



steamsounds in West Somerset

1. The West Somerset Railway is one of the longest preserved railways in the UK running from Norton Fitzwarren not far from Taunton to the seaside holiday resort of Minehead.

The journey of over 20 miles passes through very pleasant scenery varying from the Quantock and Brendon Hills to the coastline and beaches of the Bristol Channel.

The complete line to Minehead was opened in 1874 and although mentioned in the Beeching Report of 1963 as suitable for closure the railway remained open until 1971.

Soon after closure a new West Somerset Railway Company was formed with the intention of operating the line as a commercial venture with diesel trains running to and from Taunton. For a variety of reasons this never came to fruition and when the line eventually re-opened in 1976 trains ran only as far as Blue Anchor but by 1979 trains were once again running through to Bishops Lydeard. Beyond Bishops Lydeard the line reaches a junction with the main line at Norton Fitzwarren but this section of the line does not currently see regular traffic, only being used on special occasions and for charter trains from the national network.

Although the line was originally built with the intention of conveying passengers to Minehead we are going to start our visit to the railway by joining the first train of the day from that resort.

The locomotive at the head of our 7 coach train is the Great Western Railway designed 2-6-2T 4160. Locomotives of this class of Prairie Tank were first introduced in 1929 but this particular example was actually built after nationalisation by British Railways in 1949. Prairie Tanks would have been a common sight on the branch right up to the end of steam.

Soon after pulling away from the platform 4160 is eased while the token for the single line section to Blue Anchor is collected from the signalman, then the train accelerates over the ungated level crossing over Seaward Way and on towards Dunster.

2. The loco heard in the last recording was most appropriate for the line but the one we hear in this track certainly isn't!

In steam days the line would have been the preserve of smaller locos, mainly tank engines and the larger GWR tender locos would not have been allowed on the branch due to their more limited route availability. However, things are different now the line is preserved and preserved railways often have visiting locomotives. In 1998 the GWR King 4-6-0 6024 *King Edward I* was present on the line and is heard in this recording departing from Dunster.

The warning bell on Sea Lane level crossing rings as the King heads for Blue Anchor.

3. As far as Blue Anchor the line has followed the coast and has been level but now turns inland and trains have the climb to Washford to contend with.

In this recording we are on board a train hauled by the GWR Manor Class 4-6-0 7828 *Odney Manor* a loco which I've always had a soft spot for long ago in my train spotting day it was the first Great Western loco that I saw.

On departing from Blue Anchor the gradients are not too severe and *Odney Manor* is able to accelerate its 6 coach train but after half a mile the gradient becomes steeper, first to 1 in 73 then 1 in 65, the steepest gradient on the railway, which continues almost to the platform end at Washford.

4. Heard from the line side at Bilbrook, on the 1 in 65 gradient from Blue Anchor is another GWR



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Manor 4-6-0, this time 7820 *Dinmore Manor* at the head of 7 coaches heading for the next stop at Washford.

5. Having climbed a steep gradient to get to Washford trains must then descend to the next station at Watchet.

We rejoin the train hauled by *Odney Manor* which after a short pause departs from Washford and accelerates rapidly on the falling gradient beyond.

6. Having reached Watchet we'll change trains and take a short ride back towards Minehead but only as far as Washford.

Washford is the home of the Somerset & Dorset Railway Trust who have their headquarters and museum there so it is most appropriate that our locomotive for this short ride back up the climb from Watchet is the ex S&D 7F 2-8-0 53808.

Departing from Watchet 53808 starts on the initial 1 in 76 gradient. Damp rails cause a slip before the gradient eases and the 7F begins to accelerate the 6 coach train.

Soon the gradient becomes steeper again, to 1 in 125, and we run alongside the trackbed of the West Somerset Mineral Railway, a standard gauge line which ran from the harbour at Watchet through Roadwater to Comberow where it ascended by a rope worked incline to the iron ore mines on top of the Brendon Hills.

The 7F sounds to be going well on the 1 in 125 gradient but after a warning whistle for the crossing at Bye Farm the gradient changes to 1 in 74 and the loco has to be worked a little harder before the regulator can be closed ready for the stop at Washford.

7. Let's continue our journey towards Bishops Lydeard.

After Watchet comes Doniford Halt, a request stop, then Williton where there is a passing loop and trains frequently cross here.

In this recording we are on board a 4 coach train hauled by the GWR 0-6-0 Pannier Tank 9466 which is waiting to head back to Minehead. In the other platform is a Bishops Lydeard bound train hauled by the GWR 2-6-0 7325. Both 9466 and 7325 are of locomotive types that would have been seen on the branch in GW & BR days.

As the recording begins 7325 can be heard departing before the guard's whistle is heard and 9466 can leave for Minehead.

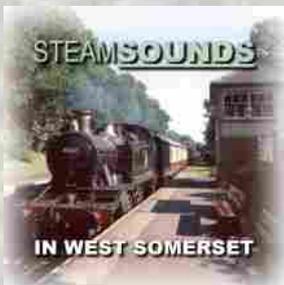
8. After leaving Williton trains head south following the valley of the Doniford Stream between the Quantock and Brendon Hills. From Williton to Crowcombe, a little more than 5 miles away, the gradients are against the train, generally at 1 in 100 or steeper.

In this recording, made from the line side a little way south of Williton station, a train hauled by the GWR 0-6-0 Pannier Tank 6412 piloted by the Ivatt 2-6-2T 41312 which was visiting from the Mid-Hants Railway are waiting to depart with a train for Bishops Lydeard having crossed a Minehead train hauled by the BR Standard Class 4 2-6-0 76079 which can be heard departing before the southbound train gets the right away.

As the train passes on the rising gradient it sounds like the Ivatt Tank is doing most of the work.

9. Heard passing in this recording near Yard Bridge not far north of Stogumber is the GWR Manor 4-6-0 7820 *Dinmore Manor* which sounds to be going easily on the 1 in 92 gradient with 6 coaches behind the tender.

10. The next station after Williton is at Stogumber. Now, while I say, 'at Stogumber' that isn't



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entirely true as the village of the same name is a mile away but I'm sure that anyone asking why the platform wasn't built nearer the village would get the usual answer; 'Because they wanted it on the railway line!'

Trains leaving Stogumber for the south must immediately face a 1 in 68 gradient which although quite short can make the start difficult.

As you can hear in this recording, the GWR 2-6-2T 4144 experiences no difficulty at all getting its 6 coach train away towards Crowcombe.

11. The next recording was made about half a mile south of Stogumber station near Water Farm and, as it begins, you can hear the GWR Manor 4-6-0 7828 *Odney Manor* departing.

The Manor's exhaust echoes in the valley as it passes on the 1 in 100 gradient towards Crowcombe.

12. Time to continue our journey, this time aboard a train hauled by the GWR 0-6-0 Pannier Tank 9466.

At Stogumber the driver acknowledges the guard's right away and the Pannier Tank makes easy work of the short 1 in 68 gradient out of the station before continuing on the ensuing 1 in 100 gradient towards Crowcombe.

13. Still on the 1 in 100 gradient near Leigh Bridge we hear the S&DJR 7F 2-8-0 53808 passing with a 6 coach train.

Leigh Bridge was once the site of a passing loop there to divide the long single track section between the loops at Williton and Crowcombe.

14. When first built the line would have been important to the area for carrying freight traffic but nowadays the main business of the railway is carrying passengers. However, the line has seen freight trains in more recent times when it was used to convey over 100,000 tonnes of stone for sea defences at Minehead.

During steam galas on the line demonstration goods trains are often a feature and in this recording you can hear the GWR 2-6-2 Prairie Tank 4561 approaching Crowcombe with a short train.

15. Crowcombe station, more properly Crowcombe Heathfield as it is $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Crowcombe village, is at the highest point on the line; just a little under 400 feet above sea level.

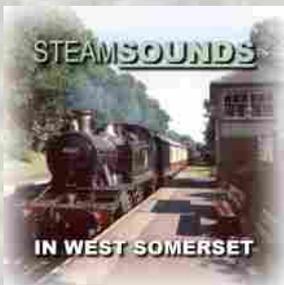
Before continuing our journey south let's just join a train heading back towards Minehead.

This particular train was doubled headed by the GW 0-6-0 Pannier Tank 9466 and with 2-6-2 Prairie Tank 5541 as pilot, both locos working bunker first. I had joined this train at Bishops Lydeard and was recording from the front of the first coach hoping to be able to hear both locos. On the climb to Crowcombe I had hardly heard the Prairie Tank at all but was almost deafened by the noise coming from the Pannier Tank's chimney which was just a few feet away! Still, both locos can clearly be heard in this short recording made leaving Crowcombe.

16. Like Williton, Crowcombe also has a passing loop and in this recording you can hear the GWR King 4-6-0 6024 *King Edward I* making the usual cacophony of creaks and groans as it makes a cautious departure for Minehead. The King had crossed a train hauled by the GWR Manor 4-6-0 7828 *Odney Manor* which can also be heard making a somewhat more vigorous start for Bishops Lydeard.

17. Heading towards Bishops Lydeard in this recording made between Crowcombe station and Lydeard Bridge is 7828 *Odney Manor* with the first train from Minehead.

18. Having left Crowcombe it is downhill all the way to Bishops Lydeard so let's join a train for the journey back up the bank.



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Heard from the front coach of a 6 coach train is the BR Standard Class 4 2-6-0 76079 departing for Minehead.

Once under the road bridge at the end of the platform the gradient is 1 in 101 and it soon becomes apparent that the fireman has everything ready for a good climb as the safety valves lift.

19. The next recording was made from the lineside about a $\frac{1}{2}$ mile north of Bishops Lydeard station and as it begins we hear the GWR Manor 4-6-0 7828 *Odney Manor* approaching on the gradient.

After the last coach has passed the adjacent outer home signal clatters back to danger, the loco whistles for the interestingly named Whiskey Trail Crossing and begins to accelerate on the lower part of the bank.

20. Starting from Bishops Lydeard must give some drivers pause for thought. After all, it isn't easy for the fireman to manage the boiler starting with a cold engine with 4 miles of rising gradient ahead. So, should he work the loco hard and hope for the best or take things easy, perhaps loose a minute or two and give the fireman a chance?

These next two recordings, both made at Nethercott about a mile from Crowcombe and both of the same loco, GWR Manor 4-6-0 7820 *Dinmore Manor* illustrate both styles.

In this first recording the driver has decided to take things fairly easily.

21. This second recording, 7820 has 7 coaches behind the tender, one more than it had in the last and the train had left Bishops Lydeard a few minutes late.

Now I'm sure you thought that the loco was being worked quite hard in the last recording but in this recording I'm sure you'll agree that this time the loco is definitely being worked far harder!

22. Back on board a train now to complete the climb from Bishops Lydeard.

This time we are at the front of a 6 coach train being hauled by the GWR Hall 4-6-0 4920 *Dumbleton Hall* and are approaching Coombe Florey with about 2 miles of the climb to Crowcombe to go. The gradient here is 1 in 80 but there is a speed restriction in force and the regulator has to be closed. Once clear of the restriction the driver begins to work the engine harder. A short easing to 1 in 99 helps to regain some speed before the gradient resumes at 1 in 81 which continues past Nethercott all the way to Crowcombe.

23. Well, aside from the section of track south from Bishops Lydeard which only sees occasional use we have covered most of the West Somerset Railway in the last 22 tracks but, as we have a little more time before our visit needs to end here are a few more lineside recordings made in some of my favourite locations on the railway.

This recording is of a demonstration goods train hauled by GWR Manor 4-6-0 7828 *Odney Manor* passing Nethercott during a steam gala weekend.

24. Demonstration goods trains at these galas do add a bit of extra interest to the proceedings but the only criticism I have is that they always seem rather short.

However, on one occasion I thought that I was going to be in for a really noisy recording when arriving at Minehead station for the first train of the day I spotted the goods train being marshalled and was most impressed with the length of it.

The goods train followed the passenger train that I caught and was to be double headed as far as Dunster by the GWR Pannier Tanks 9466 and 6412, the latter being detached at Dunster to perform shunting demonstrations in the small goods yard there.

I lighted at Washford and walked back down the bank towards Blue Anchor and waited near



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Bilbrook Bridge expecting to a good recording of this long train.

Unfortunately it was not to be as when 6412 detached at Dunster it took more than half the train with it! Still, the recording was pleasant enough and is probably more typical of the sort of pick-up goods trains that ran on the line.

25. Stogumber station is another favourite spot as it is surrounded by very pleasant countryside with the added advantages for the sound recordist that what roads there are in the vicinity are usually quiet and that locos departing for Crowcombe can usually be counted on to make plenty of noise as they start trains on the gradient.

In this recording we hear the GWR 2-6-2 Prairie Tank 4561 departing with a 5 coach train.

When this recording was made the loco was about to come out of service for a major overhaul so perhaps we can excuse the rather off beat exhaust!

26. In GWR & BR days many of the passenger trains would have been hauled by Prairie Tanks and one loco would normally have been able to cope with the fairly short trains but at holiday times trains would have been lengthened to cope with the traffic. Then trains could well have needed two locos.

Imagine it is 1962, the year that Butlins Holiday Camp opened in Minehead. Imagine it is a High Summer Saturday and the mid-morning train to Taunton has been strengthened to cope with the holiday makers returning home. Steam on the Western Region has only a few years to go but Taunton shed has provided a pair of Prairie Tanks, 4144 & 4160, to cope with the load. The train has stopped at Stogumber, a few local passengers off to do some shopping in town have joined the already packed train and the guard gives the right away. Both locos whistle and start on the gradient hurrying the passengers south for their main line connections at Taunton. Oh, for a time machine!

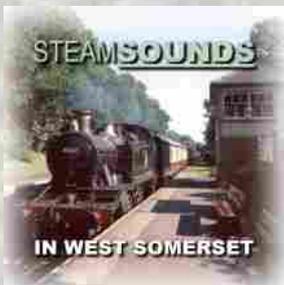
27. If I had to pick a favourite place on the railway I would be torn between Stogumber and Crowcombe stations; the atmosphere at both typifies for me how I imagine country branch line stations were in days gone by but if asked to choose a favourite spot for sound recording I would have no hesitation in picking Nethercott on the climb from Bishops Lydeard to Crowcombe. I have spent many hours in both sun and rain sitting by the lineside there and have enjoyed them whatever the weather.

So let's have a few more lineside recordings at Nethercott to round off our visit.

I mentioned earlier that the West Somerset Railway has a connection with the national network at Norton Fitzwarren but, until recent signalling alterations were made, through trains from the main line were a rarity. Hopefully in years to come this connection will see more use.

During one visit for steam gala weekend there were two charter trains visiting the railway. The first of these was a HST which had worked through from Paddington and presented an incongruous sight crossing a steam hauled train at Crowcombe. Surprisingly, there were a large number of passengers still on board as it left for Minehead - why travel to a preserved railway for a steam gala and then ride on a HST? Beats me!

The second charter was far more interesting. This was a through train from Alton using BR Standard Class 5 73096 with the Mid Hants 'green' set of coaches. Fortunately both charter trains ran pretty well to time, the Mid Hants train was just a few minutes late but as the railway was operating a very intensive timetable what would have happened had either of the charter trains run very late must be left to the imagination!



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I would have been happy to have been able to record the BR Standard Class 5 but it only worked the train as far as Bishops Lydeard and then had to return with its support coach to Westbury for servicing prior to working the train back to Alton later the same day.

From Bishops Lydeard the 9 coach train was double headed by GWR Manor 4-6-0 7820 *Dinmore Manor* and the Mid-Hants Railway's own Ivatt 2-6-2T 41312 which was visiting the railway for the gala. Approaching Nethercott the Manor seems to be making the most noise but both locos can be clearly heard continuing the climb to Crowcombe with this heavy train.

28. The 9 coaches train heard in the previous recording was the longest I had seen on the railway at the time; 6 coaches is the more usual length and that is what GWR Manor 4-6-0 7828 *Odney Manor* is heard in this recording hauling up the 1 in 81 gradient past Nethercott without any difficulty.

29. As well as Prairie and Pannier Tanks working train on the branch some traffic would have been handled by some of the smaller GWR 0-6-0 tender locos such as 3205 heard in this recording passing Nethercott going easily with 6 coaches behind the tender.

30. When running an intensive timetable during a gala weekend everything is fine as long as nothing runs late. On the occasion of this next recording things had gone somewhat awry and, not to put too fine a point on it, the timetable was in chaos!

Still, the driver on GWR 0-6-0 Pannier Tank 9466 with just 4 coaches on the drawbar sounds to be doing his best to try to regain some time on the climb to Crowcombe.

31. Time to get that time machine out again.

Let's finish our visit to the West Somerset Railway with a recording of a typical Minehead branch train.

Close your eyes. Picture a September afternoon at Nethercott and a 6 coach train hauled by GWR Prairie Tank 4141 heading for Minehead. It's a fine day and the train is on time so there's no need to hurry.

Was this recording really made in the first year of the 21st Century? Or could it have been 1950?

