

West Moors: railways, weather ... and stuff!

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CROSSING LODGE NUMBER 19 ...

Whether you've lived in West Moors for a few months or many years, it is certain that you've passed a small house next to the 'Tap and Railway' and probably given it little regard, other than perhaps to remark how it appears to be slightly 'askew' compared with the road - looking somehow 'out of place', dwarfed by surrounding newer buildings. Now named 'Gatekeepers Cottage', when it was built it was 'S & D Railway Crossing Lodge 19' and until the 1960s, there was a prominent 'No. 19' on the railway (and village)-facing wall of the house. When the Southampton & Dorchester Railway opened their single line in 1847, they built 43 of these: wherever the railway crossed a 'public' track or road on the level, then the company had a duty to fence the railway off: in effect, the line was a linear estate and gates were erected to prevent uncontrolled access. The first gatekeeper and his family lived an isolated existence. West Moors consisted of a scattering of farms along the Mannington & Uddens water-courses & along the rough track that would many years later become "Station Road", there was a smithy and a small school & associated chapel. Elsewhere, isolated 'cob' cottages dotted around the margin of the heathland which stretched eastward as far as the Moors River and beyond - but that was it! The gates were kept closed /against/ the road - only opened when a farm cart needed to cross, or edged apart to allow the few villagers to cross the track. The crossing keeper had to be available at all times; on the rare occasions he was absent, his wife (or perhaps eldest son) would take over. 'No.19' was unusual: it was two-storey, most of the rest were single-storey, but it had a twin a short way down the line at Dolman's Crossing, No.20, long since demolished. We are fortunate that we still have this visual reminder of our railway heritage.

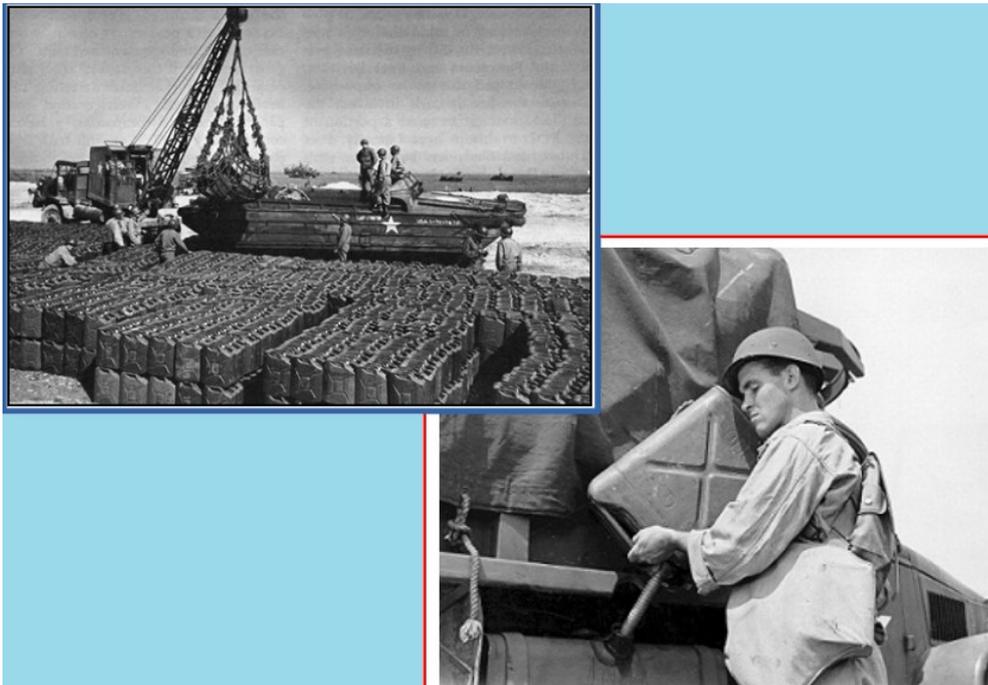
[*Image: the Southampton & Dorchester Railway crossing lodge No. 19, seen in the early 21st century.]*



WEST MOORS RAILWAY GOES TO WAR ...

In the 1840s the Duke of Wellington, not a lover of railways, fervently supported the building of the line that eventually ran through West Moors: his reasoning was simple - it would be a vital link running parallel to the south coast, which could be used to move troops swiftly in the event of an invasion of England. He could not have anticipated that the railway network that he advocated played a vital part in the support of operations in the /reverse/ direction: the invasion of occupied France by Allied forces in June 1944. Fuel supply was key. Military vehicles involved in 'D-Day' needed a constant, reliable supply of fuel. The establishment of depots to achieve this was of the highest priority for the planning staffs. Six depots were established, from Devon in the west to Sussex in the east. Of these, West Moors, close to the critical embarkation points was pivotal; failure here would have jeopardised the invasion. The US Army depot was rapidly constructed on the site of a smaller British ammunition & fuel facility on the former "Gundry's Inclosure". The Americans built big! Nearly 9 miles of railway sidings were laid down and the network was connected to the SR main line just east of the station in February 1943. Why West Moors? It was ideal: the railway had maintained its dual running lines, enabling disruption to wartime traffic to be kept to a minimum and it had access to the line north to Salisbury, thence to the ports and refineries on the British west coast. Spare a thought for the railwaymen: several times per day trains with 50 or more fuel wagons would have to be shunted back and forth - propelled by engines containing a large, hot fire! Each wagon-load fed vast piles of 5-gallon jerricans, which were then loaded on lorries which daily crawled through the sleepy village of West Moors to reach the main road network, thence to offload points scattered across the 'Overlord' assembly area. And of course the operation was a complete success.

[Image: US troops loading jerry-cans onto DUKWs and a GI "fuelling-up"]



A TALE OF TWO SIGNALMEN ...

The impact of the railway upon West Moors was small until the hamlet became, in 1866, the point where the line from Salisbury joined the then main line. Before this, staff were only required at the Crossing Lodge but a junction requires additional personnel to operate the points & associated signals. Control of the 'switch' was rudimentary. An elevated platform was provided for the 'pointsmen' to see the approach of the train - then he had to climb down to the ground and physically switch the blades of each point as required. In time, this developed into the familiar signal box operation once common on our railways. The staff in charge of these operations had to be trustworthy and intelligent. In rural areas, young men, who would otherwise have had to work on the land, sought employment in this role; two such were Thomas Larcombe & John Woolford; together they served the local railway through six decades. Thomas was born near Crewkerne, Somerset. In his early twenties, he came to West Moors as a railway gatekeeper, becoming one of the 'pointsmen' at the new Junction. He married a girl from west Dorset who bore him 3 children; sadly his wife died at the early age of 27. Their children were taken in by other members of the family, leaving him alone. But not for long. In 1872, he married Mary Ann Woolford, a local farmer's daughter. She was 35, which at the time would have been thought 'advanced' for child-bearing, but she & Thomas produced three children - one of whom, Florence would later become one of the coal merchants in West Moors station yard and also the village's sub-postmistress! Mary Ann had an ambitious younger brother, John. He started work as a railway porter for the LSWR in Dorchester but had joined brother-in-law Thomas in the local signal-box by 1876. Thomas & John retired from faithful service early in the 20th century; they died within a year of each other; Thomas in May 1915 and John in November of the following year. As in their long working lives they 'keep watch' together, buried just a few yards apart in St. Mary's churchyard.

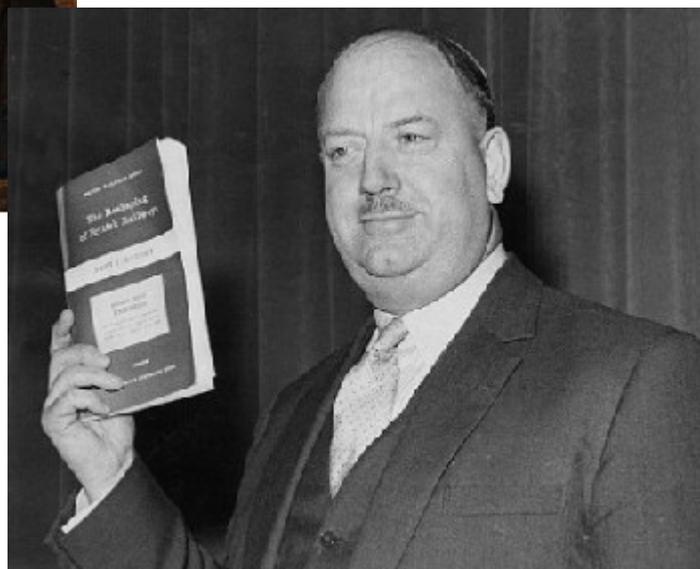
[Image: the headstones of John Woolford (left) and the Thomas Larcombe (right), with their wives]



THE DOCTORS' TALE ...

Two 'doctors' play their part in the decline and fall of the West Moors railway. One, Dr. Augustus Granville, was the author of 'The Spas of England', published in 1841. He wrote ... " I look upon Bournemouth ... as a perfect discovery ". At the time the population there was no more than 300. By 1871, largely through his promotion of its health benefits it had grown to around 7000; just ten years later, the resident population was 17000. This rapid growth left the railway with a dilemma. When constructed, the 'main line' through south Dorset (via West Moors) avoided Bournemouth: it was too small to justify consideration. To reach the fledgling resort by rail, passengers changed at Hamworthy Junction, travelled to a station at the end of the peninsula, crossed a rather precarious wooden bridge to Poole town then endured a bumpy carriage ride across Poole Heath. By the late 1860s, this wasn't good enough and two new railway routes were developed to serve Bournemouth: the first, opening early 1870, used a branch from Ringwood that followed the Avon valley to Christchurch then west to a station on Holdenhurst Road. The second was a single line branch leaving the main line at Broadstone, thence to a new station for Poole and on to a terminus in the western part of Bournemouth - this route opened in 1874. By the late 1880s the growth of the resort had outstripped even these routes; a new dual-track railway was opened running from Brockenhurst via Sway to Bournemouth and on to Poole - the modern-day main line. The original line via West Moors Junction was relegated to the status of a 'country' railway and traffic declined on what became known as the 'Old Road'. And the second doctor? One Richard Beeching, who held a doctorate in Engineering. But you didn't even need a degree to see that two lines running through south Dorset were unsustainable. The thriving resort of Bournemouth would always attract the lucrative traffic. On the first weekend of May 1964, the Beeching 'Axe' fell: all passenger services ceased along the lines running through West Moors.

[Image: Dr. Augustus Granville (left) and Dr. Richard Beeching (right), with infamous 'Report']



ANNIVERSARY OF RAILWAY CLOSURE ...

(This article was written in 2013, hence the remark in the first sentence)

Next year, 2014, marks the 50th anniversary of the withdrawal of railway passenger services from West Moors station. It is also 40 years since final rail traffic left the Fuel Depot and the tracks were lifted. You would be forgiven if you said that there's not much sign of a railway now! But adapting a phrase used elsewhere: if you seek the mark of the railway, look around you! Without the railway it is doubtful if West Moors would have developed quite as it did. In the 1840s, when railway surveyors laid out the route across south Dorset, all they found here were a few farms scattered along the Mannington & Uddens waters. There was a small school, with chapel attached, just north of where the current church is but otherwise what became Station Road was just a well-used country track running along the margin of the heathland - allowing access to the Wimborne & Ringwood turnpike. When the junction and station opened (1866-67), scattered dwellings were built to the immediate north of the railway - with the local smithy (around the present-day turning for Ashurst Road) doubling-up as the original 'Railway Inn'. Towards the end of Victoria's reign good railway services through the station and the need of local landowners to realise value from poor heathland soils encouraged development - and West Moors proper began to grow, with the building of a small church & associated school. During the early decades of the twentieth century, the process continued as local developers purchased parcels of land and built south of the station - and a proper shopping centre formed: from this nucleus, the modern West Moors grew, dramatically so from the latter 1960s - though by then, the trains passed no more. To celebrate the heritage we owe to the railway, local historians would like to hear from you: if you have memories relating to the working of the railway, particularly the fuel depot traffic, tales of station staff & working etc., please contact me

... Email: westmoorsrailway@googlemail.com

THE SALISBURY LINE - ITS LEGACY ...

For a community affected early in the railway story of these islands, there are few physical reminders of that heritage. The clues are there: 'Station Road' is obvious but one other highway in the village has a direct, named link with the railway - though perhaps it is a little obscure. In the early 1860s, West Moors was chosen as the southern end of a single-track route linking Wimborne, then a key main-line railway interchange, with Salisbury. It would run through the fertile farming area along the Avon valley, via the important town of Fordingbridge and tap the resources of the brick-yards & potteries around Alderholt & Verwood. This railway would provide us with the 'other' crossing lodge in the village, at Newman's Lane. The line that passed its door was named the *Salisbury & Dorset Junction Railway*. Though later described as a 'branch' it was intended as a key link between the rich hinterland of Wessex and the thriving towns of south & west Dorset, including the rapidly growing Bournemouth. Many of the bricks & other clay-based products used in the construction of that town were brought by railway from Verwood. Until the 1930s the line was commercially successful. However its single-line construction restricted traffic-carrying capability and after the Second World War, railway business declined dramatically. In 1964 the line closed. The portion north of West Moors was sold off for residential use. Sarum Avenue is the result - its name, the ancient name for Wiltshire's county town, is an acknowledgement that the development is partially built over and closely follows the alignment of the line that was always known by railwaymen as the 'Salisbury line'. These photographs (below) show the modern-day Newman's Lane crossing lodge (left), which though much extended and heavily modified is still recognisably aligned with the old railway. The other (right) shows the entrance to the southern portion of Sarum Avenue: the Salisbury line would have crossed The Avenue roughly where the more distant lamp-post is situated - at this point, before the days of the Fuel Depot, there were user-operated gates to allow farmers / small-holders to take stock across the line to graze the Common.



ST. LEONARD'S COMMON DISAPPEARS ...

(This was the final article, written in 2013)

In an article reviewing the prospects for railways serving Dorset & Hampshire, the Railway Magazine of 1924 carried the following text ... " The village (i.e. West Moors) is a growing one ... during the past decade new roads, shops and residential buildings have been erected in every direction. The higher portions of the village on the south-eastern side have been strongly recommended by medical men to invalids requiring a bracing and invigorating atmosphere, and it is on these open spaces that the village must eventually grow." Maps of the early 1920s show Pinehurst Road with just a few well-built family houses between Station Road and Elmhurst Road - many of which still stand: look for the ornate, 'stepped' chimney stacks. But there was little else; the 'road' further down towards Ringwood Road was a heathland track-way, with the expanse of St. Leonard's Common stretching away to the north. Apart from some smallholdings, the railway was the only sign of human impact until you reached Gundry's Farm & Woolsbridge on the Horton/Ringwood Road. In the years leading up to the Second World War sporadic building did take place along lower Pinehurst Road, and a start was made on the 'Priory Estate'. But 1939 and the demands of total war meant that all development abruptly ceased. It was not until the latter 1960s and through the 1970s that the prophecy printed in 1924 came to pass and the former "common" land was given over to residential development. The population of West Moors parish jumped from around 2000 in 1961 to 5400 just ten years later, and had risen to 6500 by 1981. Other local communities (e.g., Ferndown, Verwood) in east Dorset also grew dramatically through this period - but of course potential custom for the local railway had become an academic argument - the railway had ceased passenger operation in 1964. This is the last article in this series. I hope you have enjoyed them.