

HALBERTON HALT

By Dave Charles and John Anderson

Standing on the old railway bridge on the road between Halberton and Ash Thomas it isn't difficult to imagine a young child, held aloft in parental arms above the parapet, shouting out with excitement as they watched a single coach passenger train chuff and puff its way across the open farmland of Lower Herne en route to Tiverton.

On 12th June 1848 the railway line from Tiverton to Tiverton Junction (replaced in 1986 by Tiverton Parkway) opened as a broad gauge branch line to connect Tiverton with the Bristol to Exeter main line. The little station at Halberton, known as Halberton Halt, opened on 5th December 1927, more than 79 years after steam trains had first started running across those fields.

The Tiverton branch line was originally planned as a double track railway but only one track was ever laid. The missing track would have been located on the south (Ash Thomas) side of the line and that left a large and empty space right underneath the Ash Thomas road bridge, which was where Halberton Halt station was built. The halt, which was accessed from a gateway on the Ash Thomas road, wasn't exactly in the 'no expense spared' class. It comprised little more than a thirty three metre long platform, a corrugated iron shelter, a couple of street lamps and a very large sign confirming to any doubters that yes, this really is Halberton Halt.



Engine 1450 (built in 1935) at Halberton in the 1960's. Photo from the Halberton History Group archive

The station was unstaffed and in order to avoid queues building up at Tiverton or Tiverton Junction stations a porter (not a guard) was deployed on trains to collect fares from passengers joining at Halberton. One of the passenger train engines that worked the line, number 1442, became affectionately known as the Tivvy Bumper and is now on display at Tiverton Museum. It was originally built at Swindon in April 1935, one of seventy five Collett 1400 class locomotives that were manufactured. It spent most of its working life in the Reading / Oxford areas, spending its last years working between Tiverton and Tiverton Junction. The Tivvy Bumper was withdrawn from service in May 1965 and escaped the scrapyards thanks to the efforts of Lord Amory. It is now one of only four of the class that have been preserved. These little engines were fitted for autocoach working so that they could be driven either from the footplate of the engine or from a driver's cab in the coach the other end of the train. The pull-push arrangement avoided having to find a turntable or a run around loop to re-couple the carriage at the end of the line. When worked via the autocoach the engine driver operated the train from a cab at the front (or was it the rear?) of the single coach. It was the fireman who pulled the short straw in this arrangement; while he sweated away on the footplate stoking the boiler, maintaining the pressure and so on the driver was sat in comfort in the cab in the coach, operating the accelerator, the brake and a large brass gong that warned the unwary of the oncoming train.

Halberton Halt station was yet another rural victim of the Beeching reform of the railways and it closed on the 5th October 1964. The bicycles that local residents would ride between the Halt and their homes were pedalled away, never to return. The station lights were extinguished. The long line of mature apple trees (which had been planted by Mr Diggle) growing between the Halt and the canal viaduct, along the unused trackbed of the second line, was felled. The shallow cutting within which those trees were growing was filled in and it disappeared under a ploughed field.



This general view of the location of the Halt was taken in the winter of 1963. The apple trees planted along the unused track bed are clearly visible. Photo credit Peter Gray

Other than the bridge located quarter of a mile beyond Crownhill on the Ash Thomas road there is very little remaining evidence of the existence of the tiny railway station that serviced this community so well for 37 years between 1927 and 1964. But if you look carefully in the hedgerow halfway between the bridge and the lane leading to Mid Devon Moorings and Rowridge you will find a broken concrete post. That post is all that remains of the gate that opened onto the footpath down to the station platform.



The site of the halt as it looks today. Photo by John Anderson