

Railways to Chard

By R. J. SELICK



Photo]

[H. C. Casserley

Taunton train in the Joint Station at Chard in 1928, with G.W.R. 2-4-0 tank locomotive No. 5

THE ancient borough of Chard, in Somerset, probably has been the subject of as many rail and canal schemes as any town of its size in England. Many of these were projects to link the Bristol and English Channels, as the town lay on the most suitable route across the peninsula of the South-West. The first such canal proposal which would have affected the town was as early as 1769. Many others have followed right up to the present day, some being more practicable than others. It is not proposed to deal with the canal schemes here but it should be mentioned that, although no canal to link Chard with the two channels was constructed, the town eventually was linked with Bridgwater and Taunton by inland waterway on May 28, 1842.

The first railway proposal affecting Chard was in 1830, when, encouraged by the opening of the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal three years earlier, a group of local gentlemen approached James Green, an Exeter engineer of some

local repute, and asked him to report on the possibility of a canal being built to connect Chard with the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal. Green made a survey, and reported in favour of a railway, but nothing further came of this interesting proposal until 1833, when it was decided to build the canal instead.

On July 1, 1842 the Bristol & Exeter Railway was opened to Taunton, and it was opened throughout on May 1, 1844. This gave an added impetus locally to the general Railway Mania of 1845, and Chard was, of course, not left out of these schemes. The first in the field was the Bristol & English Channels Direct Junction Railway, which was to proceed "from Watchet to Taunton, and thence by Hatch Beauchamp, and by Ilminster, to Chard, and by Crewkerne, and Beaminster to Bridport Harbour." The Bridgwater & Taunton Canal (hard hit by competition from the Bristol & Exeter Railway) already was concerned with proposed railways from London to Okehampton and Penzance, which were

to use canal routes where possible. Seeing that the new cross-peninsula railway would further reduce its traffic, it proposed a rival scheme in conjunction with the Chard Canal. The two canal companies proposed the Bristol & English Channels Connections Railway & Harbour which, commencing at a new harbour to be built at Stolford, seven miles north west of Bridgwater, ran inland to Bridgwater, which was to be served with a multiplicity of routes and branches. After effecting junctions with the Bristol & Exeter Railway, the proposed line ran along the canal to Creech, where a

posol competed for public support. This was the Lyme Regis & Taunton Railway, which would have also passed through Chard, but which had an even shorter life than its competitors.

Parliament does not appear to have viewed the connection between the channels as being so necessary as did the promoters of these schemes, for it sanctioned only a line from Stolford to Bridgwater, and another from Creech to Ilminster, both being parts of the canal companies' subsidiary schemes. These powers were obtained in 1846, and, not wishing to have part of its line as a canal



[Photo]

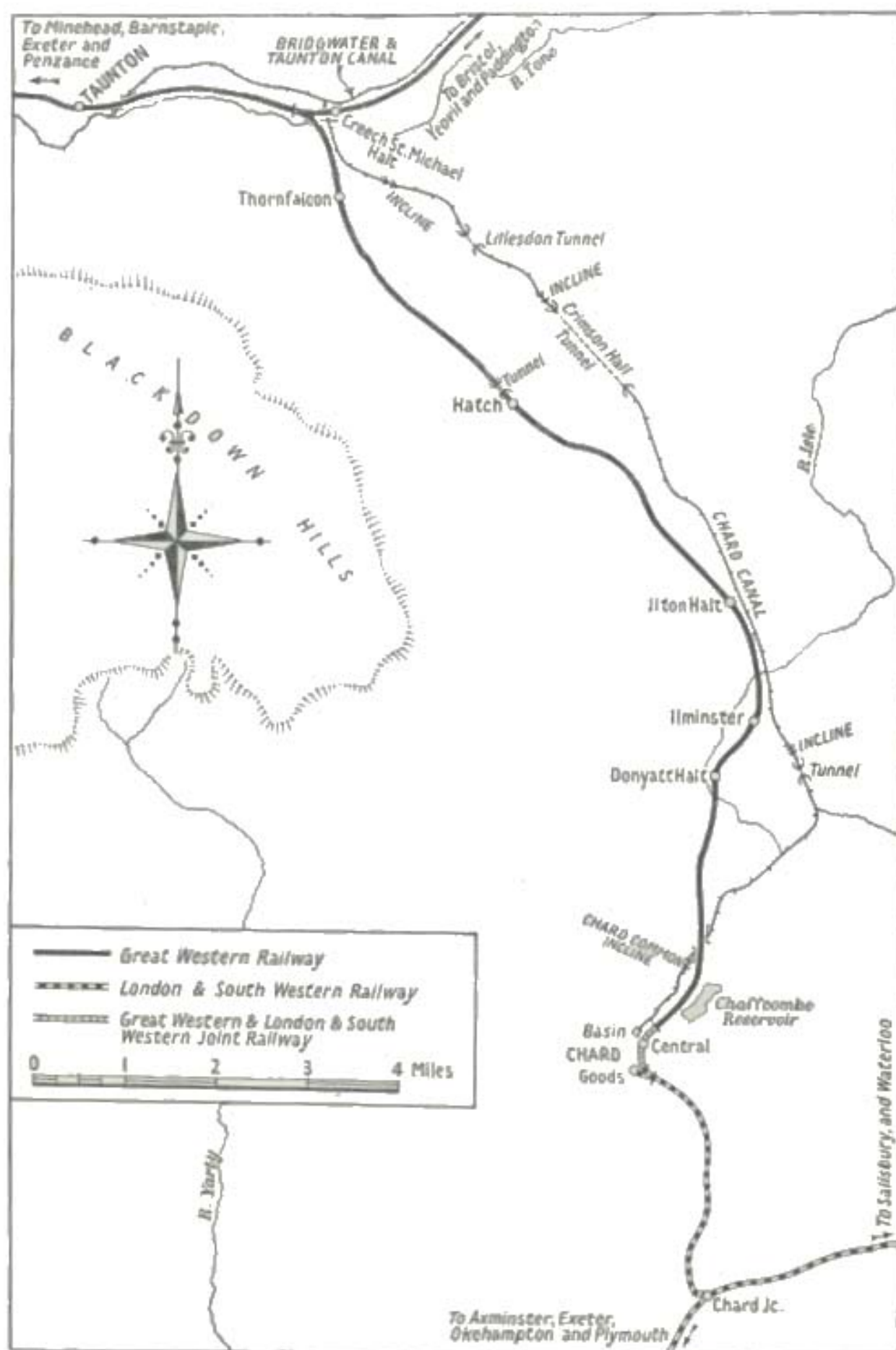
[R. J. Sellick

A recent view of Chard Town Station, the original L.S.W.R. terminus, from which passenger services were withdrawn in 1916

branch continued to Taunton. The main line then followed the Chard Canal to Ilminster, and thence ran to Bridport by way of Crewkerne and Beaminster. Chard was to be served by a branch from Ilminster which was to continue to Axminster and Lyme Regis.

As a second string to their bow the two companies also put forward as separate schemes those parts of the main route from Stolford Harbour to Bridgwater, and thence along the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal to Taunton, and from Creech to Chard along the route of the Chard Canal. For a short time another pro-

posal was made to convert the Chard Canal at once applied for powers to convert the remainder of its route, from Ilminster to Chard, into a railway. A further Act, obtained in 1847, sanctioned this, and also changed the name of the Chard Canal Company to the Chard Railway Company, but this change was nominal only, and as the necessary capital was not forthcoming (the canal was already up to its ears in debt) no work was undertaken. The proposal was revived in 1852, and an Act obtained in the following year to convert the canal into a railway, and extend the line to Taunton, but



Map of the railways serving Chard, showing pre-grouping ownerships and jointly-owned lines. The original L.S.W.R. terminus is now the goods station

again the scheme collapsed through lack of capital.

In 1845, a railway had been proposed (with London & South Western support) to link Exeter, Yeovil and Dorchester, but on account of Great Western opposition, no powers were obtained. This line would have passed some three miles to the south of Chard, and in 1846, the Exeter Great Western Railway was proposed from Yeovil to Exeter, with Great Western support, on a route much the same as that of the earlier scheme. This line was successfully opposed by the South Western and Bristol & Exeter Companies, but a revival of the Exeter, Yeovil & Dorchester was more fortunate, and obtained its Act in 1847. A financial crisis forced the scheme to be shelved, and although an attempt was made in 1851 to revive the idea of a through South Western route to Exeter, by way of Salisbury and Yeovil, the L.S.W.R. shareholders refused to back it.

In 1853, the Great Western supported a new proposal for a line from Dorchester to Exeter, which would also have passed to the south of Chard, and to defeat it the South Western gave an undertaking to submit a Bill of its own in the next session. Unfortunately, on the Bill being prepared, the shareholders refused to assent to it, with the result that the company was ordered to fulfil its pledge on pain of its dividends being stopped by the Board of Trade. As a railway was under construction from the South Western main line at Basingstoke to Salisbury, and an Act had been obtained in 1854 to extend this to Yeovil, it was decided to apply for powers from Yeovil to Exeter instead of from Dorchester. This apparently satisfied Parliament, for the line was authorised in 1857. The new route to Exeter was at length opened to passengers on July 19, 1860 (goods trains were not run until September 1). Chard was served by a station named Chard Road, some three miles to the south of the town.

Chard had for some time been hopeful of having a railway of its own, and in August, 1856, a meeting had been held in the town to advocate railway communication with Taunton. It was proposed that both the Bristol & Exeter and the London & South Western Railways should be asked if they were willing to

construct a line. Neither company seems to have been very anxious to serve Chard, and no further action was taken until 1859, when a meeting at Chard resolved:

That in the opinion of this meeting a Railway from the London & South Western Railway to Chard with a tram-road to the Canal Basin is of very great importance to the prosperity of the Town and this meeting pledges itself to afford the project every support in its power.

The promoters lost no time, and an Act authorising the line was obtained on May 25, 1860, and the first sod was cut on November 1 following. Work started the next day, but financial difficulties were encountered, and for some six months of the following year no work was done at all. The line was however completed in 1863 from Chard Road on the L.S.W.R. to a station on the eastern side of the town, described as being "close to Mr. Heck's farmyard," and it was inspected and passed for traffic by Captain Clarke of the Board of Trade on May 1. The line was scheduled to be opened to the public on May 8, but as this had not been announced until the previous evening, the town had little time to prepare a suitable send-off. There was to be no official opening ceremony, but nevertheless the inhabitants of Chard were not going to neglect this opportunity for a bean-feast, for they were also to celebrate the demolition of the town's East Gate.

Although many people travelled by the 7.40 a.m. train (and noisily denounced the third class fare of 4d. for just over three miles), the 11.30 a.m. train was the main event of the day. The Mayor and Town Council travelled by this train (which was hauled by the engine *Firefly*) and, on their return, they witnessed the demolition of the East Gate. The navvies were then provided with hot beef and potatoes at the Red Lion, while the Mayor and local worthies had luncheon in a marquee near the station. In the speeches that followed, some rather pointed remarks were made concerning the town's coal merchants who had opposed the line. The afternoon was given up to "dancing, kissing in the ring, jumping in sacks, football, etc."

The line was worked from the outset by the L.S.W.R. and in 1864 the local company was dissolved and the railway

taken over entirely by the South Western, powers having been obtained by an Act the previous year. Chard Road was renamed Chard Junction in 1872.

Although Chard had been keen to obtain a branch from the L.S.W.R., it looked north to Taunton, the county town of Somerset, rather than south to Devon and Dorset. So yet another line was promoted to link the two towns. This Chard & Taunton Railway obtained its Act of Parliament in 1861, which empowered it to construct a standard-gauge line, and gave both the Bristol &

the line itself, on the broad gauge of 7 ft.

Work was started in 1864. The contractors were Logan & Rennie, and the engineer a local man, John Fox, of Hatch, but he was evidently little more than resident engineer, for the station buildings and many of the engineering works are typical of contemporary Bristol & Exeter design. The line was at last opened to passengers on September 11, 1866, but as the goods sheds were not completed, goods traffic was not catered for until the following March. As had been the case with the canal, the completion of



Photo]

[R. J. Sellick

Looking north from Chard Central Station, with the bay platform on the left

Exeter and South Western Companies power to subscribe. Fearful that the South Western would gain access to Taunton, the Bristol & Exeter took advantage of these powers, but few others invested their money in the company, perhaps deterred by the state of the Chard Canal, which, far from paying a dividend, could not even meet its mortgage interest. A second Act was obtained in 1862, enabling the B.E.R. to subscribe a further sum, but even this proved insufficient to enable work to be started on the line, and so the B.E.R. obtained an Act in the following year enabling it to take over the powers of the Chard & Taunton Company, and build

the line had been so long delayed that the citizens of Chard lost interest and, although on the opening day trains were well filled, no special festivities marked the occasion.

The new line to Taunton had intermediate stations at Hatch and Ilminster, and at Chard a new station was opened jointly with the South Western, although the Bristol & Exeter Company was responsible for its construction. The original L.S.W.R. terminus was about half-a-mile to the south, and a loop line was built to connect the South Western branch with the Joint Station. No specific powers were given to the L.S.W.R. to build this loop, but it probably was

constructed instead of the tramway authorised to the canal, as the Joint Station adjoined the canal basin and the South Western had its own canal siding.

The Joint Station was approached from the north by the broad-gauge Bristol & Exeter branch and from the south by the standard-gauge South Western loop line, and was designed with bay platforms at each end, to keep the two as separate as possible. Both companies had sidings to the canal basin, and the L.S.W.R. siding was reached by a mixed-gauge line run right through the station. Separate signalboxes were provided by the two companies at either end of the station; the signals on the broad gauge were of the disc and crossbar pattern, and those on the narrow gauge were of the semaphore type.

There being no competition from the canal (which had closed the year the Taunton line opened), the two branches prospered quietly, and, in 1871 a new station was opened at Thorn (later called Thornfalcon), between Creech and Hatch. About the same time, the South Western bay at the Joint Station was lengthened, and a new platform opened by that company at the junction of the loop line with the older line to the Town Station. Although many of the South Western trains ran through to the Joint Station, the original terminus had not been closed and was still served by many trains. The new platform was quite close to the town station (and tickets were obtained there) and the intention was to keep traffic between the town and the junction entirely on the South Western. Plans were drawn up to construct station buildings at the new platform, and to close the Town Station, but this was not done, and only a small waiting shed was built.

The Bristol & Exeter always had been fearful that the South Western might obtain running powers to Taunton, and for this reason its branch was kept broad gauge as long as possible; indeed it was the only broad gauge branch east of Exeter for some years. The line eventually was narrowed on Sunday, July 19, 1891.

As a measure of economy, it was decided during the first world war to close Chard Town Station and the loop platform, and the last passenger train

left the station on December 30, 1916. This was also the last L.S.W.R. train on the branch for the working of both branches was taken over by the G.W.R. (which had succeeded the B.E.R. in 1876) as from January 1, 1917. Some years before this, in 1896, the Town Station and loop platform had been brought under the control of the G.W.R. station-master at the Joint Station, although the South Western had kept its own booking clerk at the Town Station. Under the new arrangement the Town Station was used for goods traffic only, but although the G.W.R. operated both branches it continued to work them independently with two sets of rolling stock for some years.

Halts were opened by the G.W.R. at Donvatt (between Chard and Ilminster) on May 5, 1928, and Ilton (between Ilminster and Hatch) on May 26, 1928. In the same year, the rails and platform awning were removed from the South Western bay at Chard.

On January 1, 1948, the two branches became respectively parts of the Southern and Western Regions of the Railway Executive, although the Western Region operated both. The first outward change was the re-naming of Chard Joint Station as Chard Central in November, 1949, and soon after, under the regional adjustment scheme, the whole line from Creech Junction to Chard Junction became part of the Southern Region on April 2, 1950, although the Western Region was still responsible for operation. During the fuel crisis in 1951, the whole line was closed to passengers from February 3, until May 7.

The route taken by the two branches between Taunton and Chard Junction is a pleasant rural one, although the scenery is not so spectacular as on the neighbouring Barnstaple or Minehead branches. At Taunton, the Chard train uses bay platform No. 2 exclusively, both for arrival and for departure. After leaving the bay, the train has to cross both down roads and the up main line, and this sometimes is a cause of delay on busy summer Saturdays. Having reached the up relief line, the train follows it for some $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles to Creech Junction, where the process is repeated, and once again the three other running lines have to be crossed. The original schemes of 1852 and 1861 provided for a separate line into Taunton running

alongside the Bristol & Exeter main line; this was not built, but it would undoubtedly be a boon today. There is no station at Creech Junction, and although it was suggested on the opening of the line that a platform be built there, when Creech St. Michael was provided with a halt in 1928, it was built on the main line, some quarter-mile north of the junction, and is not served by Chard trains.

At Creech Junction is a large paper mill served by a little-used siding from the branch, and soon after the remains of the canal can be seen on the left, and the River Tone is crossed by a masonry bridge. The line then runs through undulating country to Thornfalcon, which has several sidings, one of which forms a loop around the back of the single platform. It is not, however, a passing place, and the signalbox is now closed. Access to the sidings is obtained by means of a key on the train staff. The station building is a small wooden one, in contrast to the substantial stations elsewhere on the line.

The line now climbs at gradients of 1 in 80 and 1 in 84 along the foot of the Blackdown Hills. Crossing over the main road, it enters a wooded cutting, ending in a short tunnel 154 yd. long, beyond which the train runs into Hatch Station. The tunnel, like the other engineering works on the line, was built to take two tracks, but traffic has never warranted a second. Hatch Station has one platform and a passing loop; the station buildings are of pleasing design in brick with freestone facings, typical of the Bristol & Exeter Railway. Passenger trains do not cross here, and the box is often switched out, making one long section from Creech Junction to Ilminster.

Beyond Hatch, the line undulates at gradients up to 1 in 100, and at Spekes Wood level crossing signs of the new regional ownership can be seen in the form of a pair of standard Southern Region upper quadrant distant signals protecting the crossing. Emerging on to an embankment, Ilton Halt, a short timber platform devoid of shelter, is reached and the line crosses the River Isle (which gives its name to Ilton and Ilminster) and enters Ilminster station. This is similar in design to

Hatch, with one platform and a crossing loop, but passenger trains do not cross here. The station is nearly a mile from the centre of the town, and as there is a frequent bus service to Chard and Taunton, passenger traffic is mainly confined to travellers who have changed from the main line at Taunton. Ilminster is, however, the only growing town in south-east Somerset, and in consequence there is steady goods traffic.

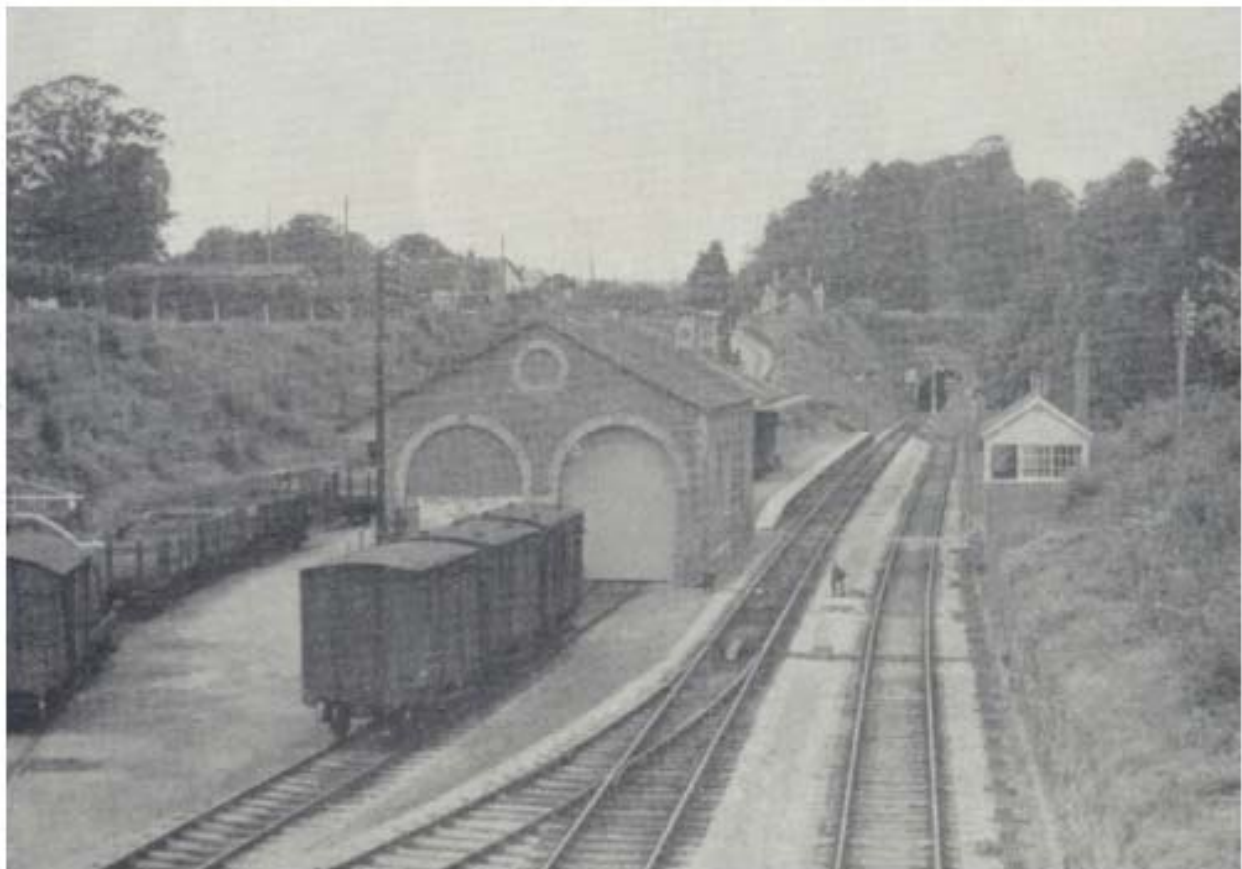
A short climb brings the train to Donyatt Halt, somewhat similar to Ilton, but provided with a waiting hut. For much of the remaining three miles to Chard, the line climbs steadily at 1 in 80. Shortly before Chard, the canal passed under the line, and although the bridge has been filled in remains of the canal incline can be seen on the right.

Chard Joint Station, or rather Chard Central as it is now called, is in effect a rather larger edition of Hatch or Ilminster. There is only one through road, which is covered by an all-over roof. The station is but a shadow of its former self, for the crossing loop is now a siding, and the south bay is no more. The L.S.W.R. signalbox, which had been re-built by the G.W.R. after it assumed maintenance of the loop line in 1896, was removed when the south bay closed, and the engine shed is now half demolished. The turntable was of mixed gauge, but the engine shed was provided for B.E.R. engines alone (the South Western having a shed, but no turntable, at the Town Station). A large tank in the roof of the shed, originally supplied by a horse-worked pump, still supplies the station with water, but the track to the shed was removed in December, 1933, and the roof was demolished in 1953. The turntable was removed in November, 1935. From 1872 until the first world war, the stationmaster of Chard Joint Station (and latterly of the Town Station also) was Mr. W. T. Dominy, a well-known local worthy, who later became Mayor of Chard, and died at the age of 105.

The loop line to the South Western branch lies in a cutting, and the loop platform is on the right, beyond the bridge carrying the main London road over the railway. As the train joins the original branch, the Town Station can be seen some 200 yd. away. The station buildings



Thornfalcon, showing the wooden station building and the siding loop around the back of the single platform



Photos]

[R. J. Sellick

The sidings, goods shed, platform, passing loop, and signalbox at Hatch, looking north towards the tunnel

are still in existence, and although built of corrugated iron, they date from the opening of the line. Such a structure might not appear to be much of an adornment to the town, but on the closure of "the tin station" (as it was known) a poem appeared in the local Press with the title "Lines on the Closing of Chard Town Station." There is also a large goods shed here and originally there was an engine shed (removed in December, 1929) and a signalbox. The box was removed on the closure of the station to passengers, and access is now obtained by a key on the train tablet.

The line to Chard Junction is uneventful, running down a gently sloping valley, and then curving east to finish alongside the main-line station. The branch platform is separated from the main station by the approach road, although there are no separate buildings. As the branch comes to a dead end, it is only possible to reach the main line by a back shunt through the goods yard.

The two branches are nominally worked in four sections, Creech Junction to Hatch, Hatch to Ilminster, Ilminster to Chard Central, and Chard Central to Chard Junction, but Hatch is often switched out, and passenger trains can only cross at Chard Central. As there is no loop here it is the practice for a train from Chard Junction to set down its passengers at the main platform and then run forward and set back into the north bay, thus leaving the through road clear for a train from Taunton. The former G.W.R. branch is controlled by electric train staff, and the Southern line by electric tablet. Speed is restricted to 45 m.p.h. between Creech Junction and Chard Central, to 15 m.p.h. on the loop, and to 20 m.p.h. between Chard Town and Chard Junction. A peculiarity of the line is that up trains are those from Taunton to Chard Junction, and down trains those to Taunton, designations which originated long before the whole line became part of the Southern Region.

The present passenger train service consists of six trains a day in each direction between Chard and Taunton, and eight to Chard Junction, with an additional Saturday working. There is no Sunday service. The same train works through from Taunton to Chard Junction, but as trains are timed to make connec-

tions both at Taunton and Chard Junction there is often a wait at Chard Central. Locomotives of the yellow and uncoloured classifications can work on the branches. The passenger traffic is invariably handled by a "54xx" 0-6-0 tank or "55xx" 2-6-2 tank. A "57xx" 0-6-0 tank is usual for goods traffic, though "2251" class 0-6-0s have worked on the line. As there is now no turntable on the line, the normal practice is for engines to work chimney first on up trains, and bunker first on down trains. The coaching stock is invariably a "B Set," although on the re-opening of the two branches in May, 1951, a pull-and-push train was used for a short while. Today passenger traffic is light.

In conclusion, the author wishes to express his thanks for the help and advice given him in the preparation of this article by Mr. E. C. R. Hadfield, Mr. J. G. Spence, Mr. R. A. Hamnet (District Engineer, Exeter, Southern Region), the Public Relations & Publicity Officer of the Western Region, the Editor of the *Chard & Ilminster News*, and the Somerset Record Office.