

# The Railways of the Worthys: Evening Lecture 13 October 2016

Jane Wheeler

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Tony Dowland has been a member of the WLHG since 1983, and a railway enthusiast for over seventy years. He presented a fascinating talk that covered the historical aspects of the three local railways, along with his personal memories.

Starting with **The London & Southampton Railway**: This line stretched back to the early days of railway operations with the London & Southampton Railway Act of 1834. The line between Winchester and Southampton opened in 1839, a month prior to the line becoming the London & South Western Railway. The Civil Engineer Joseph Locke (1805-1860), a contemporary of Robert Stephenson and Isambard Kingdom Brunel, built the line between 1834-1839/40, with Thomas Brassey (1805-1870) the Civil Engineering Contractor for the line. Most of the work was done by human labour and horse power. This immense task undertaken by Navvies who lived in transitory camps alongside the engineering works along the line, often with their families. The gradient profile between Winchester and Southampton illustrated the enormity of the engineering and physical challenge of the construction of the line. The legacy of which in the form of stations, tunnels, and embankments, can still be seen today. In 1844, the Hook Pit Deviation was mooted to provide another route to Salisbury, but despite Locke's plan the route was rejected by the Railway Commissioners and never built.

Tony went on to explain the twentieth century history of the line, with the LSWR being grouped within the Southern Railway in 1923, and following nationalisation in 1948 becoming BR(S) British Railways Southern Region. The line was more recently privatised under The Railways Act of 1993. Examples of twentieth century steam locomotives and rolling stock were shown, including the Signal Box (Top Field) at the junction to Alton c. 1960/1, and the level crossing that closed in 1967, the same year the main line was electrified. Itchen Abbas Station was shown, with a diesel locomotive with passenger carriages (1966/67) illustrating this important Mid-Hants diversionary route. The last steam engine built at the Swindon works (*Evening Star*) was also shown going towards Headbourne Worthy c. September 1966. Tony had managed to take a photograph of the locomotive on top of Springvale Bridge. Modern freight trains and electric passenger trains were also illustrated, showing modern rolling stock still travelling on the original 1839 infrastructure.

The second line discussed was **The Alton, Alresford and Winchester Railway** (which eventually became the Mid-Hants Railway): This line was approved by an Act of 1861 and opened in 1865. The contractors being Messrs Smith and Hunt. It was always single track with passing places "Over the Alps". It was worked by the London & South Western Railway (LSWR) and covered the 17 miles between Alton and Winchester Junction. Regular diesel units replaced steam in 1957, but freight trains continued to be worked by steam. The line was closed in February 1973. The North Arch with its magnificent brickwork, along with the sheer height of the embankment, is still recognisable today. Likewise the well-known photograph of the railway cottages, taken at the turn of the c. twentieth century.

Tony showed an interesting slide of a steam locomotive with two large white discs on the front of the locomotive. These indicated where a train was going, and was a system that was peculiar to Southern Railway. Tony shared some interesting slides of the transfer of a token from the engine driver to the signalman on the single-track line; and the train passing a large

flask of water to the signal box. The final slide illustrating the replacement of steam by diesel multiple units.

The final line discussed was the charming **Didcot, Newbury & Southampton Railway** which was approved by an Act of Parliament in 1882: This line will be familiar to many society members who visited the site of Chesil Station during the summer. Construction started on the south section of the line in 1883, and the section between Newbury to Winchester opened in 1885. Kings Worthy Station (passenger) and the Goods Yard both opened in 1909. The latter was partly justified by the Kings Worthy Foundry adjacent to the line. The Worthy Down Platform (halt) opened in April 1918 to provision the RAF base which was opened as a training facility. The line was closed to civilian traffic during the Second World War (1942/43). A temporary bus service replaced the passenger trains during the war to enable the line to be upgraded prior to the build-up of troops and supplies for D-Day in June 1944. The line was run by the Great Western Railway (GWR), becoming BR(W) and eventually BR(S) following nationalisation in 1948 and 1950 respectively. The line through the Worthys was closed to all traffic in March 1964.

Tony explained "**The Link**" that was built on the line during the war to enable the line to deal with the intensity of military transport both to and from Southampton. Constructed using mechanical plant, sections of The Link are still visible today. During the 1960s the track was used for storing redundant carriages and waggons. Finally he spoke about **Woodhams** – where the three lines meet and the association of this site with the Blake family; and other rails in the Worthys, i.e. the narrow-gauge line that took supplies to the aerodrome at Worthy Down (1918), and the line/bridge over the River Itchen during the construction of the Winchester by pass.