

7. DISCUSSION



Dorchester West in 2000

7 DISCUSSION

7.1 Introduction

7.1.1 In this section a comparison is made of the case study findings with the other research reviewed in the literature review. It seeks to identify similarities, inconsistencies and new issues by examining how rural passengers use the railway, how rural dwellers use the railway, and finally the opinions of both groups.

7.2 How passengers use the rural railway

7.2.1 Rural railways do not appear to have a part to play in meeting national transport objectives. Their low passenger levels mean that they contribute little to meeting the crude, nationwide target of increased passenger numbers. This is aggravated by an associated lack of funds for future improvement, despite featuring in policy at all levels of government. The B-W line has suffered from a lack of investment and an uncertain future, especially since privatisation. It appears to have never been well integrated with other nearby rail services.

7.2.2 Three-quarters of journeys using the line originate and finish at the study area stations and thus there is little movement between the line and elsewhere on the national rail network. This may be because several large service centres are accessible without needing to make connections, as explained by Hillman & Whalley [1980].

- 7.2.3 Only 17% of passengers use connecting trains before joining the B-W line and just 10% of B-W line journeys involve onward connecting train services to reach destination stations. Temporal, and sometimes physical, interchange for connecting rail services is generally poor and the location chosen for interchange alters depending on which service is caught. Stations for onward trains towards London Waterloo may be chosen on the interchange environment, and since interchange at Dorchester involves a five-minute walk between stations, many passengers choose to change trains at Upwey or Weymouth.
- 7.2.4 In similarity to other rural lines, the section of the B-W line studied has low absolute passenger numbers. Conversely, however, overcrowding at certain times in peak season is a problem recognised by passengers, local residents and policy documents. Passenger numbers are fairly low and fairly well spread across the day, with the exception of very late or very early services. The 2003 results of 300 passengers per day appear lower than the results for 1992 [DCC 1992]. The 1992 results, however, may be distorted due to high passenger flows attending Weymouth carnival. A reported 17% increase in passenger numbers between 1993 and 1997 may particularly reflect an increased popularity during summer months.
- 7.2.5 The high proportion of travellers who travel frequently on the line are joined by a substantial number of people who have never used the line. Comparison of the frequency of rail use over the last 10 years is shown below in Table 7.1. The proportion of passengers travelling frequently appears to have increased. There has been a rise in passengers who last used the train within month or year of being interviewed. The proportion of passengers travelling very infrequently on the line has fallen from 32% to 17%.

| Table 7.1: Frequency of train use- Weymouth- Yeovil | | | |
|--|----------|---|----------|
| 1992 Survey | | 2003 Survey | |
| Frequency | % | When last used | % |
| Daily/ Between daily and weekly | 34 | Within last week | 42 |
| Between weekly and annually | 34 | Within last month / Within last year | 41 |
| Less than annually | 32 | Rarer still/ never before | 17 |
| Total | 100 | Total | 100 |
| Note: 1992 survey asked how often passengers travelled and 2003 survey asked when last travelled on line | | | |

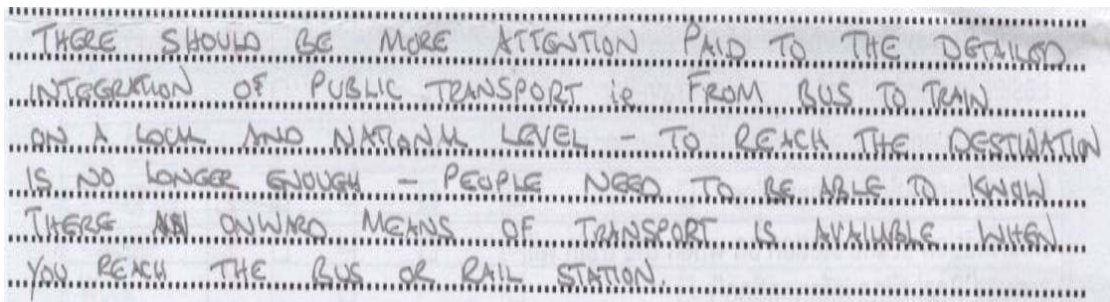
7.2.6 Use of the line by both genders is roughly equal. Table 7.2 compares the rail passenger age distribution with that of West Dorset. This shows that young adults (18-44) are over-represented on the train, and that state pensioners are under-represented travellers.

| Table 7.2: Rail travellers and local population: age breakdown | | | | | |
|--|---------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Survey Area | % population | | | | |
| | Under 5 | 5-17 | 18-44 | 45-State Pension | State Pensioner |
| West Dorset 1991 | 5.4 | 14.2 | 32.7 | 20.5 | 27.2 |
| Train survey 2003 | 2.1 | 10.1 | 52.1 | 21.0 | 14.7 |
| Note: West Dorset data reflects the most recent statistics currently available | | | | | |

7.2.7 Journeys for leisure, holidays and visiting friends and relatives are the journey purposes which feature most strongly on the route. Whilst these could be considered non-essential they constitute almost half of all journeys on the route.

7.2.8 In similarity to other research [SCC 2000, RDC 1996], there is a high proportion of rail passengers who travel short distances to reach their rail station. 56% and 63% of travellers of the B-W line began and finished their journeys in station settlements. In addition, 40% of passengers walk to the station- a reflection of their proximity to the station (and of their propensity to use the train due to its proximity). In addition, nearly half of passengers walk from their destination. It is thus that many journeys are undertaken by rail only where at least one connecting journey can be on foot. The difficulty in

accessing the stations by means other than foot was noted by one householder [QR 487], who stated that:



THERE SHOULD BE MORE ATTENTION PAID TO THE DETAILED INTEGRATION OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT ie FROM BUS TO TRAIN ON A LOCAL AND NATIONAL LEVEL - TO REACH THE DESTINATION IS NO LONGER ENOUGH - PEOPLE NEED TO BE ABLE TO KNOW THERE ARE ONWARD MEANS OF TRANSPORT IS AVAILABLE WHEN YOU REACH THE BUS OR RAIL STATION.

7.2.9 Nearly half of rail travellers declared that, if they had not been able to use the railway, they would not have been able or would not have undertaken their journey. This appears to reflect the poor or non-existent alternatives and the proportion is high when compared to figures quoted by research on other rural railways [Salveson 1997]. Rather than resorting to bus services as an alternative, as found on other lines, the favoured alternative method for B-W line passengers was the car (as driver or passenger). Value for money and ability to avoid traffic and parking difficulties were mentioned as reasons for specifically choosing the train but the train was seen as giving no time advantage.

7.3 How rural dwellers use rural railways

7.3.1 Vehicle ownership in the case study area is very high, with only 5% of households with no car, as compared with Dorset's 17% and England & Wales' 27% [Owens 2002]. Those households reliant on any form of public transport are thus small in absolute number. However, some household members in 14% of households stated that had experienced difficulties due to a lack of public transport. 3% households acknowledged the importance of the railway for these 'other people', stereotyped by respondents as the elderly and young people.

7.3.2 Rural households in parishes proximate to the railway line make similar numbers of journeys by rail as other rural areas examined in previous literature. Levels of use are, in fact, not greatly different from that of urban areas [Hedges 1999]. One householder appears to sum up use of rail by the car-owning majority by stating that

While we are still able to drive, the [public transport] in our area fills the holes we do not wish to fill with the car. When we are unable to drive we may take a different view' [QR 235]

7.3.3 Train use for everyday purposes is limited by diverse work and education locations, the bulk of which are not located near railway stations. Thus, whilst 90% of work and education travel is within 20km of the home settlement, only 30% is located in settlements with a station on the B-W line and only 4% of journeys are by train. As a consequence 30% of householders agreed that their destinations were nowhere near stations, which acted as a barrier to increased train use. Therefore whilst the train may be a valid option for *some* trips, for many others it does not serve the places currently travelled to by rural residents.

7.3.4 Similar barriers to using the train for shopping trips is revealed by householder shopping habits. 25% of daily shopping and 73% of weekly shopping takes place in station settlements, but use of trains is negligible. This is most likely to be accounted for by trip chaining (with work journeys by car) and the bulky nature of purchases which favours the use of a car. 71% of households travel to buy clothes, presents and the like in shopping centres with stations on the B-W line and 12% of households use the train to make these. These types of shopping journeys are more akin to leisure trips for which the train is often used.

7.3.5 Half of households have used the train to reach Weymouth at some point during the summer, indicating some acceptance of using rail travel to access the busy seaside resort, especially in the summer months (when parking is extremely difficult). This train use is most likely for leisure trips, which can be built around the timetable. However, infrequent or new rail travellers travelling in the summer may experience the line at its busiest, when overcrowding is a recognised problem, and thus when the route is not shown in its best light.

7.3.6 The rural railway is considered by some living just 3km away from the station to have no relevance to their lives. One Leigh resident (Q106) considered that

A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in blue ink and reads: "AS WE HAVE NO RAIL SERVICE THIS PAGE DOES NOT APPLY". The note is placed over a section of the document that has been redacted with a grey box.

7.3.7 This is perhaps in part due to the difficulty in reaching the station, even from its namesake settlement. Some stations, which are up to 1.5km from the nearest settlement, offer nowhere to park a car, safely walk, or easily reach the platform with a bicycle, as illustrated in Figure 7.1 overleaf. It is also not surprising that some respondents noted that, since they had to use their car to reach the station, they might as well use it for their entire journey.

In the words of one Chetnole respondent,

'once at Yetminster [station] we're half way to Yeovil' (Q38)

Figure 7.1: Thornford Station: poor access



7.3.8 Several respondents stated that rail enabled them to easily reach city or town centres and avoid traffic congestion and parking. Weymouth and Bath were mentioned due to these aspects, as was London- a rail commuting destination for two people in the case study area.

7.3.9 However, there are many rural journeys where deterrents to using the car are minimal and for which rail's perceived congestion-avoiding advantage is of limited use. As one Chetnole resident emphasised,

We have a Station very close, but convenience will always make the car an easier option.

7.3.10 The villages served by rail services have greater numbers of trains calling every day of the week than bus services (to the extent that there are no bus services on Sundays). Bus use tends to be lower than rail use for most purposes; the exception to this being education and health travel. School travel is provided by the Local Authority to the secondary schools at Sherborne (7 kilometres from the Wriggle Valley parishes) and Beaminster (13 kilometres from Maiden Newton). In addition, more weekly shopping is undertaken by bus than rail, a possible reflection of the proximity of bus stops to town centres.

7.4 Opinions and knowledge

7.4.1 Householders rate making rail travel more attractive relative to the car as the most persuasive method of increasing their rail use. Whilst this implies action at a national level, the benefits of the absence of parking worries and reduced stress of rail travel encouragingly strike a chord with many rural dwellers. The basics of rail travel, such as frequency, timings, ticket prices and better connections are viewed by householders as the next most influential group of possible changes. The influence of this second group of potential improvements was highlighted in previous studies [Salveson 1997].

7.4.2 Whilst only 50% of passengers rated a physical link to Yeovil Junction for London connections as important for increasing their rail use, its implementation emerged as the joint sixth most frequent householder comment. Low importance was accorded to improving facilities for cyclists, disabled people or reducing season ticket prices, due to their minority nature. However the minorities who have disabilities, travel with bicycles and have season tickets rate these as very necessary and important changes. Only 11% of householders stated that nothing would make them change their current travel habits.

7.4.3 Comments from rail travellers mainly emphasised the need to improve the frequency and timing of train services, in similarity to Salveson's study [ibid.], and the train environment. With regard to timing and frequency comments, this consisted firstly of regular travellers requesting times which better fitted around their routines and secondly more irregular travellers wishing a more general increase in frequency; again noted by Salveson [ibid.].

7.4.4 There is a general enthusiasm for winter Sunday morning trains on the line and half of the rail passengers interviewed expressed a willingness to use them. One respondent noted that current

'The Sunday service[s] in winter are of little use- two trains (sic) in the afternoon' [QR 148]

7.4.5 60% of householders asserted that they knew the times of trains at their local stations, with a further 3% (with perhaps more honesty) stating they knew some of the times. Whilst this superficial knowledge appears good, flaws in this were exposed by testing householder knowledge on the number of trains travelling in one direction on one weekday. These results are less impressive. To begin with, one quarter of households either did not know or appear to not be confident enough to answer the question. Another quarter of households correctly stated 8 trains. The remaining half gave estimations ranging from 2 to 40 trains.

7.4.6 Detailed knowledge of train availability appears patchy and several respondents emphasized that irregular timings of services hindered familiarity with the timetable. Simple changes, such as an increased knowledge of the timetable, would appear encourage householders to travel to regional centres by train. As many as 40% of householders expressed an interest in shopping trips to Bath if they knew more about the timetable. If dissemination of timetable information improved, increased leisure travel to the major centres of Bath and Bristol look most likely.

7.4.7 With regard to opinions on price, householders firstly appear to pessimistically over-estimate the cost of local rail travel. Twice as many householders as rail travellers felt that rail travel was too expensive (and this was one of the most frequent householder comments). Whilst three-quarters of rail passengers found the costs reasonable (and further 1% ventured that they found it

'cheap'), only one-third of householders thought the same. Secondly, ignorance as to the costs of rail travel is high amongst householders, with one quarter of respondents confessing that they did not know the costs involved. In the extreme, one respondent (QR 65) stated that:

' [I] haven't the faintest idea'

7.4.8 The more traditional methods of finding information on rail services appear to hold sway. A majority of rail passengers own timetables and 55% of households would consult them. Whilst telephone enquires were also fairly popular websites were used infrequently. The percentage of householders and rail passengers who had visited the Rail Partnership's website was negligible.