

The Somerset & Dorset railway - along the route

The Somerset & Dorset railway line ran over the Mendips, on into North Dorset and down to the South Coast, linking Bath and Bournemouth. There was also a branch line across the Somerset Levels, from Evercreech Junction to Highbridge and Burnham-on-Sea. The line had started as two entirely separate railways - the Somerset Central and the Dorset Central - Cole (near Bruton) was the meeting point of the two systems, the stretch from Glastonbury to Templecombe opening in 1862 and the same year, amalgamation resulted in the creation of the *Somerset & Dorset Railway Company*.

The line ultimately formed part of a link between the North of England, the Midlands and the South Coast. Particularly on summer Saturdays, a host of trains carried holiday makers from the Northern and Midlands industrial cities of Leeds, Bradford, Nottingham, Manchester and Liverpool to Bournemouth, this traffic reaching a crescendo in the 1950s.

In 1910, a daily, all-year-round service commenced between Manchester and Bournemouth - in 1927 it was given the title *Pines Express*, pine trees being a distinctive feature of Bournemouth. It was this train for which the Somerset & Dorset line became famous. However, it does not tell the whole story of the railway's contribution to life along the route.

In the era before cars, vans and lorries came to dominate transportation, railways carried passengers and freight - workers to work, housewives to the shops, children to school, letters and parcels, goods to local retail outlets, coal for local deliveries. Coal was essential for everyday use - heating, cooking and hot water in the home; and in powering local industry. Local stations provided employment for booking clerks, porters, signalmen, goods delivery drivers and others.

As road transport gradually took over in the 1950s and 1960s, the line became more and more uneconomic and run-down. All long-distance holiday trains and the *Pines Express* were taken off the Somerset & Dorset line, the last running on Saturday 8th September 1962. Only local passenger trains remained; freight traffic was progressively withdrawn. The end came in March 1966, when the line was closed.

Somerset & Dorset trains were always hauled by steam locomotives - diesels never managed to take over, even in the final years. Small tank engines hauled trains between Templecombe and Highbridge. By contrast, the early 1960s saw the largest, most powerful steam locomotives to run in Britain hauling the summer Saturday long-distance trains, which could be of twelve coaches in length. Indeed, the final *Pines Express* was hauled by No. 92220 *Evening Star*, the very last steam locomotive to be built for British Railways. Such powerful locomotives were ideal for carrying heavy loads on the steep gradients over the Mendip hills.

The Somerset & Dorset Railway Trust keeps the memory of this individualistic railway alive - it has a museum at Washford, West Somerset. Its principal artefact is No. 88, a large locomotive built in 1925 and specially designed for heavy freight haulage over the Mendip hills, and which now hauls trains on the West Somerset Railway. The Trust is also restoring an original Somerset & Dorset 6-wheeled coach from the Victorian era. It publishes a regular magazine, full of history and information about the railway.

Other groups are restoring stations at Midsomer Norton and at Shillingstone; the Gartell Light Railway runs a miniature railway on the trackbed of the old line south of Templecombe.

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Bath Green Park station opened in 1870 and is still largely intact today, home to thriving markets, small independent retail outlets, a restaurant, as well a Sainsbury's store. The magnificent facade of the building is in the Palladian architectural style, in keeping with Bath's Georgian heritage. The platforms were of wooden construction, covered by a wrought-iron single span glass roof. The whole place retained its quiet Victorian charm throughout its railway existence, although it became rather neglected and run-down in later years. Trains also ran to Bristol from here, via Bitton and Mangotsfield. On Saturdays, a late train ran down the Somerset & Dorset line to Templecombe, and was known to railway staff as the 'fish & chipper', as many such meals were consumed by passengers on board after an evening out in the city.

The actual course of the Somerset & Dorset line can now be walked or cycled along the suburbs of Bath along the Sustrans path (Route 24 - Bath Two Tunnels), through Devonshire and Combe Down Tunnels and on to Midford and Radstock. This part of the line was single track only, and one can imagine travelling through the claustrophobic, smoke-filled tunnels in steam days - they are now well lit and airy.

Midford was the first station on the line from Bath Green Park, the point just beyond which the single line from Bath Junction became double track, part way across the viaduct which carried the line over the B3110 Bath - Frome road and the Cam Brook. The platform was situated at the northern end of the viaduct, tucked into the hillside. The signalbox was rebuilt following partial demolition in an accident in 1936, when wagons propelled by a run-away engine crashed into it. The line continued southwards, meandering through the picturesque valley of the Wellow Brook.

Wellow station conveniently served the village, and was well patronised as there was no regular bus service to compete for passengers. The neat station building was of grey limestone with a slate roof, with a bay-window station master's office, booking office, general waiting room and ladies' waiting room, a pattern that is repeated in stations down the line as far as Evercreech Junction. Some time after the closure of the line, the signal box was turned into an artist's studio by Peter Blake, who painted the cover picture of the Beatles' album *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

Continuing along the valley, **Shoscombe & Single Hill Halt** was opened in 1929, simply consisting of two concrete platforms. On the path towards the village was situated a waiting room and small booking office, which was staffed by two sisters - the Misses Tapper before marriage - throughout the life of the halt.

The line now approached the North Somerset coalfields, a signal box at **Writhlington** controlling sidings to the adjacent pit. Coal continued to be transported by rail until closure of the colliery in the 1973.

As the line neared **Radstock**, sidings and a locomotive shed predominated the south side of the line. Immediately to the west of the station, at the foot of the A367 Bath New Road right in the centre of town, there was a level crossing. There was yet another level crossing a few yards further on, by Radstock's other station on the Frome line; these level crossings

could cause congestion and delays to traffic during busy periods. The locomotive shed housed tank locomotives that shunted the nearby sidings and provided 'banking' (pushing trains from the rear) support, assisting heavy freight trains climbing to the summit on Mendip. It is at Radstock that Sustrans Route 24 parts company with the line.

Now began the stiff climb, over Five Arches bridge and the A362, on past Norton Hill Colliery to **Midsomer Norton** station. This is now the headquarters of the Somerset & Dorset Heritage Trust, which is restoring the station and its environs to former glory, together with a section of track towards Chilcompton. In the 1950s and '60s, Midsomer Norton regularly won prizes for its well-tended lawns and flowerbeds.

On through a twin-bore tunnel, the railway arrived at **Chilcompton** station. At the beginning and end of each term, pupils at Downside School were taken in specially chartered trains from London. Moorewood Sidings, which dealt with coal and stone, were located near where the railway bridged the A37 road.

Binegar station came next. This wayside village station had its own commuter train, being the terminating point for an early evening weekday service from Bath. In the final years of operation, calves were sent by rail from here to Scotland. From 1904 to 1921, a narrow gauge railway ran from the station yard to the Oakhill Brewery.

About a mile from Binegar, the line reached the summit just beyond the B3135 near Masbury. Magnificent views can be enjoyed from nearby 'Maesbury Castle', an Iron Age hill fort, 957 feet above sea level. Now began the drop down the southern slopes of Mendip, through remote **Masbury** station, one of the least busy on the line. The station building here was much simpler than the standard design, containing a booking office and waiting room. For some years after the First World War, chapel services were held in the waiting room on Sunday evenings.

The line now passed more quarries, Hamwood and Winsor Hill; at the latter location, the railway ran through twin-bore tunnels.

The railway continued on over Bath Road and Charlton Road viaducts, on the outskirts of Shepton Mallet. The former partially collapsed during stormy weather in 1946, leaving track hanging in mid air, before being rebuilt. The line arrived at **Shepton Mallet** station, site of the present industrial estate, just south of which the Yatton to Witham railway crossed on a bridge. Part of this railway now forms the East Somerset Railway, based at Cranmore.

The line now climbed in a cutting close to Cannards Grave, then recommenced its downward gradient, over Prestleigh Viaduct, of which nothing now remains.

Evercreech New station stood conveniently on the edge of Evercreech village next to a lime kiln, which once provided considerable business for the railway. Milk traffic was also prevalent here.

In just over a mile, the line reached **Evercreech Junction** station, just prior to which the branch line from Burnham on Sea joined the main line from the north west. Immediately beyond the station, there was a level crossing over the A371. As well as the usual station building, there was a station master's house. There were sidings for marshalling freight trains. Additional engines for assisting freight trains and the heavier passenger trains to the summit at Masbury added to the sense of activity.

The next station, **Cole**, although a small wayside stop, was especially busy with children arriving by train for the adjacent boys' and girls' secondary schools. School prefects were instructed to ensure that boys and girls did not travel in the same compartments - a rule that they considered not applying to themselves. The main station building (still in existence as a private dwelling) on the southbound platform was of typical Dorset Central design, built of stone with high gables with tall chimneys. This design proliferated all the way down to the outskirts of Bournemouth. The station garden - which included a fishpond - was kept in immaculate condition. On the opposite platform was a small wooden shelter and signal box.

Wincanton was a busy station, which in its earlier days dealt with the ferrying of horses to the races. With the opening of the Cow & Gate milk factory in 1933, large quantities of milk were dispatched to London. The Royal Mail was also an important customer, sending letters and parcels by rail. The short southbound platform housed a station building much like that at Cole, but it additionally had a wooden canopy to protect passengers from the rain. The northbound platform, with its signal box and waiting shelter, was longer. A goods shed dealt with general merchandise, and cattle pens were provided for the transport of livestock.

The line now approached **Templecombe**, with sidings and the locomotive depot diverging to the left, whilst the main line curved round to run alongside the main Waterloo - Exeter line. The site of the former depot is now an electronics factory and the curving road to it lies on the old trackbed. The station was rebuilt in 1938, but nothing of significance now remains; Somerset & Dorset trains used the far side of the now-disused platform, lost in the undergrowth. Trains continuing on to Bournemouth reversed out of the platform to a junction where the train proceeded forwards again on a single track, running through a bridge under the Waterloo line.

Part of the old line near Common Lane is now occupied by the Gartell Light Railway, a privately run narrow gauge railway.

Henstridge station followed, the railway having passed under the A30 road. This was a small wayside station of wooden construction, with one adjacent siding.

The line continued in a south easterly direction, crossing from Somerset into Dorset and arriving at **Stalbridge** station, where there a passing loop and a level crossing. Passing loops enabled trains travelling in opposite directions on otherwise single sections of track to pass one another. The station buildings were on the northbound platform, at the south end of which stood the signal box and behind which was the goods yard.

On the approach to **Sturminster Newton** the line crossed the River Stour; this was a station with a passing loop. The main station buildings and signal box were on the northbound platform. Cattle traffic was important at this location, generated particularly by the weekly market.

Situated at the northern end of the village, **Shillingstone** station also had a passing loop; its main facilities were on the northbound platform. The station building again was of the standard Dorset Central design, but was additionally adorned by a canopy extended from the building to the platform edge. This was in recognition of King Edward VII who used the station on visits to Iwerne Minster House. The station is now home to the Shillingstone Railway Project, which is restoring the station to its 1950s and 1960s condition. It has

renovated the station buildings, repaired and reconstructed the platforms, fencing, signal box, platform shelter and other outbuildings.

The concrete station nameboard of **Stourpaine & Durweston Halt** has been incorporated into the playing field at Stourpaine. This wayside halt was opened in 1928 and closed in 1956.

At **Blandford Forum**, the single line sections came to an end, double track extending from here to Corfe Mullen. Blandford had the distinction of having a subway rather than a footbridge to enable passengers to cross the railway lines between the platforms. Its principal station building of red brick and stone facings with a canopy was on the northbound platform. The signal box on the southbound platform was struck by lightning and gutted by fire in 1906. At the south end of the station was a junction for the short-lived Military Light Railway built at the end of the First World War. There was a daily passenger train from Bournemouth for civilian personnel working at the camp. Most of the passengers were women working in the stores and the line became known as the 'Powderpuff Line', as they applied their make-up on the way to work.

The line now kept close to the A350 and passed through **Charlton Marshall Halt**, used by the pupils of Clayesmore Preparatory School at the beginning and end of each term. Opened in 1928, it closed in 1956.

Spetisbury was another wayside station. Although conveniently situated for the village, it had little traffic and closed in 1952.

Sturminster Marshall was served by **Bailey Gate** station, the brick-built station building being situated on the southbound platform. The chief business here was the despatch of milk by train to London.

The line crossed the A31 on the level at Bailey Gate Crossing. There was no station here, but two sidings were provided for the Admiralty during the First World War.

Close by St. Hubert's Church, with its squat Norman tower, was Corfe Mullen Junction, with a level crossing. From here, the line originally ran to Wimborne; this closed in 1933, although a stretch of it was retained as far as Carter's Siding, for clay traffic. The line was now single and climbed steeply past **Corfe Mullen Halt**, another short-lived station, from 1928 to 1956. Having reached a summit, the railway dropped down past a golf course to **Broadstone**, a junction station with four platforms, where the line from Wimborne and Ringwood merged. From here on, the line was double track.

In 1933, **Creekmoor Halt** was built of pre-cast concrete, including a footbridge. The line then joined up with the line from Weymouth and Holes Bay Junction, trains travelling over the existing railway to **Poole**, where the station has subsequently been rebuilt, and onwards through **Parkstone** to **Branksome**, where the line branched right to **Bournemouth West** terminus.

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The branch line from Evercreech Junction to Highbridge and Burnham on Sea was single track throughout, with passing loops at certain stations. There had been such a loop at **Pylle** station, but it was removed in 1929. The A37 at Street on the Fosse crossed the line

here. A curious feature was that the station master's house was combined within the structure of the goods shed.

The line dropped down through a wooded valley and across Pilton Park, now better known as the Worthy Farm site of the annual world-famous Glastonbury Festival.

Passing under a bridge carrying the A361, the line entered **West Pennard** station, a good mile from the village itself. The principal building was of stone. There was a passing loop here until 1964.

Continuing in a straight line, the line passed under the A39 on that road's northern approach to Glastonbury; from this point, the A39 now occupies the trackbed, as it curves around to head in a south-westerly direction, forming a ring road around the town. On this south-westerly alignment, the branch from Wells also ran alongside the Evercreech line.

The railway then swung through 90 degrees to head north west, at which point it entered **Glastonbury** station, where there was a passing loop. This was a busy location, in the form of goods and parcels rather than passenger traffic; Clark's shoes constituted a considerable portion of the outbound goods. The impressive station buildings were of wooden construction, and the platforms were joined by a covered footbridge. The platform at which Evercreech-bound trains called had a refreshment room until 1932; it also had an outer face used by Wells trains, which ceased to run in 1951.

The line now traversed the Somerset Levels; the next station, **Ashcott**, was situated at Ashcott Corner. It consisted of a single concrete platform, with an adjacent brick-built station house. A siding principally dealt with peat traffic.

Next came a siding serving the Eclipse Peat Works, where a 2ft gauge railway crossed the line on the level. This was the scene of an accident in 1949, when a light petrol-driven engine on the peat works railway stalled on the crossing and was hit by a passenger train; low lying fog had obscured the obstruction. The passenger train's locomotive was derailed, ending up in the South Drain. The peat bog environment was too unstable to bring in heavy lifting equipment, and the locomotive was cut up on the spot.

Shapwick station stood in a remote location in the wetlands of the levels, roughly halfway between Shapwick and Westhay villages; it had a level crossing over the connecting road. The adjacent signal box also controlled a passing loop. A small wooden building stood on the westbound platform. Needless to say, peat was the main traffic here.

Approximately a mile further west was Catcott Crossing, one of nine such crossing on the branch where a minor road crossed the railway on the level. Each had a crossing keeper's house, many of which stand today in extended form. Often these locations had no mains water supply; consequently, fresh water was dropped off in water cans by passing goods trains. Hot water from the steam engine's boiler would be piped into the houses on clothes washing days.

Edington Burtle station stood on the minor road between those two villages, with a level crossing and wooden buildings on a brick-built platform. Until 1952, it had been Edington Junction, with a branch line to Bridgwater, a passing loop and signal box.

The line parted company with the South Drain, heading for then crossing over River Brue before arriving at **Bason Bridge** station. Although itself a small wayside station with one platform on which stood elementary wooden buildings, a large milk factory was established in 1909. Milk continued to be despatched by rail from here, continuing for a further six years after closure of passenger services in 1966.

The railway continued in the company of the River Brue to **Highbridge**, where the Somerset & Dorset's platforms stood next to those still serving trains from Bristol to Taunton. Until 1930, the principal maintenance works of the line stood here, the area now being an industrial site. The works undertook the repair and maintenance of locomotives, carriages and wagons, together with the construction of the latter two items. In 1900, the works employed 480 men. There was also a locomotive shed for everyday servicing and housing.

Crossing the current Bristol to Taunton line on the level, the line crossed the A38 road in the middle of town also on the level; a major bottleneck in an era before the M5. Railway sidings served the once-busy Highbridge Wharf, which was closed in 1964, the entire basin now having been filled in.

The line ended at **Burnham on Sea** station, situated on Marine Drive where it meets Pier Street. The original single platform was covered in part by an overall roof; subsequently a longer concrete platform was provided on the loop line for excursion trains. The station building was built of brick, as was the adjacent goods shed. The line originally extended onto a stone slipway, down which wagons were shunted and hauled back by a wire rope. In the 1880s there were excursions by ship across the Bristol Channel between Burnham and Cardiff. Regular passenger services ceased between Highbridge and Burnham on Sea in 1951, but there were occasional excursion trains in the summer into the 1960s.