

The Peat Works Railway at Ashcott



Members of the Bristol Railway Circle visiting the Peat Works Railway in June 1970. Note the loaded train on the right. The members had arrived on the empty train in the background.

For many years, peat cut from the low-lying land around Ashcott on the S&D's Highbridge branch was moved by narrow gauge railway.

Known locally as the Eclipse Peat Works Railway and owned by Fisons, it was laid across land on which no other vehicle could go. The 2ft-gauge line covered a total of about 10 miles and besides its 'main line', a considerable length of track would be moved about to serve the latest peat workings.

The narrow gauge line crossed both the S&D and the adjacent South Drain, this being the site of a collision in 1949. There were facilities for loading peat both onto the S&D's wagons and onto lorries.

With improved drainage enabling tractors to be used, the railway hauled its last load in March 1983. The track was removed in order to extend another peat railway near Carlisle and a Lister loco plus a length of track were donated to the Trust; this you can see along with three replica wagons.



The lorry transfer point - wagons were hauled up the slope using a winch and discharged by gravity.



A narrow gauge peat train crosses the S&D Highbridge branch near Ashcott in October 1965 - the site of the 1949 collision. [Photo by S C Nash]



Peat Works activity at the S&D siding seen in the early 1920s. An S&D train is in the siding with the tender of a 'Scottie' 0-6-0 locomotive just visible. Note the loaded narrow gauge peat trucks on the bridge over the South Drain. [From an original photo held in the Peat Works canteen]



Ashcott Peat Works showing the narrow gauge railway with loading point and gantry. Photo believed to date from the 1960s.



A view of typical trackwork on the peat railway. Note the basic means of point locking - a wooden wedge - and the piles of peat drying in the background.



The narrow gauge railway with a Lister autotruck hauling the wagons. The picture is believed to have been taken in the 1970s.

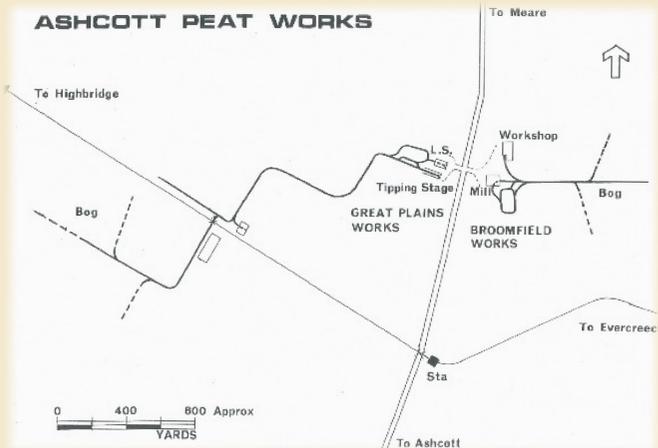
Collision!

On 19 August 1949, the levels were veiled in a thick blanket of fog and as the 8.00 am mixed train (conveying both passengers and freight) from Glastonbury to Bridgwater ran over the crossing with the peat railway, it hit one of the peat railway's engines.

The locomotive on the S&D line, Class 3F No. 3260, was derailed and embedded itself in the South Drain, the front of the engine being about 35 feet from the rails and the chimney about three or four feet below rail level. The locomotive weighed 42 tons and the tender 20 tons.



Without the great expense of pile-driving it was not possible to lift the locomotive out with a breakdown crane; a 4-ton capacity excavator was all that could be used. In late September, the waterway was diverted around the locomotive and both it and the tender were cut up into pieces no heavier than 4 tons, this process taking eight men working 11 hours a day, eight days to achieve - working in mud and water alive with insect life! During the work, 65 cylinders of oxygen and 18 of acetylene were used. Fragments of the locomotive can be seen here at Washford.



A map of the Peat Works Railway showing the 'main line' and the movable parts of the line.



Enthusiasts take a ride in the peat wagons! Again, this is believed to be in the 1970s.