The lost station of Winchester Cheesehill: A ramble around the Chesil Street Area

A full turnout of the WLHG congregated outside the Guildhall on a cool late June evening. Our guide, James King, briefed the group in Abbey Gardens prior to our walk around the Chesil Street area about the nineteenth century railway mania that instigated the construction of the Didcot, Newbury and Southampton (DN&SR) railway line, along with Winchester Cheesehill/Chesil station and associated structures.

The concept of the DN&SR in the latter half of the nineteenth century was to offer an alternative route from the North of England and The Midlands to Southampton, for both passengers and freight. The major competition on the routes radiating out of London to Southampton being the established Great Western (GWR) and London & South Western (LSWR) railway companies. Whilst the grand plan of the DN&SR was to terminate the line at the Royal Pier in Southampton, providing a short cut to the coast, the company ran out of money and the track to Southampton was never constructed. We were told, the streets around the Mayflower Theatre in Southampton just stop, as the planned railway did not progress southwards past Winchester Chesil. The DN&SR sold this land, and in its place Southampton Football Club's old ground "The Dell" was built.

As the site of Winchester Chesil station is immediately north of Abbey Gardens, the WLHG walked to the bottom of High Street, past the Almshouses on the right and City Mill on the left, onto Chesil Street. Early twentieth century photographs revealed several buildings, now demolished, to the left of The Chesil Rectory Restaurant; and the corner building that was the Railway Coffee house, still standing opposite The Rising Sun pub. The former is now a private house. The pub, interestingly, housed a kiln where a Richard Goodhall made clay pipes c. 1861-1922. To the right of the Chesil Rectory, Old Station Approach provided a clue as to the whereabouts of the lost station. An early post-construction photograph illustrated the steep incline of the raw chalk cut into St Giles' Hill with the single-storey station building in the chateau-style of the GWR at its' base. An awkward and restricted site, but the only land the DN&SR could afford for the station and goods yard, which forced the construction of the tunnel under The Soke.

The group headed uphill along Bridge Street, past the Rising Sun, and up the steep ginnel of Magdalen Hill, where we stopped directly over the top of the Chesil tunnel. The narrow garden of the old Station Master's house emphasised the plummet down to the tunnel entrance and former station below. Today, painted a dark green, the red-brick Station Master's house would have once been decorated in the chocolate and cream livery of the GWR. Continuing up the hill, the near vertical cut of the excavated chalk cliff is now obscured by dense vegetation. However, the old iron railings survive in situ with the fence posts being scrapped GWR broad-gauge tracks (Fig. 1). Walking down the hill, the group stopped on the original sloping footbridge that once spanned the throat of the station. On the north-side the modern Chesil multi-storey carpark, and to the south, a building site that once housed the signal box and tracks to the goods yard and engine shed.

Brunel's wide gauge track used as a fencepost

The tunnel that runs under the soke, towards Kings Worthy

Over the bridge, the group continued down the hill and across Chesil Street, past Wharfe Hill (which I was told used to be a less than salubrious neighbourhood in the past) onto the open area of Rackhill Fields. The latter named after the tenterhook racks used to dry cloth processed by the local fulling mills. Continuing down to Bar End, we reached the tail end of the goods yard, now the recycling depot. As the group walked towards the surviving goods shed long since used for passenger luggage, we walked over what was once the main line. On the opposite side of the road was the site of the GWR's engine shed which provided the engines for the DN&SR services, with a capacity to hold two tank engines. The turntable had been approximately 500 yards away from the engine shed, turning the locomotives back toward Didcot. The turntable was renewed in 1957, three years prior to the closure of the railway.

Walking down Barfield Close back towards Chesil car park, we walked under the footbridge, and through the car park onto the rear area of the multi-storey onto the former platform level of the station. The tunnel entrance is now covered with heavy metal doors (Fig. 2), perhaps unwittingly painted in chocolate brown, but which secure entry into what is now a council storage facility for road and rubbish paraphernalia. The tunnel is at the original foundation level, and had two tracks as the station, being double tracked, had two platforms. Recorded as being 439 yards long, the tunnel was classified as a tunnel as opposed to a short bridge (400 yards). Re-measurement on the wider outside curve increased the length to 441 yards, a factor which enabled railway staff working in the tunnel to claim "tunnel allowance" as the tunnel was more than 440 yards long. The group walked the accessible length of the tunnel (Fig. 3), as the last 25-30 yards are now blocked, with the 'other side' (close to the cutting at Winnall/Ebden Road) now used as a small-bore rifle range.

The lost station of Winchester Cheesehill opened in May 1885, with the DN&SR never providing an intensive service or profit. Being subsumed by the GWR in February 1923. Increasing troop and freight/munition capacity during World War II in the run-up to D-Day led to civilian passengers abandoning the line in favour of bus services. Re-named Winchester Chesil Station in September 1949 following nationalisation in 1947, and finally closed by Dr Beeching in 1960. This ramble around Chesil Street revealed not only the railway history of the area, and the lost infrastructure of Winchester's 'other' line, but also the scale of the operations at Chesil (including the tunnel) and Bar End on this stretch and terminus of the DN&SR.

Jane Wheeler

WLHG members with our guide at platform level, outside the entrance to the tunnel