



A Brief History of the Line

Devon & Cornwall Railway, 1864-1871

The Okehampton Railway was authorised on 17th July 1862 to build a line from Coleford Junction (northwest of Crediton) to Okehampton. After being renamed as the Devon & Cornwall Railway in 1864, the line opened in stages with trains reaching Sampford Courtenay (originally named Okehampton Road and later Belstone Corner) in 1867. Train services to Okehampton began on 3rd October 1871 and the Devon & Cornwall Railway became part of the London & South Western Railway (LSWR) only a year later in 1872.

London & South Western Railway, 1872-1922

When completed, the line through Okehampton connected London Waterloo with Plymouth via Salisbury and Exeter. After leaving Exeter Queen Street (now called Exeter Central) trains descended the gradient to Exeter St. David's and then ran along the Great Western Railway lines to Cowley Bridge Junction where trains took what is today called the *Tarka Line*, which ran to Barnstaple and beyond. After passing through Crediton and Yeoford, the Okehampton branch diverged from the North Devon line at Coleford Junction, and then passed through Bow, North Tawton and Sampford Courtenay stations before reaching Okehampton, at 197 miles from London Waterloo.

After Okehampton the line climbed to Meldon Quarry and crossed the spectacular Meldon viaduct, built in 1874 and doubled in 1878, over the West Okement river. The granite quarry at Meldon was purchased by the LSWR in 1897 to provide track ballast. The lines to Padstow and Bude branched off just after Meldon viaduct, and the main line continued through Lydford, Tavistock and Bere Alston before reaching Plymouth.

Southern Railway, 1923-1947

When most of the smaller railway companies were grouped together into the 'Big Four' companies in 1923, the LSWR became part of the Southern Railway. Okehampton had become an important junction station, and was redeveloped into its present format during the early 1930s. The engine shed, turntable and water tower were located at the east end of the station, which is today part of the car park. The signal box was relocated from Platform 2 to its present site in 1935. Beyond Okehampton station were some military sidings, the nearest point on the railway to the large military camp on the moor above. Troops, munitions, horses and ordnance would have been loaded and unloaded here in vast numbers.

The original station at Meldon Quarry Halt was constructed in the 1920s solely for use by workers at the quarry. Meldon Summit to the west of Meldon Junction was the highest point on the line and also the highest point on the whole of the Southern Railway at 950 ft (290 m) above sea level.

British Railways, 1948-1994

Following nationalisation in 1948 the line was incorporated into the Southern Region of British Railways, though from 1950-1958 it was transferred to the Western Region but effectively remained under Southern management. The 1950s were the heyday for Okehampton station, with 75 people working around the station and yard which unloaded an average of 300 wagons per week. Okehampton was the junction where carriages were separated for the two Cornish stations (Bude and Padstow) served by the famous *Atlantic Coast Express (ACE)* with the service also continuing onwards to Plymouth. The *ACE* ran between 1926 and 1964. The luxury *Devon Belle* express ran from London to Ilfracombe and Plymouth between 1947 and 1954 consisting of Pullman coaches and an observation car, though the Plymouth service which passed through Okehampton was withdrawn in 1949. From 1960 to 1964, a car carrier service operated on Saturdays from Surbiton, and cars were loaded and unloaded at the military sidings.

Following the 1963 Beeching Report, and transfer back to the Western Region in 1964, the period of decline began with the closure of the through route to Plymouth at Bere Alston in May 1968. Afterwards the only services were the stone trains serving Meldon quarry and a local passenger service to Exeter operated by diesel multiple units. The passenger service was halted on 5th June 1972.

Due to the presence of Meldon quarry, stone trains continued to operate on the line along with occasional specials. During the summer of 1985 West Devon Borough Council sponsored a series of summer Saturday trains between Exeter and Okehampton, but these were discontinued.

Regeneration, 1994-2008

In 1994 Meldon quarry was sold to the quarry firm Camas, along with the line from Coleford Junction to Meldon, Okehampton station, and Meldon viaduct. From 1994-1996 Devon County Council, along with West Devon Borough Council, and Dartmoor National Park developed a plan to regenerate Okehampton station to provide tourist facilities, and it was purchased for a nominal sum. The station building was refurbished, the platform raised, the awning restored, and the goods shed converted into a Youth Hostel. The grand re-opening of Okehampton station took place on 24th May 1997 and the following day saw the start of a seasonal summer Sunday train service into Exeter. Meldon viaduct was declared a scheduled ancient monument and an extensive restoration project was completed at the end of 1998. The *Dartmoor Pony* shuttle between Okehampton and a new station at Meldon began in Easter 2000.

The Dartmoor Railway today, 2008-present

British American Railway Services Ltd, a company created by Iowa Pacific Holdings of Chicago, became the new owner of the Dartmoor Railway on 4th September 2008. The railway in its current form runs for 15.5 miles from Coleford Junction on the Exeter-Barnstaple *Tarka Line*, as far as Meldon Viaduct. Heritage trains operate between Okehampton and Meldon Viaduct, with occasional services to Sampford Courtenay and beyond. First Great Western continue to operate a summer Sunday service direct from Exeter between May and September, and a variety of diesel and steam hauled charter trains visit Okehampton. Stone trains have ceased to operate as the quarry at Meldon has been mothballed.

The station buildings at Bow and North Tawton remain as private residences. Sampford Courtenay station is still used by heritage trains and the summer Sunday services from Exeter. Beyond Meldon, 11 miles of the former track bed to Lydford can be explored on foot or cycle along what is now called the *Granite Way*.