



From top: Locomotive 7828
Norton Manor steams near
Blue Anchor; all aboard at
Minehead station

Book your seat on the West Somerset Railway

Where: Minehead to Bishops Lydeard

Distance: 20 miles

Duration: 2 hour round trip

A ride on a steam train calls to mind visions of Agatha Christie mysteries or family friendly Thomas the Tank engine excursions. This historic stretch of heritage railway line in Somerset caters to both of these elements, pleasing crowds with a variety of special events and heritage days to which all are welcome, even the family dog. The original West Somerset Railway was opened in 1862 near Taunton. It ran on

a single track to the coastal town of Watchet and for eight years the route was so well used that the community at Minehead, wanting a piece of the action, campaigned to extend the line, which opened in 1874. Gradually, as demand increased, more stations were opened along the route. The heyday of steam travel came and went and by the 1960s the decline was clear. By 1971 the branch was closed, but loyal conservationists fought hard and their efforts



NEARBY ATTRACTIONS

Minehead is a tourist haven, confirmed by the presence of its Butlins holiday camp which lies close to the heritage West Somerset Railway station. The town is also the official start of the **South West Coast Path**, the 630-mile route accessed at a quieter part of the town, near to the harbour.

The **Quantock Hills AONB** tempt passengers in walking gear from the carriage at Crowcombe Heathfield, the penultimate station. From here trails lead into the countryside, a landscape famed for inspiring the birth of the Romantic Movement. One of the best known routes is the **Coleridge Way**, a 36-mile walk from Nether Stowey to Porlock through forests and wide open countryside. Follow in the footsteps of poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who admired this landscape during the 18th century and whose former (National Trust owned) home of **Coleridge Cottage** in Nether Stowey, is open to visitors.

A number of museums are dotted along the West Somerset Railway. Those alighting at Washford will receive discounted admission to the nearby (a 10-minute walk) 13th-century **Cleeve Abbey**, the most complete set of monastic cloister buildings in England, which is run by English Heritage.



Cost: Adult £15.60 advance purchase. Child from £7.80; dogs £2

Open: Trains run from 10.15am-4pm or 5.35pm depending on the day and time of year

Contact: 01643 704 996; www.west-somerset-railway.co.uk

saw it partially reopened in 1976. Little by little, the line was eventually reopened all the way to Bishops Lydeard in 1979, forming the UK's longest steam heritage railway.

Stepping onto the platform at Minehead is the start of the journey back into the golden age of travel. All along this line the quaint, flower bedecked stations are dressed in the contrasting tan livery shades of yesteryear, complete with advertising boards promoting cigarettes, soap and Brooke Bond tea. The ticket inspectors and railway officials are dressed in period uniform, completing the experience for those alighting at each country station or just passing through. From our compartment aboard the hissing

Mogul 9351 steam locomotive, we slowly chugged away from Minehead in a cloud of steam. The smell of the engine drifted through the open windows, the steady motion and relentless chug-a-chug as the carriages picked up speed offering a comforting lull to the proceedings. A heritage steam train journey is devoid of the stresses of modern public transport – we didn't care if our journey was delayed (it wasn't) or if we couldn't find a seat (we did). The novelty factor seemed equal for all passengers, most of whom couldn't contain their delight as the whistle blew or the steam drifted back into their faces on the platform.

Clockwise from top: Not far from Minehead is the dramatic Valley of the Rocks in North Devon; crowds gather for the railway's Spring Gala; Dunster Castle

The sea was the captivating factor viewed from the left hand windows on departure from Minehead; in a short while we stopped at Dunster, where the mighty castle of the same name appeared, dominating a position on a distant wooded hillside, towering over the pretty village beneath. This National Trust attraction was restyled as a lavish country home for the Luttrell family in the late 19th century and visitors can enjoy fantastic views from its sunny terraces. Onward we travelled, stopping briefly to let passengers off at Blue Anchor station, where the Great Western Railway Museum just along the



DID YOU KNOW?

Crowcombe Heathfield station was used in the films *The Land Girls* and *A Hard Day's Night*



platform in a former waiting room features an assortment of memorabilia. Further reasons to embark here are the sandy beach and local pubs.

We allowed time to spend in Watchet to have lunch, midway down the line on our return journey. This harbour community offers a boat museum and zoo, and is another popular destination for families. Even the quieter stations beyond at Doniford Halt, Williton and Stogumber have their own small wonders, including Doniford Farm Attraction, and the Bakelite Museum at Williton, which claims to have the largest collection of vintage plastics in Britain – a bit of a surprising find in the middle of the Somerset countryside! While our fellow passengers tucked into buffet car fare, wafts of sausage and bacon almost too hard to resist, we gazed out at the ever-changing scene of rolling green fields, swallows flocking above and pheasants lurking in the hedgerows – possibly a view that hasn't changed since the 19th century. At Bishops Lydeard we alighted – it was a case

From top: Mogul steams through countryside near Williton; view towards Minehead

of having to for we had reached the end of the line. With the smell of breakfast still lingering in the memory we decided to explore

the village and seek out a tea room. The station was surprisingly busy for a Tuesday morning, and then we realised this was partly due to the Gauge Museum, a little way off down the platform in an old goods shed.

From Bishops Lydeard a bus service runs to the county town of Taunton, about a 20-minute drive away. For us though, a return trip beckoned on a diesel engine – not such a refined journey we thought, snootily, as we boarded a carriage which, although clearly vintage, brought us sharply up to date. As we travelled we noticed some of history's other survivors waiting on the sidings of the stations we passed, including the gleaming freight trains of the so-called Warship Classes. Suddenly we came to an unexpected halt when the familiar hoot and hiss of an approaching steam engine transported us back to the era of Agatha Christie once more. ■