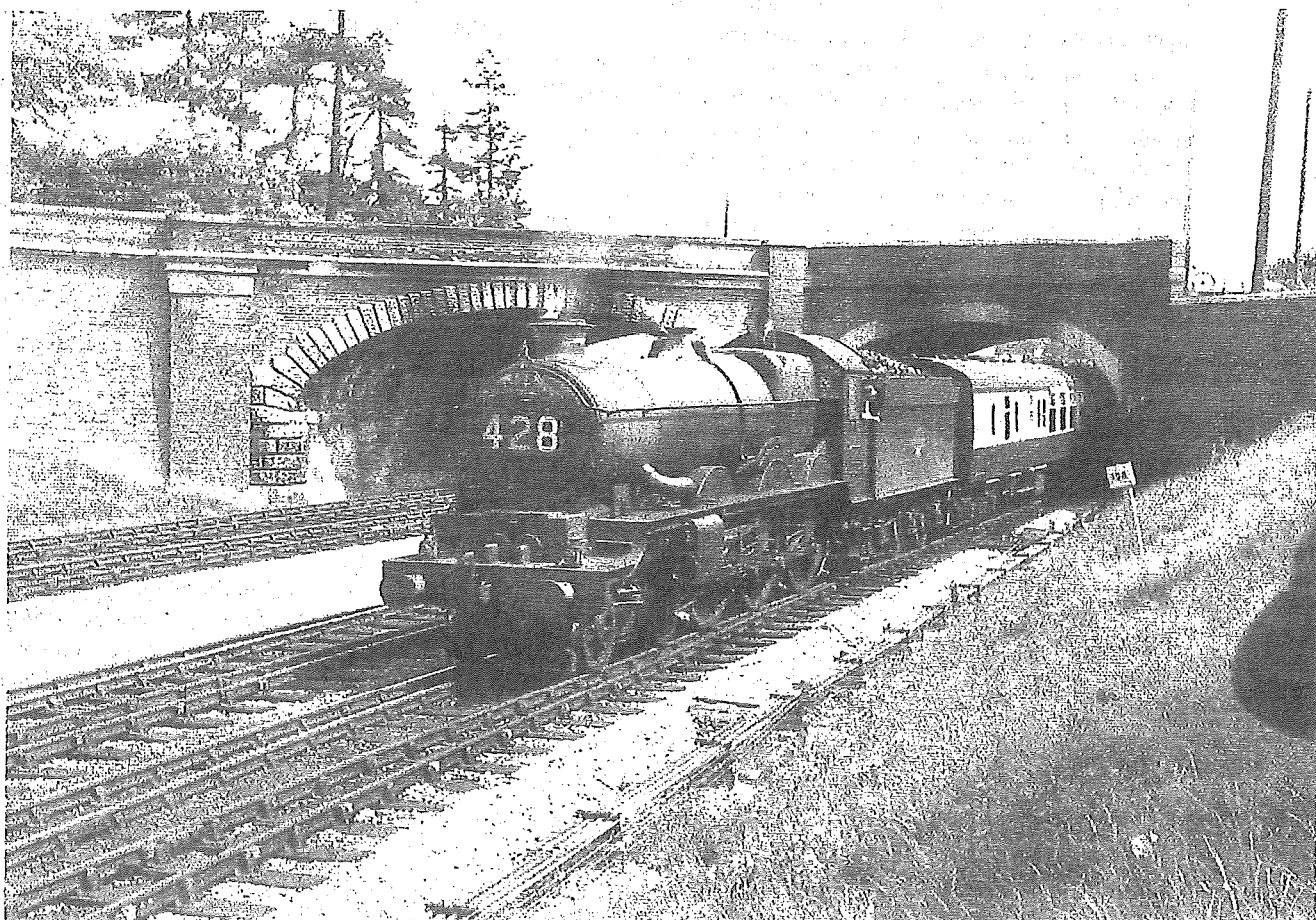
Local stations on the route south of Honeybourne had closed in 1960, with the through express trains, including 'The Cornishman', being rerouted via the Midland route in 1962. The residual through passenger service on the line (two trains a day each way between Leamington Spa and Gloucester) was finally withdrawn in 1968, with

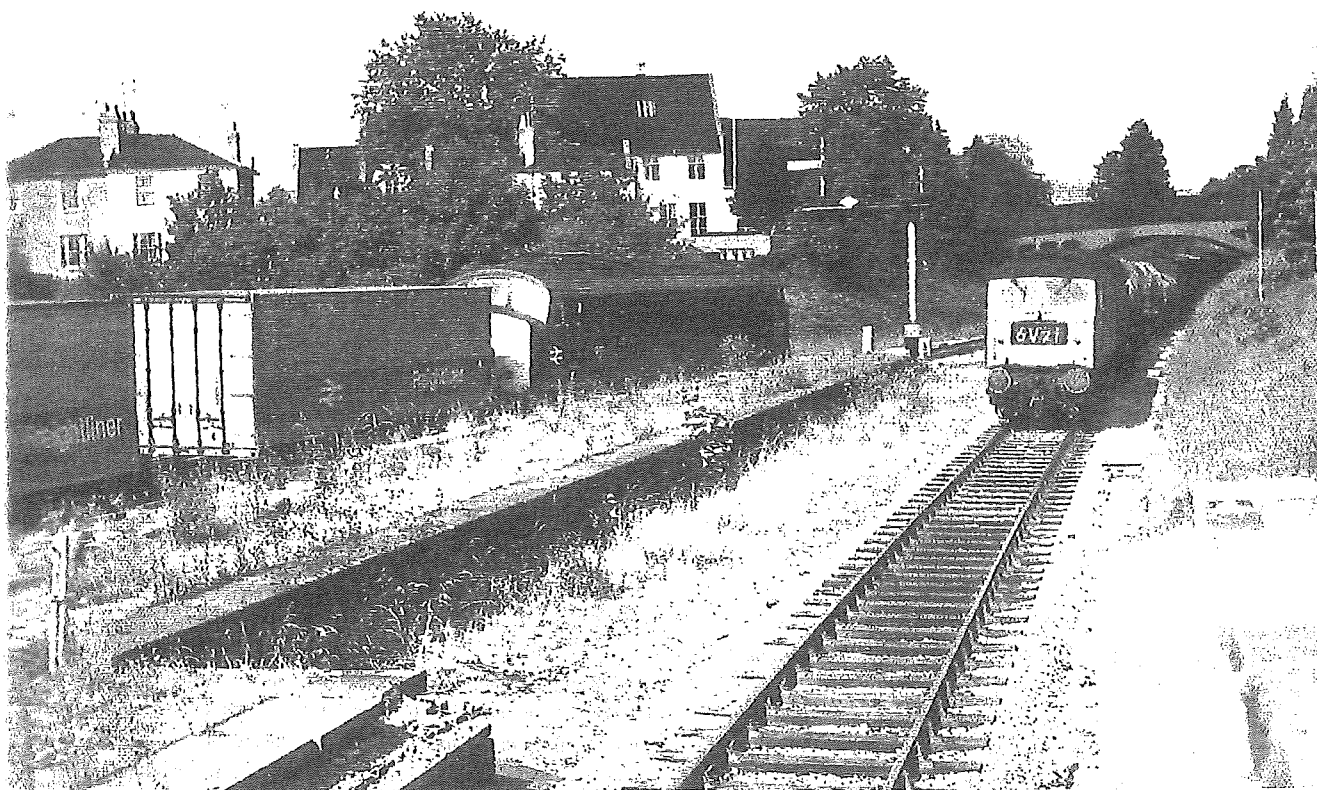
the useful Worcester-Honeybourne-Stratford service coming off in 1969. By 1971, though, the route was still being used by five freight trains daily each way and was a diversionary route for passenger trains between Cheltenham and Birmingham while engineering work was taking place on the route via the Lickey incline. With the freight contracts then in place, a future for the line was seen at least until 1974. Other developments on the Lickey route were the planned introduction of HSTs on the cross-country service, with a 125mph capability, and the expected subsequent introduction of the gas-turbine APT with a capability of 155mph. The West Midlands PTE had also started to plan the cross-city service, originally intended to run from Lichfield to Frankley, but later cut back to Longbridge, with some trains going through to Redditch. All these developments meant that capacity on the Midland route was going to be tight.

In September 1971 minds were concentrated by a proposal from the Department of the Environment to use part of the line at the southern end for a Cheltenham relief road. For BR, closure of the line would mean a grant of £136,000 from Government for eliminating the surplus capacity, £104,000 for the scrap value of the

CORNISHMAN AT CHELTENHAM

Coming off the Stratford line at Lansdown Junction in June 1960 behind No 5031 *Totnes Castle* of Stafford Road shed, this express has come from Wolverhampton Low Level and is going to Penzance. It is taking the line towards Gloucester, and the diverging route in the foreground is that for Andoversford and Kingham. *John C. Baker*





track, signalling and structures, an annual saving in operating costs of £45,000, and a rather optimistic assumption that it could secure compensation of perhaps as much as £2 million for giving up the route for the road.

Decisions on the future of the line changed frequently during 1972. On 23 March the Western Region General Manager had recommended closure (from 1974), but the Chief Executive at the Board, David Bowick, decided¹¹³ on 16 May that the line should remain open. Within five weeks, however, he had changed his mind and a letter of 21 June indicated that the line should close from the end of 1973. On 15 September the Board's Chief Operations Manager wrote to confirm that the date for closure had been brought forward to January 1973. Within three weeks there had been another change of heart and the Executive Director, Systems & Operations at the Board had written to halt the closure, and this was followed by an exasperated letter from the General Manager on 11 October. He had already agreed the freight train diversions with the London Midland Region; he had consulted on the proposal with the trade unions at sectional council, and they had objected, referring it to head office level. He had authorised the signalling alterations required to convert the Honeybourne-Long Marston section to a single track, and the savings were already in the budget for the following year. Could the Board give him guidance on how to explain this to staff, colleagues and customers?

Worse was to come, for this decision also meant that the formation could not be used for the road in Cheltenham. In an

USEFUL DIVERSION

The disused station at Malvern Road, Cheltenham, is the meeting point for northbound and southbound freight trains on 6 July 1971. All trains were diverted via Stratford following a derailment on the Midland route at Eckington. The disused bay platform between the two trains had been used by the Honeybourne to Cheltenham Spa St James auto-trains until 1960.

Eric Ilett

angry letter of 6 April 1973, the Cheltenham Town Clerk expressed incredulity at the decision, but perhaps this was because he had commissioned consultants to draw up proposals for the road using the line of the old railway, at a cost of £40,000. Local press reaction was hostile to BR, and also inflated the cost of the report to £60,000. DoE was unhappy, and a stiff letter from Bill Sharpe followed saying they should have been advised beforehand, and that it had caused problems with its regional office and local MPs. BRHQ, quite rightly, dismissed these narrowly based objections and on 9 October 1973 the Railway Investment Panel (which handled investment expenditure within the Chief Executive's delegated powers) approved the retention and restoration of the line for 75mph running, at a cost of £1,110,000.

The work was not put in hand, and in August 1976 the future of the line was overtaken by events. An up freight train was derailed approaching Winchcombe, and a lot of damage to track occurred. The derailment was caused by a serious slip in the embankment on the famous 'Chicken Curve', which was to be the site of a further



devastating slip in 2012 that severed the heritage Gloucestershire Warwickshire Railway for 18 months. The inherent problem stemmed from the original poor construction of the embankment, where spoil had been tipped directly on to the field without preparation, and the heritage railway has now rebuilt it properly, so a recurrence is unlikely.

While the Winchcombe accident meant that traffic ceased on the railway, its future remained undetermined. On 30 September 1977 the General Manager (by then Jim O'Brien) wrote to David Bowick¹¹⁴ to advise him that he would have to replace the junction at Lansdown with plain line, as the poor condition of the fittings on the connections had resulted in the imposition of a 20mph temporary speed restriction on the main line at that point. By this time the whole line had deteriorated quite badly as no maintenance or renewals had been undertaken for a few years, and O'Brien's letter indicates that, 'Indeed, no movement is allowed over this section without the express permission of the CCE'¹¹⁵.

In June 1977 the London Midland Region issued a consultation document concluding that there was no justification in retaining the line as a diversionary route. The report quoted a cost of £1,273,000 to restore the line for 50mph running. The trade unions, however, which had been somewhat supine during the height of the closure controversy 15 years earlier, were a lot more active in opposing closures now. All three unions objected to the removal of track from the Honeybourne line, and were prepared to back this with non-cooperation. In 1979, therefore, Ian Campbell, the Board's Chief Executive, wrote to instruct the General Manager to let the contract

LIMIT OF SHUNT

No 37235 hauls a short train of vans from Long Marston MOD depot to Didcot on 17 February 1992. It is heading south towards Honeybourne and is just regaining the formation of the former line to Cheltenham. Behind the locomotive can be seen the overgrown formation of the route to Stratford.

Peter Tandy

for track-lifting 'without recourse to the use of railway resources'. Lifting was complete at the end of that year.

Fortunately, that was not the end. In 1977 the Gloucestershire & Warwickshire Railway Trust was formed to reopen the line between the Stratford and Cheltenham racecourses. A base was established at Toddington in 1981 and opened to the public, with just a quarter of a mile of track laid in April 1984, the opening ceremony being performed by the Secretary of State for Transport and Cotswold MP Nicholas Ridley¹¹⁶. The line was extended south steadily and was formally opened to Cheltenham Racecourse by the Princess Royal on 7 April 2003. Subsequently the line has been extended north from Toddington, with the aim of linking to the picturesque village of Broadway in 2017, the limit of the company's ownership. Setback occurred with an embankment collapse at Gotherington in 2010 and another at Winchcombe ('Chicken Curve') in 2012, but have been overcome by this determined and successful railway.

Looking to the north, the possibility of the Gloucestershire Warwickshire Railway eventually reaching Honeybourne must be considered good. The case for reopening Honeybourne to Stratford upon-Avon as part of the national network is even stronger, and was

enhanced by the major landslide on the Chiltern main line between Banbury and Leamington on 31 January 2015. That closed this busy route for many weeks, and meant that journeys on Chiltern and CrossCountry trains had to be interrupted by an unwelcome bus journey around the closed line.

Had the trains continued to operate to Stratford from the south (and Oxford, with the reinstatement of a chord to the east of Honeybourne), there would have been an ideal ready-made diversionary route, as well as the basis of a new semi-circular route serving Worcester, Evesham, Stratford and Birmingham, used by commuters and tourists. It would also be attractive to Vintage Trains, the operators of the steam specials from Tyseley to Stratford and places further afield.

Conclusions

So, should the line have been kept as part of the national network and would it today have value as a link in the network?

BR's prevarication in 1972 suggests that there was genuine uncertainty as to whether the line was required or not. Under these conditions, the default position should surely have been to retain it, on the grounds that it is so much harder to replace a line that has been closed than to expand the use of one that has been retained, even if little used for a period. However, as we have seen, retaining the line would not have been without cost. Following the derailment, around £1.25 million (£14.3 million at today's prices) would have been required to restore the line to a useable condition. During the 1980s freight continued to decline and the case for an alternative freight route would have been correspondingly weaker. Operation as a diversionary route would have been useful, however, both for track renewals on the Barnt Green route and during the electrification of the cross-city line. It might also have found a useful role with the expansion of cross-country services where one of the constraints on Virgin's 'Operation Princess' in 2002 was limited route capacity. There is no doubt that a service from Bristol, Gloucester and Cheltenham to Stratford and Birmingham would be providing a useful alternative to the A46 today. If it were there, the line would be a significant link in the national network, similar to the route from nearby Worcester to Birmingham via Kidderminster, but if that were the case the Gloucestershire Warwickshire heritage railway would not have developed and a major tourist attraction for Gloucestershire (and a significant local employer) would have been lost.

So, a potentially useful link was lost, but a significant heritage line replaced it, initially from Toddington to Cheltenham Racecourse. Sadly, the encroachment of development in Cheltenham appears to have prevented the heritage line from connecting with the national network at that end, and perhaps performing a dual function in the future. It should be a different story at Honeybourne, though, with the heritage line getting its main-line connection there, and linking to a reopened Honeybourne to Stratford line.

* Steaming through Strathmore: the Caledonian main line to Aberdeen

From Perth the double-track main line heads north for Inverness, but 7 miles on at Stanley Junction it becomes single. This is where the Highland Railway started and the formation of the first main line from the south to Aberdeen continues straight on. Opened in

1848, it became part of the Caledonian in 1866 while the arch-rival, the North British, did not arrive until the opening of the Tay Bridge in 1878 (and, more particularly, the replacement bridge opened in 1887), while its route was only completed with the opening of that Scottish icon, the Forth Bridge, in 1890. The NBR relied on running powers over its rival north of Kinnaber Junction, where the two lines joined. The double-track Caledonian main line ran for 44½ miles through Strathmore from Stanley Junction to Kinnaber, which was effectively the winning post in the 'races to the north' between the east and west coast companies that culminated in the summer of 1895. Mileposts from this point to Aberdeen are still measured from Carlisle by the Forfar route.

Journey times were some 15 minutes quicker via Forfar than the alternative line via Dundee used by Scotrail express trains today. The Strathmore line was a racecourse over which latterly the thoroughbred 'A4s' ran with the 3-hour expresses between Glasgow (Buchanan Street) and Aberdeen as their swansong. In September 1966 the song ended and a year later the line itself lost its passenger service. Today's best timing between Queen Street and Aberdeen is 2hr 33min via Dundee.

While 1967 saw the end of the line as a through route, Stanley Junction to Forfar remained open for freight until 1982, while at the eastern end Kinnaber Junction to Bridge of Dun and Brechin closed for freight in 1981. The 4 miles from Bridge of Dun to Brechin now forms the Caledonian Railway heritage line.

The line was both a competitive route and served a rural corridor to the north of Dundee. In any reduction of capacity, it was inevitable that it would lose out to an alternative that served the much greater population and industry on Tayside. So it is unsurprising that it was included in the Beeching Report for closure, together with the remaining intermediate stations at Coupar Angus, Alyth Junction, Forfar and Bridge of Dun. Some 214 written objections were received, together with 1,702 objections registered via a form circulated by objectors.

The TUCC for Scotland found evidence¹⁷ of severe and extensive hardship for users from Forfar, a large market town, with a big rural hinterland and 14 miles from the nearest alternative station at Dundee. Consequently the minister, in approving the closure, required the provision of replacement buses between Forfar and Perth, two of which should have rail connections to the south, as well as buses from Coupar Angus to Perth.

Inevitably, the A90 has had huge investment since the closure of the railway and is dualled all the way from the M90 junction to Aberdeen, including bypasses around Forfar and Brechin. The A94, however, which follows the old line through Strathmore, remains a single-carriageway road, albeit with bypasses including a relief road using the formation of the railway through Coupar Angus, opened in 1997.

It would be hard to argue the need for the restoration of the line today, and ScotRail runs an excellent service between Glasgow and Aberdeen, planning to operate this with high-speed diesel trains to meet the capacity needed and expectations of journey times between the two cities. However, Forfar did lose out when its railway closed and the line did provide a useful alternative route to Aberdeen, in particular as it avoided the single-track pinch point between Usan and Montrose.

thin 1hr 22min of the city. With five platforms, this will eventually provide the city with more platform capacity (22) than it had in the heyday of steam (20). The final result will be quite a success story.

The history of the Leeds stations is different from the others we've considered in detail. They were certainly the result of the way the railways around Leeds developed piecemeal, but they were not really the product of competition in quite the same way as the two principal Birmingham stations or the bitter rivalries that created two stations at either end of Princes Street in Edinburgh. Indeed, they were both joint ventures shared by all the companies whose lines fed into them, and so railways, the NER and LNWR, had a share in both Central and Wellington stations. At such an important interchange point, it was certainly inconvenient having two stations requiring additional interchange facilities, even though they were quite close together. As an added complication, trains from Leeds to Harrogate left from both stations. Again, the lesson is that capacity is easy to destroy and very costly to recreate. In Leeds the outcome has been a happy one – a joint venture forming a hub for all local, regional and long-distance services, with good facilities and relatively easy interchange.

THE DECO DELIGHT

The LMS concourse at Leeds has been well restored by Network Rail and is the site of the earlier Wellington station. It is now linked to the newer concourse behind the photographer. *Chris Austin*

Redevelopment of the Leeds Central site has been a long time coming, but at the time of writing good-quality offices and restaurants were starting to cover the site, leaving just one of the wagon hoists and the approach viaduct as a memorial to the past age. This development is on such a scale as to secure Leeds's place as the principal administrative as well as retail focus in Yorkshire and Humberside, providing a large and coherent central business district that can only be effectively served by rail. Central's loss has effectively secured the future of the railway in Leeds.

* Gloucester, Cheltenham and Worcester *

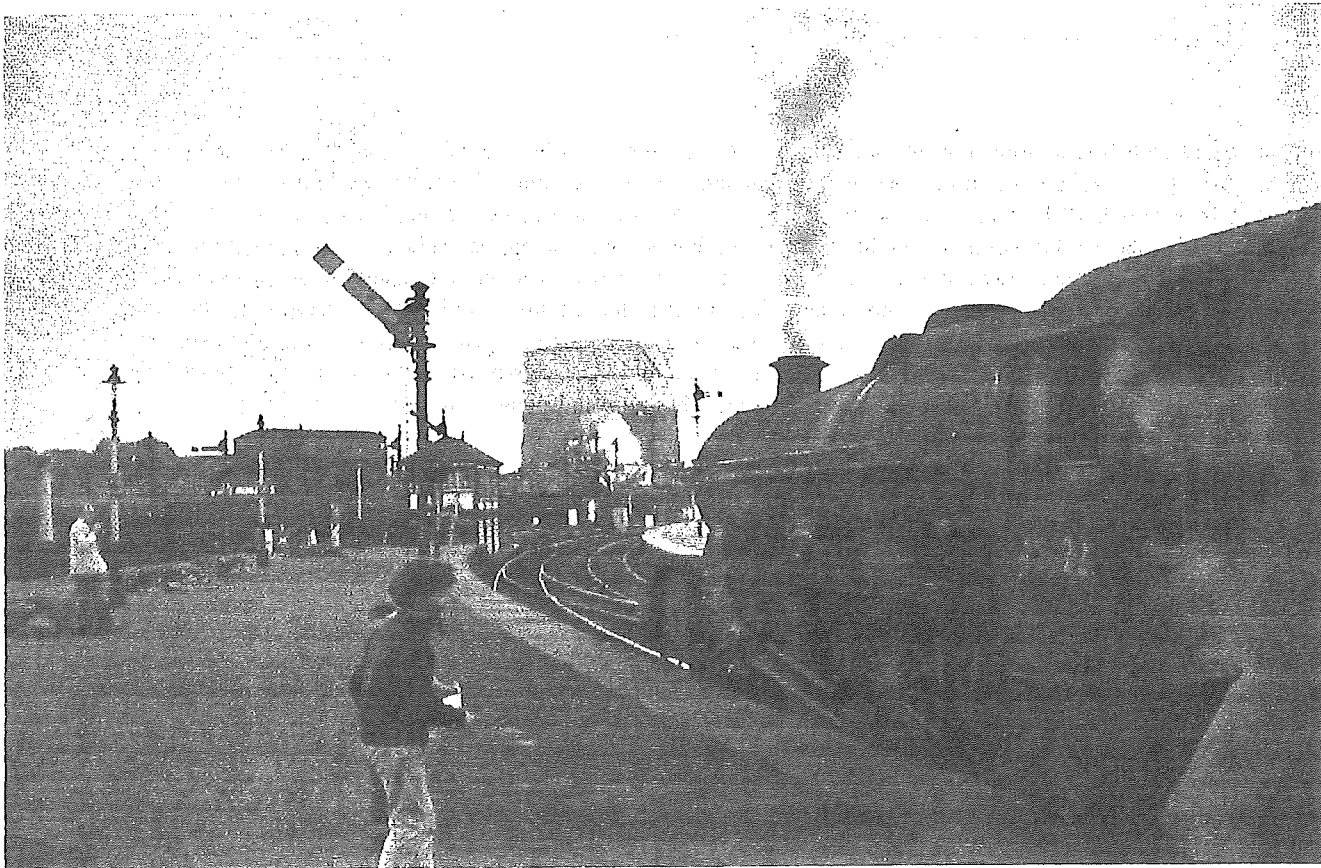
These are interesting examples in two neighbouring cities and the major town between them, where different solutions were chosen, each with some disadvantages for the communities served.

Gloucester

Railway history and the pressures of competition between the Midland and Great Western railways resulted in two stations in the city, Central (GWR) and Eastgate (MR).

The first railway to reach the city was the Birmingham & Gloucester Railway, which arrived in 1840, built as a standard gauge line. This was followed in July 1844 by the Bristol & Gloucester, planned as a standard gauge line, but the company was persuaded by Brunel to change this to the broad gauge. The Cheltenham & Great





Western Union Railway, a broad gauge line linking Cheltenham and Gloucester to Swindon, opened in October of the same year. All three railways used stations on or near the present station site.

The city thus formed the frontier between the two gauges, and the disruption and delay caused by the exchange of passengers and parcels was a key factor in the decision of the Parliamentary Commission of 1845 to recommend the choice of the standard gauge and made inevitable the end of the broad gauge in 1892.

The break of gauge might have been of less significance had the two companies been taken over by the Great Western as had been agreed in 1843. The Midland Railway made a better offer, however, and effectively snatched the Bristol-Birmingham route²⁴¹ from under the noses of the Great Western directors. Its amalgamation with the Midland Railway was authorised by Act of Parliament in August 1846.

The need for transfer at Gloucester was seen as a straightforward affair, 'as passengers from Birmingham could simply step across the platform from one train to another.'²⁴² For the visit of the Parliamentary Gauge commissioners in 1845, however, J. D. Payne, the goods manager of the Birmingham & Gloucester Railway, arranged a piece of theatre by having two goods trains that had already been dealt with unloaded again to add to the work.²⁴³ The commissioners were duly appalled at the disorganised confusion on their visit, and the Gloucester break-of-gauge 'chaos' has become part of railway folklore. The problem was finally solved in May 1872 with the conversion of the broad gauge lines in the Gloucester area to standard gauge.

Ironically, the Great Western's Central station is on the site of the original Birmingham & Gloucester terminus, although the Midland's Birmingham trains moved across to Eastgate when it was opened in

CROSS COUNTRY CONNECTION

'Jubilee' 4-6-0 No 45622 *Nyasaland* awaits departure from Gloucester Eastgate with a train for the north. Beyond the station the line crosses the Great Western at Tramway Junction. In the background is the ex-GWR engine shed at Horton Road. *Chris Austin*

1896. Central became a through station when the Gloucester & Dean Forest Railway opened in 1851 to Grange Court, where it linked with the South Wales Railway, which opened on the same day.

Central station is closer to the city centre and serves both the route to South Wales and the routes north to Birmingham and south to Bristol and London. A triangular junction just to the east of the station allows trains from the north via Birmingham to serve Gloucester Central, then to reverse and head south to Bristol and the South West. The station originally had two long through platforms, and two through centre roads, with crossovers allowing both up and down platforms to be used by two short trains simultaneously. A bay platform at the eastern end on the up side was provided for the Chalford auto-trains, and one at the west end on the down side for the Hereford and Ledbury trains as well as local trains to Cardiff.

Eastgate station was on a loop built from the original line from Bristol at Tuffley Junction to the south of the city, and connecting back into the main line to Birmingham just to the north of the stations at Tramway Junction, a distance of 1 mile 49 chains. It was linked to Central station by a covered footbridge 250 yards long, and had three long through platforms, an up (northbound) platform and a down island platform, as well as a bay platform on the up side facing towards Birmingham.

Both stations were busy with local and express trains, but the former gradually disappeared with the Ledbury branch closing in 1959, the Chalford auto-trains being withdrawn in 1964, the line to Ross and Hereford closing the same year, and the local stations on the Bristol route closing in 1965. A number of local stations between Gloucester and Chepstow had closed at various dates between 1954 and 1964. Almost all the through trains used Eastgate at this stage, whether they were running via the Midland or Great Western routes. So, by the summer 1965 timetable the number of train departures each weekday were:

Gloucester Central	
Up trains (towards Swindon/Paddington)	2
Down trains (towards Cardiff or Cheltenham or beyond)	29
Gloucester Eastgate	
Up trains (towards Cheltenham or Birmingham)	14
Down trains (towards Bristol)	15
Down trains (towards Swindon/Paddington)	10
Total for both stations	70

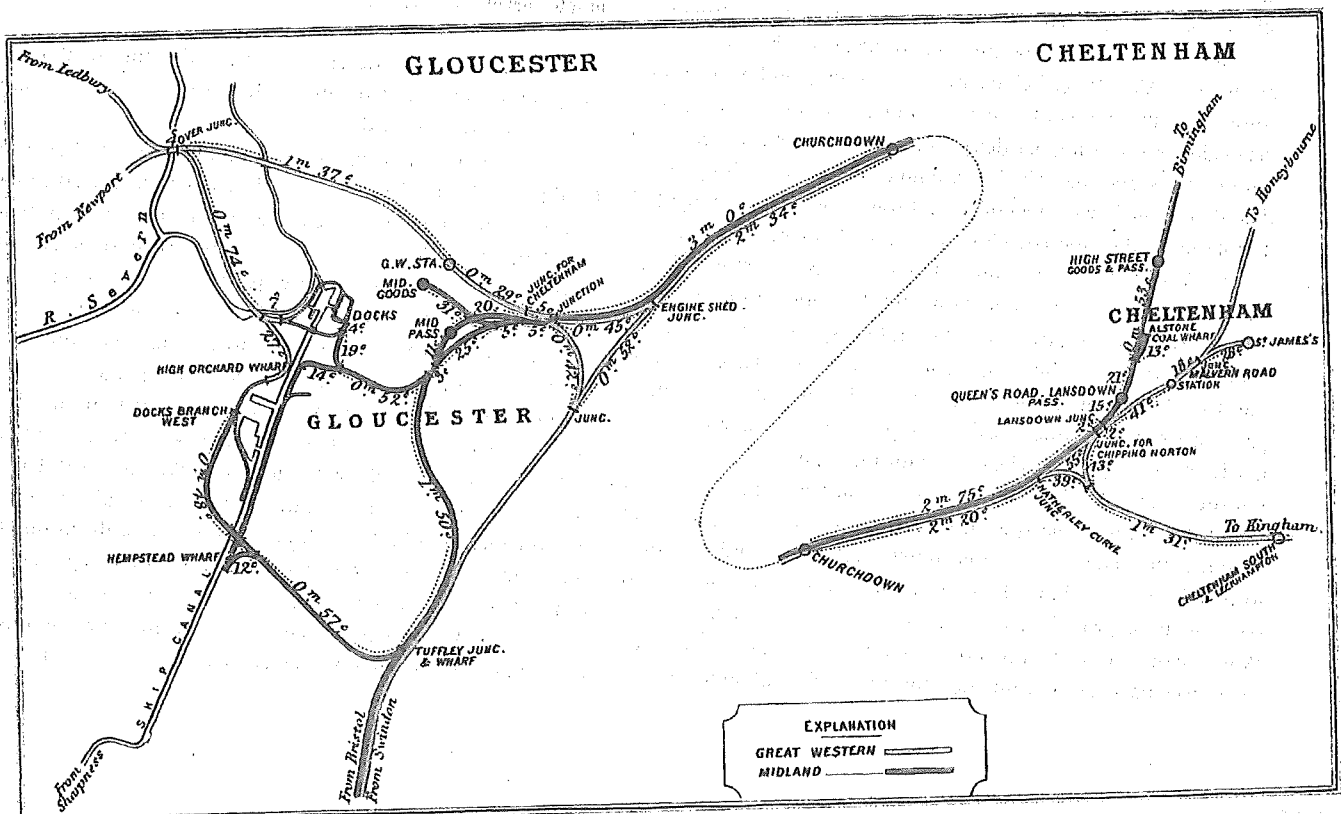
For comparison, the total number of trains using Gloucester today is 102.

Clearly, this total of 70 trains daily would be capable of being dealt with at a single station. That station could only be Gloucester Central, given the location of the station on the route to South Wales, and its links to the Bristol-Birmingham line at Barnwood Junction going north and Gloucester Yard Junction heading south.

Removal of Eastgate station would release a large city-centre site for development and for part of an inner relief road for the city (a road that, incidentally, now severs Central station from the city centre). It would also remove five level crossings where traffic congestion was then of more concern to the council than the city's position on the rail network.

The process was not simple. BR had done a good job in convincing the city council of the merits of a single modern station, but to make the scheme work financially it needed prior outline planning permission for the development of the Eastgate site. The appeal route for this lay to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Peter Walker²⁴⁴. Planning consent could not be given without seeming to pre-judge the closure decision, which would have to be made ultimately by the same man. The plans were inconsistent with the County Council's structure plan and a formal 'departure' from the plan would also need to be approved by ... Peter Walker. An added complication was that part of the site was earmarked for a primary school, and the local MP, Mrs Sally Oppenheim²⁴⁵, wanted to bring a local delegation to lobby the Secretary of State for an early release of the site. Finally, the County Borough of Gloucester was due to be abolished on 6 April 1974 as part of the major reorganisation of local government that year, and BR was keen to complete the deal and consents before the new authority took over.

The Department was cross. 'The Board has put the cart before the horse,' declared Edward Osmotherly²⁴⁶ in an internal memo²⁴⁷. With agreement from the City, and the Transport Users' Consultative Committee on side, the Department did not want to upset the latter by seeming to prejudge the issue, or to encourage 'railway enthusiasts' or others to lodge further objections against closure. Looking back,





it is hard to appreciate how little the Department was prepared to work proactively towards a positive outcome, despite being involved in every stage of decision-making through the tight hold it kept on all the Board's investment (or in this case, disinvestment) proposals.

After a slow process, permission to advertise the closure was given on 1 May 1974, helped by the fact that outline planning consent for the site had by then been given. Mrs Oppenheim was persuaded not to bring her delegation, and in the event there were few objectors, and the TUCC found no evidence of hardship, other than that created by the loss of the last train from Bristol at night.²⁴⁸ The station and its approach lines were closed in January 1975.

The Western Region promoted the scheme as an opportunity to rebuild and extend Central station, and the public notice relating to the closure of Eastgate set out a bright prospectus: 'This scheme, which was developed in conjunction with the former council of the County Borough of Gloucester, will provide a modern passenger station, reduce road traffic problems by the removal of five level crossings, and release land for redevelopment.' But it was not the same as Leeds, described above, and while the station was rebuilt to a reasonable specification it started to look dated and shabby within a decade. The long down platform, extended in 1977 to handle trains in both directions, with a central crossover, was convenient in providing level access, but involved a long walk. Worse than that, while much of the platform canopy was retained to protect passengers from the rain, the back wall supporting a

DEMOLITION

Between Tuffley Junction and Gloucester Eastgate, the demolition train gradually dismantles the railway in 1976. The locomotive is No 25205 of Toton depot. *Norman E. Preedy*

long section of it was declared unsafe and demolished, leaving a long gap open to the elements for all passengers going to and from the new platform extension.

The down bay platform remained for local trains to Newport and Cardiff, but the up platforms were closed to passengers, the up main platform remaining to handle parcels trains. Thus, within the space of 12 months Gloucester had gone from two stations and ten platforms to one station and three platforms. Subsequently, in 1984 the up platform at Central was reinstated for passenger use.

While trains from South Wales to Birmingham could operate normally, those from Bristol, Swindon or London heading to Cheltenham or Birmingham had to reverse at Central. This had always been the case for the Great Western's services from Paddington or Swindon to Cheltenham, but for South West to North East intercity services the reversal was a new requirement with a time penalty of more than 10 minutes, including 5 minutes for the locomotive to run round its train, in the days before HSTs were deployed on the route. This reversal also resulted in conflicting moves at all three junctions on the triangle, which in turn became a timing constraint as the number of train services increased during the 1990s.

This meant that the faster trains ran direct and served Cheltenham Spa in preference to Gloucester. From the outset this meant a loss of four cross-country trains in each direction for Gloucester, although BR claimed that this was in response to changing demand rather than to the closure of Eastgate. It came to a head in 2002 when the requirements of the Virgin Cross Country franchise meant a much more intensive service of trains between Birmingham and Bristol as well as a service running via the Stroud Valley to and from Paddington. Codenamed 'Operation Princess', the proposals provided an ambitious and imaginative new range of journey opportunities for passengers, but the train plan did not work. The rail network as a whole was still reeling from the effect of the Hatfield accident, and the newly formed Strategic Rail Authority was under strong public and political pressure to restore performance and public confidence in the railway. Urgent action was required, and one of the key changes was to remove the Gloucester stops from the cross-country services. Co-author Chris Austin, as the SRA's External Relations Director, was the man chosen to break the bad news to Gloucester councillors. The evening meeting took place in the grim mediaeval Parliament Room in the city, and the proposals were not well received. The cross-country service from the West Country to Birmingham and beyond (now run by Arriva) still avoids Gloucester, and the change did lead to consideration of a new station on the main line at Barnwood as an alternative, to restore Gloucester's access to this route.

There is no doubt that Gloucester lost out in giving priority to the development of Eastgate and removing the traffic constraints of the level crossings in preference to securing the city's place on the cross-country network. Retention of Eastgate would have allowed cross-country trains to call at Gloucester without significant time penalty and would have avoided many of the timing constraints that are a consequence of the current station layout. It would still have allowed the release of a lot of land in the Gloucester area for redevelopment, as the requirement would have only been for a two-platform station.

The good news for the city, though, has been the development of the route from Cardiff through Gloucester to Birmingham and Nottingham, now hourly, and the huge growth in the number of its through trains to London. In 1975 the frequency was roughly 2-hourly with a change at Swindon except on three trains that ran through from Cheltenham Spa to Paddington. Now there are nine through trains a day and an hourly service to Swindon.



Cheltenham Spa

The first railway to reach Cheltenham was the Birmingham & Gloucester in 1840, with a station about a mile to the west of the city at Lansdown. Five years later the Cheltenham & Great Western Union railway reached the town from Swindon and established stations at both Lansdown and

The site of Gloucester Eastgate today. *Chris Austin*





a central one at St James, a short walk from the Royal Crescent and the Promenade. Later, in 1908, a station at Malvern Road replaced Lansdown for the GWR when a cut-off line from Cheltenham to Honeybourne was opened, providing the Great Western with its own route between Cardiff, Gloucester and Birmingham via Stratford-upon-Avon. (For the story of this line, see Chapter 3.)

St James was a four-platform terminus, but the other two stations had two through platforms each, Malvern Road having a short bay in addition where the Honeybourne auto-trains reversed.

Apart from the express trains on these main lines, stopping services ran to Birmingham, Honeybourne, Kingham, Southampton via Marlborough, and Gloucester. Three stations did result in some confusion so that, for example, a passenger for Birmingham would

END OF AN ERA

The 2.50pm train for Kingham awaits departure from Cheltenham Spa St James behind 2-6-2T No 5173 of Horton Road shed, Gloucester, on 23 June 1962. The locomotive was withdrawn two months later and the line to Kingham closed two months after that. On the left, the 12.15pm train from Cardiff has just arrived behind taper-bollered pannier tank No 8487, also from Gloucester shed, which has just run round its train. *Leslie Sandler*

need to decide whether to head to Lansdown for the train to New Street, or Malvern Road for the train to Snow Hill. For Bristol, many trains left from Lansdown, but 'The Cornishman' ran from Malvern Road. In most other cases, the station required was predicated by the destination chosen.

In 1959 there was a total of 65 daily departures from Cheltenham's three stations, but by 1968 the branch lines and stopping services had gone, as had the auto-train on the Honeybourne route; the number of trains remaining was 32, and the question of combining stations became inescapable.

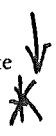
The closure of the Cheltenham-Kingham branch deprived the town of its shortest and most direct route to London – 109¾ miles via Oxford, as against 121½ via the Stroud Valley and Swindon. Even as late as 1961, at many times of the day it was quicker to take the Cotswold Line and change at Kingham: the 10.45am from Paddington gave a Cheltenham arrival of 1.40pm, whereas the through train leaving London at 11.15am didn't get there until 2.25pm. If we go back to 1911, the 'Cheltenham, Worcester, Malvern and Hereford Express', which departed from Paddington at 1.40pm and ran non-stop to Worcester, had a through carriage for Cheltenham that was slipped at Kingham and joined to a local train that arrived at St James at 4.12pm, 2hr 32min after leaving London.

The presence of Lansdown on the through route between Bristol and Birmingham meant that it had to be kept and the decision was made to route the London and Swindon trains to Lansdown and close both Malvern Road and St James, and services were withdrawn on 3 January 1966. The residual service of two trains each way daily between Leamington Spa and Gloucester continued until withdrawn on 25 March 1968; for the last two years they had not called at Cheltenham at all.

In Gloucester the most central station had been kept and the one on the through route from Bristol to Birmingham was abandoned. In Cheltenham the opposite choices were made, and the central station was closed. A supermarket was built on the site of St James and its sidings, while the railway from Malvern Road has been kept as an attractive cycleway and footpath; today it is the most pleasant way to get from the railway station to the town centre, involving a 20-minute walk. A frequent bus service also links the station with the town centre and drops passengers a few minutes' walk from the bus station at Royal Well, which, ironically, is within a stone's throw of the former station at St James.

Sadly, the Honeybourne line is blocked just to the north of Malvern Road by an office block and ring road. A tunnel has sensibly been provided for the cycle route, but unfortunately not large enough for even a single line of railway. Trains do run from a second station at Cheltenham Racecourse, however, northwards to Toddington on the Gloucestershire & Warwickshire Railway heritage line. They are steam trains and offer a great day out from Toddington, and on race days provide a park and ride service to the racecourse.

Cheltenham, sadly, has missed out and is nothing like as accessible for tourists by rail as Bath, for example, with its centrally located railway station and adjacent bus station. Thousands of racegoers have to transfer to coach to rumble along the town's ancient streets to the racecourse on busy race days, and the town struggles with cars whose drivers might have used regional trains if they did not involve the mile trek from the station. The town has done better than

Gloucester following the loss of two of its stations, but it is not quite what it could have been. 

Worcester

Unusually for a city of its size, Worcester has retained the two central stations – Shrub Hill and Foregate Street – located in it since 1860. They are connected by a long curve on a viaduct high above the flood plain, worked as a bi-directional single line. A second (also bi-directional) single line takes trains from Foregate Street north to Droitwich and Birmingham, and west to Malvern and Hereford.

Had the Birmingham & Gloucester Railway not decided to route its line to the east, and instead taken it through Worcester, rather than serve the city with branches from Abbotswood Junction to Shrub Hill (1850), and from Shrub Hill to Droitwich and Stoke Works (1852), Worcester would have become a railway junction of major importance.

The Oxford, Worcester & Wolverhampton's Cotswold line arrived in June 1853, and the line through Foregate Street was opened in May 1860.

Demand for rail travel in the area is high and growing. There is pressure for the present hourly fast service to Birmingham New Street via Bromsgrove to become half-hourly, the trains to Snow Hill via Kidderminster are relatively frequent and popular, and so too are those to Malvern and Hereford. Services south to Cheltenham and Gloucester are less satisfactory, with the frequency never better than 2-hourly. The Cotswold Line has seen a transformation, from a threat of closure in the 1970s to the introduction of an almost hourly timetable in both directions, following the reinstatement of double track between Evesham and Charlbury. A particular problem is the journey time to London: too many people from Worcester and the surrounding area prefer to drive to Birmingham International or Warwick Parkway, and pick up fast London trains there.

A long-running issue (over almost 40 years) is whether it makes sense to build a 'Worcestershire Parkway' station close to Norton Junction, with high-level (Cotswold Line) and low-level (cross-country) platforms. At the time of writing prospects for its construction appear brighter, with money offered by Worcestershire County Council and the Department for Transport, with revenue anticipated as being provided from car parking charges. The Cotswold Line Promotion Group – which deserves immense credit for the part it has played since the late 1970s in popularising the railway – is clear that the Parkway station must not lead to any increase in journey times, nor threaten the future of either of Worcester's two city-centre stations.

So, Gloucester kept its city-centre station but lost out on cross-country services. Cheltenham became the principal calling point between Bristol and Birmingham on the cross-country network at the expense of its city-centre station. Worcester has kept both its city-centre stations, and is inching its way towards achieving a stop on the cross-country line from the North and Midlands to the South West – the railway's 'M5'.

