



DISCOVER the art, heritage and culture of this old Great Western Railway branch line. Enjoy a nostalgic and relaxed ride, back in time, through lovely countryside from Bishops Lydeard to Minehead. Study the railway and its preserved industrial heritage, or to stop and study the wonderful historic places that can be easily accessed from its stations. <https://www.west-somerset-railway.co.uk>

HISTORY The West Somerset Railway (WSR) is the longest heritage railway line in the UK (23 miles), operating heritage steam and diesel-powered trains. In 1845, after the Bristol and Exeter railway (B&ER) had recently completed its main line, there were proposals for several different and competitive railway schemes in West Somerset. Isambard Kingdom Brunel was closely involved with the initial design of the railway, but an associate of his George Furness was appointed as the railways engineer. Construction started in 1859 and was completed by 1874, being converted from Broad Gauge to standard width in 1882. WSR took over running the line after the Beeching closures and some refurbishment work. It became operational in 1979.



Bishops Lydeard Station.



Trains passing at Crowcombe Heathfield.

THE TRAIL starts at Bishops Lydeard Station (TA4 3BX), which is the southern terminus of the West Somerset Railway and is located just off the A358 on the western edge of the village. The main building is used as offices and the Gauge Museum, run by West Somerset Railway Heritage Trust (WSRHT), occupies the former good shed. This is well worth a visit. See the restored GWR sleeping car and many other interesting railway artifacts. www.wsrht.co.uk

To Crowcombe Heathfield We begin with an uphill climb through the countryside close to and twice over the A358. Close to Combe Florey the Quantock hills look beautiful in the sunshine and rather foreboding in inclement weather. We soon arrive in Crowcombe Heathfield, a picturesque rural station, the

highest point on the WSR line, at just under 400 feet above sea level. The station found a moment of fame in 1964, when it was featured in the Beatles first film "A Hard Day's Night", and later on "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" and "Land girls".

To Stogumber The line passes gently downhill through woodland and small valleys, cut by rivers and streams emanating from the Quantocks, en-route for **Stogumber station**. This station lies tucked into the side of a hill just over a mile from the village and is reached via a sloping approach road. Don't miss the model railway in the waiting room – it is based on Stogumber. The former cattle dock behind the car park has been restored, complete with its own railings, and now provides a viewing gallery.

To Williton The train now hugs the hills on the right-hand side with lovely views over Stogumber village to the left. It is still travelling downhill past beautiful rolling hills and dark red soils. We soon arrive at Williton station, the principal intermediate train crossing place on the WSR. The original goods shed is used by the WSR Diesel and Electric Preservation Group. The signal box was installed by the Bristol & Exeter Railway, which operated the line before GWR, and it is the only surviving example of a B & E R signal box still in use.



Stogumber station looking south east.



Williton Station.

It is but a short journey onwards to **Doniford Halt**, a pretty little platform with a heritage GWR 'pagoda' waiting room, reportedly saved from the Exe valley railway. Enjoy the views from the platform bench, of farmland, the Quantock Hills and Steep Holm Island rising in the distance from the Bristol Channel. This is a request stop so to catch a train you must put your hand out to signal to the driver. From here walk to **Hellwell Bay**, go fossil hunting on the beach and look for Ammonites, Bi-valves and Devils toe nails.



Doniford Halt.



Hellwell Bay.

After a run through a cliff cutting we arrive at **Watchet Station**. Watchet was the original terminus of the West Somerset Railway (WSR) when it opened in 1862, a fact which is reflected in the position of the station building at right angles to the railway line. The attraction of Watchet to the railway developers was the promise of further business generated by the harbour, redeveloped between 1857 and 1862. There was a network of WSR sidings that served the East Quay. Iron ore from the West Somerset mineral workings was brought down

from the Brendon Hills by an independent and separate railway line to the West Quay and exported to Ebbw Vale. Visit the boat museum housed in the old railway goods shed, or the town museum closer to the harbour.

<https://www.westsomersetmineralrailway.org.uk> <https://www.watchetmuseum.co.uk>

An impressive statue of the Ancient Mariner with the albatross hung from his neck can be seen at Watchet Harbour, unveiled in September 2003 as a tribute to the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who lived nearby and wrote 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'.



Statue of the Ancient Mariner on Watchet Harbour.



Watchet Station.

To Washford On leaving Watchet the line climbs again, alongside the old mineral line, towards **Washford Station**, a neat, stone-built station with a single platform, different in style from the buildings of the earlier line. Cleeve Abbey is a short but hazardous walk from the station and brings you to a beautiful Cistercian medieval Abbey in the care of English Heritage. <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk>

Behind the Abbey is the line of the disused West Somerset Mineral Railway (WSMR) that brought Iron Ore down from the mines on the Brendon hills and Exmoor to Watchet harbour.

On leaving Washford the line continues to climb up before a gentle run down to the coastal plain.



Cleeve Abbey gatehouse.



WSMR Incline (Photo by Herbert Hole). 2023!



To Blue Anchor This Station is in a quiet seaside village with a scenic location, adjacent to a long sandy beach. The population here grows enormously in the summer. Try the locally made Styles ice creams from their shoreside ice cream van. The signal box controls busy level crossing with gates operated by the traditional capstan wheel apparatus. The building on the down platform (South side of the station) houses a small GWR Museum run by the West Somerset Railway Heritage Trust. www.wsrht.co.uk

To Dunster Running along the coast we arrive at a fine example of a small country station, **Dunster station**. This is listed Grade II, as is the former goods shed opposite the platform.

The station building may well look familiar to those with a model railway as for many years Hornby produced a 1:76 scale model of it. A beautifully restored example is displayed in the station. The station goods office and yard/sidings serve as the WSR centre for track laying operations.

The medieval village of **Dunster** is about a mile from the station. Visit the historic castle, grounds and watermill, plus the beautiful packhorse bridge and ford. The town has a unique octagonal Yarn Market and a main street filled with charming 17th to 19th century buildings. The castle and its grounds are now owned by the National Trust. www.nationaltrust.org.uk



Dunster Castle.



Main street Dunster and Yarn Market.

Finally to Minehead You will continue along the coast and pass the Butlins resort before arriving at **Minehead Station**. This is located close to the sea front and a short walk from the town centre. It was opened in 1874 when the original West Somerset Railway was extended from Watchet. The original station was quite small, but facilities were gradually extended as the holiday traffic grew and included the addition of a bay platform, an extension to the station building and the extension of the main platform to its current length in 1933. The present booking office, at the front of the building, dates from the 1980s and was constructed using internal woodwork and windows from the old booking office at Cardiff Central station. At the far side of the car park is a small brick building, which was once stabled railway horses used for distributing goods in the town.



Minehead Station.



Turntable, Water Tower and Rolling Stock.

If you would like to know more of our ART SOCIETY TRAILS, please go to <https://www.trails.theartsociety.org>

This trail was produced by members/volunteers of The Arts Society Taunton ©