

Malmesbury

The Malmesbury Railway



Photo: Colin G. Maggs

No. D2187 shunting at Malmesbury.
On the right is the abandoned
locomotive shed

The Malmesbury Railway was closed completely from November 12, eleven years after it had lost its passenger services. This little line in North Wiltshire was probably unique in that its junction was changed from one main line to another of equal importance. When first built, the railway branched from the Paddington to Bristol line, and was otherwise isolated. Early this century, however, the Badminton line to South Wales was built, and its route crossed the Malmesbury line, but without physical connection. Eventually the branch was truncated and linked to the newer main line.

The first scheme to mention Malmesbury was that of the Wiltshire & Gloucestershire Railway. A meeting to discuss this project was held at Stroud in October, 1863. The line was to run from Christian Malford on the Great Western Railway four miles from Chippenham, up the valley of the Avon close to Malmesbury and Tetbury, and thence to Nailsworth. From Nailsworth it was to follow the course of the line sanctioned the previous year as far as Dudbridge. Thence it would diverge to the north and join the G.W.R. about a mile west of Stroud Station. The gradients were easier than those of the existing Stroud-Swindon line. The intended length of the Wiltshire & Gloucestershire Railway was about 21 miles and it was expected to cost about £275,000.

An Act for a railway between Christian Malford and Nailsworth was duly passed in July, 1864. The directors of the Midland Railway agreed to work the line as a continuation of the Stonehouse & Nailsworth Railway, for it was one of their attempted inroads into G.W.R. territory. Salisbury was the objective, and to this end powers were obtained in July, 1865, for the North & South Wiltshire Junction Railway, from Christian Malford to the Berks & Hants Extension Railway between Woodborough and Devizes.



The Malmesbury branch and associated railways

Unfortunately for the Midland, its little scheme did not materialise. The well-known 1863 agreement between the Great Western and the Midland companies stated that they should “agree as to subscribing to any new lines in the districts in which the companies are directly interested.” Captain Galton, of the Board of Trade, was appointed arbitrator and he denied the Midland’s right. Powers were allowed to lapse and the railways dissolved in 1870. It is known that work was started on the Wiltshire & Gloucestershire Railway at Malmesbury in July, 1865 (possibly on the tunnel, though so far no evidence has come to light), but the town was abandoned to the G.W.R. after the arbitrator’s decision had been made known.

Malmesbury was determined to have a railway and the scheme which actually was carried out was that of the Malmesbury Railway. This was incorporated by an Act of July 25, 1872, to run from the G.W.R. at Dauntsey to Malmesbury, a distance of 6 miles 43 ch. Its estimated cost was £60,000, and the G.W.R. subscribed half of this sum.

The line was worked by the G.W.R. under an agreement of June 5, 1872, and was opened formally on December 17, 1877, “amid much rejoicings.” A special train ran to Malmesbury, where it was received by a procession of the leading inhabitants. Regular traffic began the next day; a slight accident occurred when the gatekeeper at a crossing near Great Somerford failed to open the gates and the train dashed through and shattered them. It transpired that the old man in charge of the crossing could not get out of his house in time because the door handle came off in his hand! The Malmesbury Railway was taken over by the Great Western from July 1, 1880, under an Act dated August 6, 1880, allowing G.W.R. Ordinary Stock at the rate of £15 per £100.



Photo: Colin G. Maggs

Keeper's house at Kingsmead Crossing

The Badminton line, a shorter route from Wootton Bassett to the Severn Tunnel than the one *via* Bristol, was opened on July 1, 1903. When this line was being built a temporary connection was laid from the Malmesbury branch westwards for the purpose of bringing materials to the new line. It is still possible to trace this when standing at Kingsmead Crossing, for the site of the former siding can be seen rising up the embankment of the South Wales line.

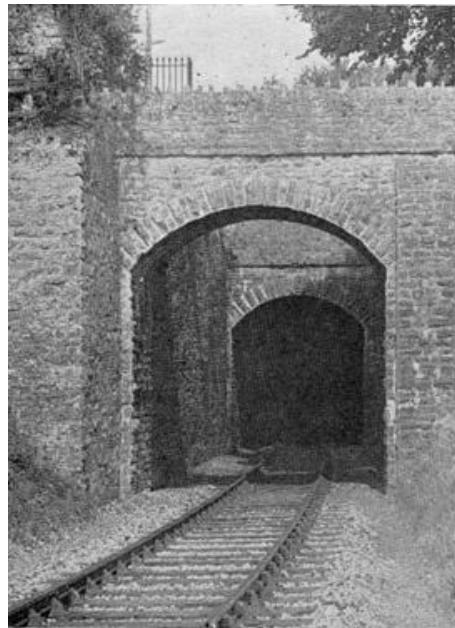


Photo: Colin G. Maggs

Mouth of Malmesbury Tunnel

Nearly thirty years later, a permanent connecting line was laid alongside the up Badminton line from Little Somerford Station to the Malmesbury branch at Kingsmead Crossing. Alterations were complete by February 6, 1933, for a change on that date for the working of the branch from Little Somerford instead of Dauntsey. However, a legal hitch deferred the abandonment from Kingsmead Crossing to Dauntsey, and the new spur was not used until Monday,

July 17, 1933, when the line between Dauntsey and Kingsmead Crossing was closed. The length of the branch was thus altered from 6 ½ to 3 ¾ miles.

The Malmesbury Railway used a short terminal bay at the west end of the up platform at Dauntsey, and this remained *in situ* until dismantled in April, 1956. There was a through connection by means of a trailing point with the up main line. Leaving the station, the line curved north-west and passed under the Chippenham to Swindon road. This bridge is now removed and the railway partly filled-in. The line crossed the River Avon and passed Dauntsey Road Crossing, protected by distant signals, re-crossed the Avon, and arrived at Great Somerford, 2 ¾ miles. Immediately south of the station a lane was crossed by the railway leaving a headroom of only 7 ft. This proved insufficient, so the G.W.R. built a parallel road with a level crossing; the road was given over to the Wiltshire County Council when the railway was abandoned.

Great Somerford had a platform and station building, both constructed of timber and sold for £10 when this section of line was closed. The station was formerly a halt and a bungalow was provided for the crossing keeper. The goods depot was opened on January 1, 1879. The large milk traffic (sometimes as many as 100 carts of milk churns came from farms each day) made it necessary for a stationmaster to be appointed. He had a large family and needed a bigger house, so this was arranged by the simple expedient of adding an upper storey to the bungalow. The station reverted to a halt when the goods depot and siding was closed on May 22, 1922.

From Dauntsey to Great Somerford the track was laid with flat-bottom rails. These were lifted after the branch was shortened, but a short spur between Great Somerford and Kingsmead Crossing remained for stabling “cripples” until about three years ago. After lifting, as an engine pushed seven wagons towards the station house at Great Somerford to pick up the old rails, the wagons crashed into the stop-block and went forward about fifty yards, one wagon knocking a hole in the old station house. North of Great Somerford the line passed under the Badminton line and came to Kingsmead Crossing, where the new branch from Little Somerford joined the former Kingsmead Siding, which was the truncated old branch.

Little Somerford has four through roads, the outer ones having platforms; either of these were used for Malmesbury trains. The branch ran westwards alongside the up line and then came to a board stating that goods trains should pin down brakes. The line curves through a shallow cutting and descends a gradient of 1 in 50 to Kingsmead Crossing, which is about 700 yd. west of Little Somerford and 200 yd. north of the bridge carrying the main line over the old branch. Just before the level crossing was Kingsmead Siding Ground Frame, with two levers—a point lever and a facing point lock. The crossing gates had to be widened when the spur to Dauntsey was opened, to give sufficient clearance to the curve. By the side of the crossing keeper’s house are two levers operating distant signals which were lowered when the gates were closed to road traffic. This arrangement operated at the other level crossings.

The gradient lessens to 1 in 150 for a few yards and then becomes level. The line goes along the youthful Avon Valley and before Malmesbury descends at 1 in 500, crosses a river, goes into a 100-yd. tunnel, again crosses a river, and then enters the station on the level. The situation of the station is rather unusual, as it lies beyond the

town, rather than short of it, as is the case with so many branches. Possibly this is the result of the Wiltshire & Gloucestershire project.

Malmesbury Station has stone buildings, a single platform with run-round loop, and an engine shed with a watertower. Short of the station were the goods sidings, goods shed, and cattle loading dock. The points and two signals were controlled from an enlarged ground frame with six levers. Goods traffic consisted of coal, agricultural machinery, and general merchandise.

The branch was worked by train staff and one engine in steam. From Dauntsey to Malmesbury there were seven trips each way, several being mixed trains, and one on Sundays; 16-23 min. were allowed for the journey of 6 ½ miles. In 1933 the train was formed of three four-wheel coaches, but, on the opening of the spur to Little Somerford, two bogie coaches were used. There were then nine trips each way and one on Sundays; 9 min. were allowed for the journey. The branch train made an evening trip to Swindon and back and an afternoon trip to Wootton Bassett, and an additional train set made a morning trip from Swindon to Malmesbury and back. Except for "mixed" trips, a guard was dispensed with on the branch line, latterly there were five trains in each direction and one to Swindon and back on Saturday evenings; and no Sunday trains ran. Two "mixed" trains ran in each direction for some years, but the passenger working ended with separate trains. The branch was closed to passengers from September 10, 1951. In recent years, it has been used for trials of diesel sets built at Swindon, as well as the daily freight train.



Photo: Colin G. Maggs

Malmesbury Station, looking towards the buffer stops

(Original source not recorded)