

2. The Railway



Postcard of Lypstone Station, 1904

Introduction

Although conceived during the days of Railway Mania the railway line was not opened until 1861 to great celebrations in Lypstone. The station was never grand but has included a single story building and, later, a signal box. The station master's house was the fine Queen Anne house near the station, and the Railway hotel is what is now The Swan Inn. There was a siding for trucks which closed in 1960. The railway served as a holiday line for Exmouth and delivered all the village's goods and sent its shell fish onward. More recently the line has been known as the 'Avocet Line' and now carries 2million passengers each year. The future for the line is bright.

To find out more, scroll down.

This is one of a set of info points around the village.

For more information click [here](#).

2. The Railway



<http://www.avocetline.org.uk/> accessed May 2022

Lympstone is lucky enough to have a railway line, a station and regular trains to Exmouth and Exeter (and beyond) that escaped the Beeching cuts in the 1960's. The line was built in the days of Victorian excitement about seaside holidays. We were fortunate that the route chosen for the line did not cut access to the sea shore (as happened on the other side of the estuary), but its building affected the village in no small way.

The first plan for a railway from Exeter to Exmouth was in 1825 when a 'rail road' was proposed to replace the Exeter Canal. This, however, came to nothing when the canal was adapted to take larger vessels. During the 'railway mania' of 1840's several plans emerged, including one supported by Isambard Kingdom Brunel, which would have linked Exmouth to Exeter by a line across Exminster Marshes, operated on the 'Atmospheric System'. This would have involved the building of a swing bridge over the River Exe and canal at Topsham.

Subsequently, disagreement between local supporters of the Great Western Railway (GWR) and its rival the London and South Western Railway (LSWR) delayed construction until 1857. Even then, financial troubles forced the 'west bank party' (GWR) to turn to the hated rival, the LSWR for financial help to finish the line. As a result of this, the route was diverted to LSWR's new station in Exeter, Queen Street or, as we now call it, Exeter Central. Even then there were troubles during construction, as some of the material for preparing the trackbed, 'delayed due to bad weather', arrived at Lympstone by boat from Torbay for onward transport.

The line was opened on 1st May 1861 and was rightly celebrated as a red-letter day. Triumphal arches of greenery and flags were raised by Lympstone's 'principal citizens'.

At noon a procession toured the village, led by a brass band, local members of the Exmouth Rifle Corps, the Coastguard and 'representatives of trade and commerce' with their banner, symbolically carried by 'Neptune' and 'Mercury'. The village schoolchildren, dressed in white and carrying a variety of flags, brought up the rear and all were greeted at the entrance to Cliff Field by a banner bearing the message:

'Young and old. Come forth and sing.
Children join the jocund ring;
Striplings blithe and maidens gay
Join the railway holiday.'

The company then sat down to a cold collation of roast beef and plum pudding and after the repast, joined in games for the rest of the day.



Archive photograph

The station at Lympstone, unlike that at Topsham (which was designed by a celebrated railway architect, Sir William Tite), was always a humble single story building with one platform, although there was a loop for goods wagons. A separate signal box was later re-sited onto the platform.

Goods traffic was handled at most rural stations until the advent of lorries and the better roads of the 1920's and 30's; before World War 2, even Lympstone's limited facilities annually forwarded over 4000 milkchurns and considerable quantities of shellfish and parcels (sent on passenger trains). Most wagonload traffic was inward with, for example, 248 tons of general goods and 680 tons of coal and coke in 1936. Goods facilities were withdrawn in 1960.

In terms of passengers, the line was well used from the day of its opening and was double tracked from Exeter to Topsham in 1910 to allow a frequent service to compete with Exeter Trams. Exmouth was connected both to Sidmouth and to the Waterloo mainline at Sidmouth Junction (now Feniton) in 1903 and the 1911 timetable shows through services to both destinations. The number of commuters grew steadily. The LSWR and its 1923 successor, the Southern Railway, advertised Exmouth as a seaside resort and promoted day excursions from Exeter to Exmouth. There were also all-in tickets that included entrance to the weekend dances at Exmouth Pavilion.

Just after World War 2 many holidaymakers came to East Devon by train, but all through services which were Saturdays only (including one to Cleethorpes) ran via Sidmouth Junction, except one to Manchester via Exeter St Davids. Exton Station, which was originally known as Woodbury Road, hosted 'camping coach' visitors during the 1950's and 60's, as did Littleham, nearby.

The Royal Marine Commando Training Centre has been served by a private Ministry of Defence station since 1976, with access 'restricted only to those who have business at the camp'.

The increase in cars led to the decrease in passenger numbers. Dr Beeching's 1955 report proposed closure of the line but it was saved by a local authority campaign. Since then, user numbers have grown steadily until they almost reached 2,000,000 in late 2020. New stations at Digby and Sowton on the outskirts of Exeter, and Newcourt near Topsham have helped to increase patronage of the railways in recent times. This has seen a great increase in commuter traffic to Exeter and beyond, to supplement the traditional flows of schoolchildren and students both to and from Exeter and Exmouth.

Although Covid took its toll, services have recovered more quickly than in other parts of the country, and the decade-old concept of a 'Devon Metro' was revived to cover most rail services in the county, of which the local line would form an integral part. Building of a new station is in progress at Marsh Barton, south of Exeter, to be used by the Exmouth-Paignton service, as well as the reopening the Exeter-Okehampton route in 2022. With increasing traffic congestion and concern about climate change, the future of the Exmouth branch looks bright.

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