

A Beginner's Guide to the Somerset & Dorset Railway

Where did the Somerset & Dorset run to and from?

As the title suggests, the line ran across the counties of Somerset & Dorset - principally from Bath to Bournemouth. It traversed the Mendip hills, then through Wincanton and on into North Dorset, to Blandford Forum and Poole. A branch line ran from Evercreech Junction to Highbridge and Burnham-on-Sea, through Glastonbury and across the Somerset Levels. There were branch lines between Glastonbury and Wells and Edington Junction and Bridgwater.

When did the line open?

The system opened in piecemeal stages. Originally, there were two separate railways; the Somerset Central Railway from Highbridge to Glastonbury, opened in 1854; it then extended at the Highbridge end to Burnham in 1858, and at the Glastonbury end to Wells in 1859; to Cole (near Bruton) in 1862 and onward to Templecombe in 1863.

In 1860, the Dorset Central Railway opened a railway line between Blandford and Wimborne, where it connected with the Southampton-Broadstone-Dorchester line; and another between Templecombe and Cole in 1862; in that same year the two companies amalgamated to become the Somerset & Dorset Railway. The missing link between Templecombe and Blandford was opened in 1863, resulting in a coast to coast route between Burnham and Hamworthy in Poole Harbour. Subsequently, a line was opened from Broadstone to Poole in 1872, and on to Bournemouth West station in 1874, which then became the southern terminus of Somerset & Dorset trains.

An extension over the Mendip hills from Evercreech Junction to Bath was opened in 1874. In 1885, new line was opened between Corfe Mullen and Broadstone, which avoided reversal at Wimborne.

What sort of traffic did the line carry?

In the era before cars, vans and lorries came to dominate transportation, railways carried passengers and freight - workers to work, housewives to the shops, social trips to the larger towns and the seaside; goods, including coal, to local retail outlets. Coal was essential for everyday use - heating, cooking and hot water in the home; and in powering local industry. Parcels and letters were also carried on behalf of the Royal Mail.

Serving a rural area, the Somerset & Dorset line's passenger traffic was essentially local and small-scale in nature. The movement of freight was its prime purpose. Principal traffic was the transfer of freight arriving from the Midlands and the North at Bath to Templecombe, where much of it was transferred onto the London Waterloo to Devon and Cornwall main line. There was also locally-derived traffic - coal from the North Somerset coalfields; stone from Mendip quarries; peat from the Somerset Levels; farm produce and milk from country stations bound for London.

In 1910, a daily express train was introduced between Manchester and Bournemouth which travelled over the Somerset & Dorset; in 1927 it was named 'Pines Express', pine trees being a particular feature of Bournemouth. Other long-distance services were

developed in the 1920s and 1930s, running during the summer months. This holiday traffic over the line reached its peak in the late 1950s, when people had annual holidays with pay, but before the mass ownership of cars. Two weeks family holiday by the seaside was the norm, and trains to Bournemouth ran on summer Saturdays from Manchester, Liverpool, Bradford, Leeds, Nottingham, Derby, Birmingham.

What were the trains like?

Trains on the Somerset & Dorset were hauled by steam locomotives - even towards the end of its life, when most trains on Britain's railways were powered by diesel or electricity.

In the early years, relatively small, under-powered locomotives struggled up the fearsome climb over Mendip. This changed with the arrival of half a dozen large, powerful freight locomotives in 1914, a further five following in 1925. These were the Somerset & Dorset 2-8-0 engines, which lasted well into the 1960s. Post-war, modern locomotives built by British Railways took over much of the work - the BR Standard classes. 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.

Unlike the bulk containers of today, freight was carried in a multitude of small 4-wheeled covered vans and open wagons, often individually shunted several times into different trains before arriving at the intended destination. In the early years, passengers were carried in 4 and 6-wheeled coaches, with individual compartments and no toilets. In the 20th century, longer coaches with sets of bogies gradually took over; these typically still had individual compartments, but also had side corridors, toilets and gangways to pass between them. The 'Pines Express' had a restaurant car - truly a 'restaurant on wheels', in which full 3-course meals could be enjoyed.

When did the line close?

Just as the line had opened in piecemeal stages, so did it close. Ever-increasing motor car ownership in the post-war period resulted in continuing reductions in passenger usage; lorries and vans ate into the railway's freight business. The branch lines between Highbridge and Burnham and the Glastonbury to Wells line closed in the early 1950s. The 'Pines Express' and the long-distance Saturday holiday trains ceased at the end of the summer schedules in 1962. Freight traffic was re-routed away from the line.

Some localised freight traffic lingered on, such as milk from Bason Bridge to Highbridge, but all had ceased by the mid-1970s. However, the hammer blow came with the closure to passenger traffic in March 1966.