

# TRAINS

## ILLUSTRATED

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## THE EXE VALLEY BRANCH

**Top:** Thorverton station. The 5.20 p.m. Dulverton-Exeter waits to pass a down train.  
**Centre:** A view of Dulverton, looking east; the Exe Valley trains use the right-hand face of the right-hand platform. A Class "N" 2-6-0 is arriving on the 4.16 p.m. Barnstaple-Taunton train.  
**Bottom:** Dulverton, looking west. The 1.43 p.m. from Exeter has just arrived on the extreme left and is connecting with the 2.5 p.m. Taunton-Barnstaple and the 2.5 p.m. Barnstaple-Taunton; the latter is headed by W.R. 2-6-0 No. 6317

[G. Freeman Allen]



# An afternoon on the

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# EXE VALLEY BRANCH

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by G. FREEMAN ALLEN

TO any enthusiast who finds himself in Exeter with a spare afternoon on his hands I warmly recommend a half-day trip up the Exe Valley branch to Dulverton. Particularly north of Cadeleigh, where the steep, wooded walls of the river valley close in on the railway, the scenery is some of the most appealing in the West Country, and there are no better vantage points than the open saloons of a Western auto-train from which to enjoy it. On purely railway counts, the line curves and climbs quite sharply, so that speeds are restricted to 35 m.p.h. throughout, while on the return journey you may be entertained to a lively gallop down the main line from Stoke Canon to Exeter with the engine in rear. Above all, you will find the heart-warming sight of a branch which, despite a competitive bus service, is apparently in good commercial health.

The 1.43 p.m. from Exeter St. David's is nicely timed for the half-day tripper—there are cheap fares—but don't begin to form an adverse impression of the service when the advertised hour goes by and there is no sign of action, for the working book departure is at 1.47 p.m., after the up "Cornish Riviera" has rolled through at 1.45. You follow this aristocrat as far as Stoke Canon (3 $\frac{3}{8}$  miles), where the Exe Valley branch diverges from the main line. This modern-looking station was built as recently as 1932, when its platforms were provided for new up and down main loops flanking the through main line. The up platform is an island, the outer face of which caters for the Exe Valley branch trains. In the down direction (i.e. from Dulverton) the latter sometimes have to kick their heels at Stoke Canon for quite a time awaiting a path on the main line; there is direct access from the branch to the down platform, but its rusty state indicates little use, and normally Exe Valley trains in both directions use the branch platform, the down trains crossing to the main line west of Stoke Canon station.

From Stoke Canon the single-line branch and the Exe river bear left, away from the tributary Culm river with which the West of England main line keeps company from Tiverton Junction, and your train soon reaches Bramford Speke Halt (4 $\frac{1}{2}$  miles). The grey stone buildings here are now in private use and a corrugated iron shelter is the only public accommodation on the single platform; for travellers joining at

this and other unstaffed halts on the branch tickets are available on the train.

Thorverton (6 $\frac{1}{8}$  miles) still witnesses to its great event of recent years, in the early hours of July 1, 1952, when the Royal Train was stabled there from 3 a.m. to breakfast time, while H.M. The Queen was on her way to the Royal Show at Newton Abbot, and the Royal Saloon was parked under the signalbox windows; the train was hauled up from Stoke Canon by a couple of "Manor" Class 4-6-0s. Potted geraniums hang from the station awning, and white-painted stones embellish the beautifully kept flowerbeds backing the asphalted platforms. This is the first station of importance on the branch and a passing place. Beyond the station a siding curves away to a mill on the river which used to provide the railway with considerable grain traffic.

As at Bramford Speke, the station buildings at Up Exe Halt (6 $\frac{3}{8}$  miles) are in private occupation. Two hundred yards on the Exeter side of the halt is Up Exe Crossing, which, like others on the branch, is protected by distant signals whose levers are interlocked on the Crossing ground frame with the gate locking levers. It is not unknown for both up and down distant signals at one of these crossings to be off simultaneously, although the branch is only single line!

Burn Halt (8 $\frac{1}{4}$  miles) is a single overgrown wooden platform, which offered us no custom on my last Exe Valley trip—in fact, thus far almost all the numerous passengers joining the train since we left Exeter had boarded it at Thorverton. Most of them were good Devonshire women bound for an afternoon's shopping in Tiverton, who had organised themselves into a garrulous knitting bee down one side of the saloon.

So far our 2-6-2 tank, No. 5525—the auto-fitted 0-4-2 tanks are more usual branch power—had enjoyed a fairly easy passage, but beyond Burn Halt the valley begins to narrow and the line begins to climb, though gently at first. The name of the next station, Cadeleigh (10 $\frac{3}{8}$  miles) is a misnomer, for that village is 3 miles away to the west, whereas the village adjacent to the station is Bickleigh; this local confusion, however, is to avoid railway muddle that might arise from the fact that there is another Bickleigh station in Devon, on the Plymouth-Tavistock branch. The Exe Valley station is most picturesquely



situated, with a view over its ramblertwined fences to some exquisite thatched cottages and a weir.

The valley is now much narrower, and I couldn't help recalling "The Titchfield Thunderbolt" as we ran neck-and-neck with a country bus on the road which parallels the branch for some distance. The ruling gradient steepens to about 1 in 137 here, before the country flattens again and council houses on the outskirts of Tiverton come into view. This part of the town is served by the single platform of West Exe Halt (13½ miles), and beyond it the railway veers east, across the Exe and along the south side of the town to Tiverton station (14½ miles).

The Stoke Canon-Tiverton stretch was the first section of the branch to be conceived. It had been authorised as the Exe Valley Railway in June, 1874, but the powers granted to this concern were taken over in the following year by the Bristol and Exeter Railway, which promptly pigeon-holed them. It was not until after the Bristol and Exeter had been amalgamated with the G.W.R. that the line was completed and opened in May, 1885. Originally the branch joined the West of England main line south of Stoke Canon station, which was moved to its present site in 1894. Some months before this part of the branch carried trains, however—in August, 1884—the Tiverton and North Devon Railway, which had been authorised in July, 1875, was in operation. This made up the remainder of the line from Tiverton to Morebath Junction; the local concern maintained a nominal independence until 1894, but its line was G.W.-operated from the start. Both sections of the branch were laid to standard gauge, unlike the Tiverton-Tiverton Junction branch, which had to be converted from broad gauge in 1884.

If for nothing else, Tiverton is known to enthusiasts for its castle—the gateway to it is about all that remains—which gives a name to 4-6-0 No. 5041, but it is also an important agricultural centre and the home of a large lace factory dating from 1816; a mile from the town is Blundells School. The railway installations at Tiverton are not particularly remarkable. There are a sizeable goods yard and a two-platform station with a bay on the down side for the Tiverton Junction trains, which branch right at the conclusion of some 300 yards of double track beyond the station. The signalbox is some distance from the station on the down side. A feature of its equipment, and of the boxes at Thorverton, Cadeleigh and Bampton, is a ganger's key. When one of these keys is released simultaneously by two adjoining boxes, the

electric train staff instruments in use are locked, making it safe for gangers' trolleys to occupy the line. The staff instruments can be freed without the necessity of returning the key to either of the boxes by replacing one of the telephone apparatuses between Bampton and Bolham, once the trolley has been lifted off the line.

Out of Tiverton the line descends at 1 in 73 to the simple paved platform of Bolham Halt (16 miles) and thereafter enters one of the most attractive sections of its run. The branch has now dropped almost to the level of the rushing Exe and threads a steeply wooded part of the valley. With hardly a dwelling in sight, the country is completely unspoiled and the train's only company may be a farmer and dog in search of the rabbits which start from the engine's chatter in scores in the early evening. Then the branch begins its serious climb to the level of the Taunton-Barnstaple branch at Morebath Junction.

Climbing up through Cove Halt (19½ miles), the ruling gradient is 1 in 63. This is another little station in a charming setting, embellished by colourful ramblers and overlooking a beautiful garden by the side of a stream. There is a signalbox here to control the dinstants guarding the level crossing and the access to a tiny siding, but it is not a block post; its bells merely repeat the signals transmitted to each other by Tiverton and Bampton boxes, its flanking block posts. Just beyond the station the valley is scarred by a quarry, which sends the hideous supports of its aerial ropeway striding up the slopes on the up side of the line.

Beyond Cove the scenery becomes a little wilder, for now great wooded cliffs overhang the opposite bank of the river, but a mile from the station the railway, still climbing at steeper than 1 in 70, and the river part company to straddle an island of high ground. Hereabouts the line twists and turns in the narrow valley in its efforts to gain altitude quickly and avoid expensive earthworks. At Bampton (21½ miles), another two-platform crossing place, it emerges into somewhat flatter country. There is a quarry here, too, served by a siding, though most of its output, I believe, now goes by road.

After a further 1½ miles' ascent over more reverse curves, you come in sight of the Taunton-Barnstaple branch at Morebath Junction, for which both lines break into double track to form another passing place. The Exe Valley branch makes a climbing, left-hand curve at 1 in 66 into the junction, beyond which the track singles again past the concrete platform and wooden shelter of Morebath Junction Halt (22¼ miles). Descending once more at 1 in 58 the railway runs parallel with the



southern flank of Exmoor and then the train is soon ambling into the left-hand face of the down island platform of Dulverton (24½ miles), which is the Exe Valley berth. There is a tiny 23 ft. diameter turntable in the small goods yard. The station, which is just within the borders of Somerset, is about 2½ miles from the town it serves, and if you have taken the train from Exeter which I mentioned earlier, you will now have ample time for a delightful walk through the woods fringing the banks of the Exe to Dulverton proper for tea and also to stroll back at your leisure for the 5.20 p.m. to Exeter.

There are eight daily Exe Valley passenger services from Exeter to Dulverton and seven in the reverse direction; the eighth balancing working from Dulverton, the 10.10 p.m., is the last train of the day and is diverted from Tiverton to Tiverton Junction, whence it returns empty to Exeter down the main line. In addition there is an evening train from Exeter to Tiverton and back and a Tuesdays and Saturdays only midday train limited to the Dulverton-Tiverton section. Trains take from 60 to 80 minutes for the journey. Freight, usually handled by "57XX" pannier tanks, is covered by a daily working in each direction, Saturdays excepted, but under the British Railways system much of the smaller traffic for such outlying stations as those on this branch is now carried by road to and from the nearest railhead—in this case, Exeter.

In the event of a blockage on the main line between Norton Fitzwarren and Exeter, of course, the Exe Valley branch provides part of an alternative route, including the Taunton-Barnstaple branch as far as Morebath Junction; or, if the blockage is south of Tiverton Junction, the branch thence to Tiverton. It is laid down, however, that if such emergency working should be necessary, some traffic should be sent over the Southern from Exeter to Basingstoke and Reading, to avoid impossible overloading of the Barnstaple and Exe Valley branches. This course was followed early in the last war, when a freight train was derailed on Wellington bank and traffic was divided between the Southern and Exe Valley routes. The W.R. route colour of the Exe Valley branch is "yellow" and normally its tracks are barred to all engines but tanks in this category. In an emergency, however, engines of the "blue" group (i.e., up to the size of a "Manor" 4-6-0) can be specially authorised between Morebath Junction and Stoke Canon; in this group, however, the 2-8-0s are specifically prohibited from the branch. In March, 1953, a Southern "West Country" Pacific was given a trial run between Exeter and Barnstaple over the Exe Valley branch with a view, I imagine, to opening up another emergency route.

● The Wivenhoe-Brightlingsea branch was reopened on December 7 last, writes Mr. D. E. Phelan.



A PACIFIC AT PERRY BARR—Diverted from the Trent Valley main line because of Sunday engineering work, Pacific No. 46204 *Princess Louise* takes to the Birmingham-Walsall branch with the 10.10 a.m. Liverpool-Euston express (5/7/53). [W. A. Camwell]