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TWO SHILLINGS

By Rail through the Exe Valley

By G. L. HUXLEY

WHAT is now known as the Exe Valley branch of the Western Region of British Railways originated as two separate railways, both of which were absorbed by the Great Western Railway. One of these lines, the Exe Valley Railway, was authorised on June 30, 1874, and opened on May 1, 1885. It connected Tiverton with the West of England main line at Stoke Canon, south of the existing station, and provided improved communication between the Exe Valley and Exeter. Previously, a railway journey from Exeter to Tiverton had involved a circuitous route *via* Tiverton Junction and the Tiverton branch of the former Bristol & Exeter Railway, opened in 1848. The powers of the Exe Valley Company were taken over by the B. & E.R. in 1875, but the line was not completed until several years after the B. & E.R. was amalgamated with the G.W.R., in 1876.

The Exe Valley Company had proposed an extension of its line for nine miles north of Tiverton Station, but the remainder of the route through the valley, to a junction with the Barnstaple branch of the G.W.R. at Morebath, near Dulverton, was built by the Tiverton & North Devon Railway. This line was authorised on July 19, 1875, and opened on August 1, 1884, nine months before the railway to Stoke Canon was completed. It was worked by the G.W.R., but the local company retained its nominal independence until 1894. The total distance from Stoke Canon to Morebath was about 19½ miles. The Exe Valley, and the Tiverton & North Devon Railways were laid as standard-gauge lines, and the gauge of the older branch to Tiverton was converted in June, 1884, in readiness for the opening of the railway from Tiverton to Morebath Junction.

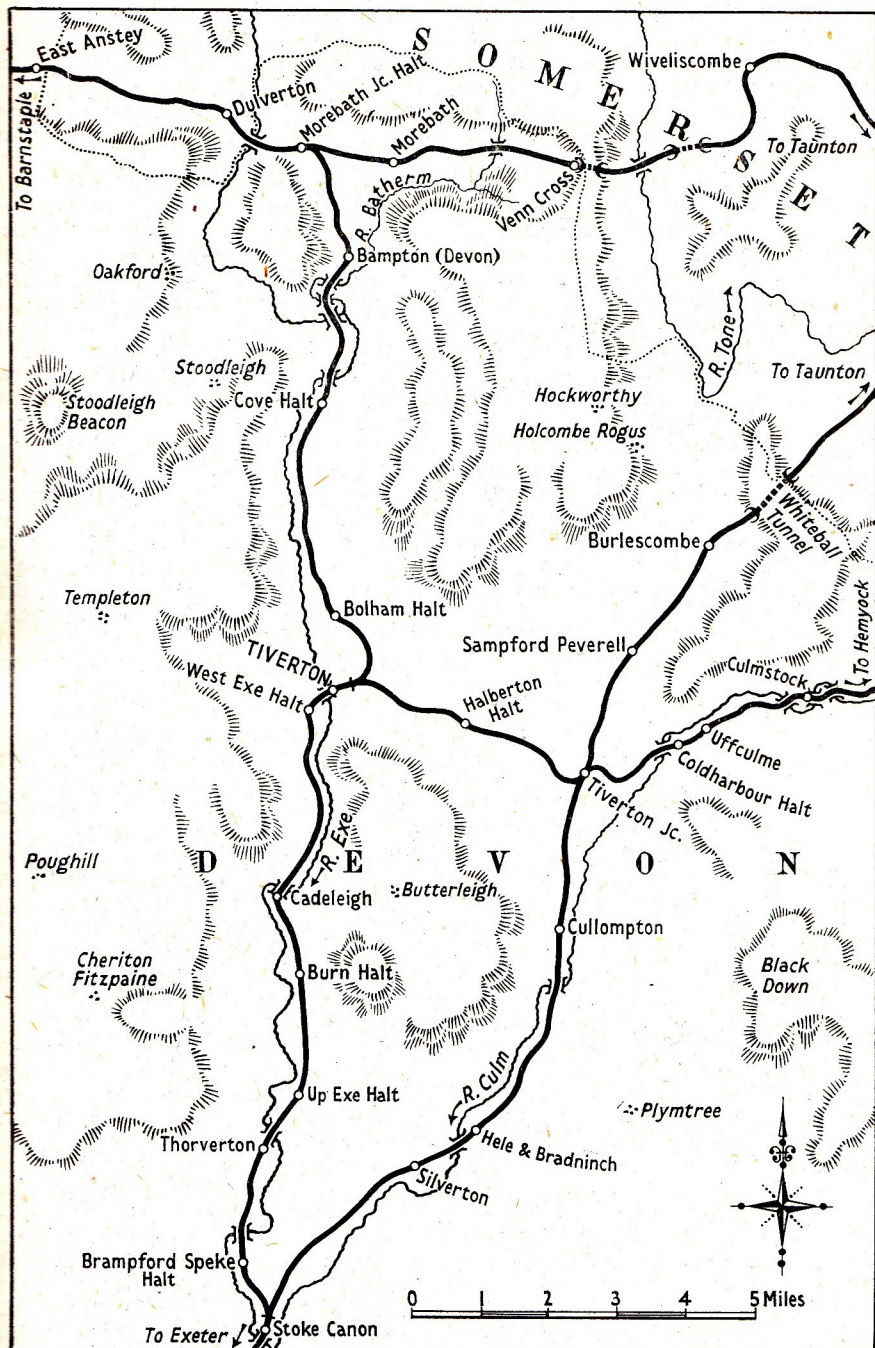
Stoke Canon Station was removed to its present site in 1894, and rebuilt when the main line was quadrupled through the station in 1932. Trains from Dulverton to Exeter often have to be held at the branch platform before they can cross over to the down line to complete the journey to Exeter (St. Davids).

Beyond Stoke Canon, the branch curves away from the main line and reaches Bramford Speke Halt, which has a single platform on the west side of the line. The adjoining station building has been closed, and passengers have to use a corrugated iron shelter on the platform. The railway soon crosses the Exe, and rises on an easy gradient to Thorverton, where there is a passing loop and a signal-box, situated next the station buildings on the down platform. A siding curves away to the right to a mill on the Exe, which was once the source of a considerable grain traffic. Beyond Thorverton, the Exe is again crossed, and ½ mile beyond the bridge Up Exe Halt is reached. This is similar in construction to Bramford Speke Halt, and is situated on the east side of the line.

On each side of Up Exe Halt there is a level crossing. In common with the others on the branch, these crossings are protected by distant signals in both directions. The signal levers are interlocked with the gate locking levers in the ground frames beside each of the crossings, and as the signals may be released simultaneously, it is not uncommon for them to show a clear indication for both directions at the same time, although the branch is single track.

Between Up Exe Halt and Burn Halt (a single wooden platform, two miles to the north) the valley is nearly a mile wide, and the Exe, now appreciably smaller than at Stoke Canon, follows a circuitous course among the meadows to the west of the line, but at Cadeleigh, the next station, the valley is much narrower. Cadeleigh Station has a passing loop and a small goods yard, and the signalbox is on the up platform. The station is situated in the picturesque village of Bickleigh, but takes its name from a village three miles to the west, to avoid confusion with the Bickleigh near Plymouth.

The Exe is again crossed beyond Cadeleigh, and remains on the east of the line until Tiverton is reached. A single platform, 3½ miles beyond Cadeleigh, serves the part of Tiverton known as West Exe,



Map of the Exe Valley line and its associated railways

and deals with a comparatively large amount of passenger traffic. The line, now running in an easterly direction, skirts the south side of the town to reach Tiverton Station. The up and down platforms are connected by a footbridge, and there is a separate bay adjoining the down platform for the branch trains to Tiverton Junction. There is an extensive goods yard, and siding accommodation for the gas-works, a petroleum depot, and several coal merchants. The signal box is set well away from the station on the down side of the line. The railway continues to double for nearly 300 yd. beyond the signalbox, and trains from Tiverton Junction use the down Exe Valley line to reach the bay. This often involves delays to connecting trains, although the signaller is able to accept a train from Tiverton Junction, when a Dulverton-Exeter train is already signalled.

Beyond Tiverton, the line curves sharply to the north, and passes under the Taunton road. Bolham Halt serves the village of that name, and is about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile from the river. From Tiverton to Bolham, the line falls on a gradient of 1 in 73, and soon after the halt the Exe comes into view again, and the railway is less than 10 ft. above its banks. The valley narrows considerably, and the railway runs along its eastern side, which is densely wooded.

At Cove Halt, there is a level crossing, protected by distant signals, and a siding which will hold three trucks. The signalbox is not a separate block post, but the crossing keeper is warned of the approach of trains by the code bells rung between the signaller at Bampton, the next station, and Tiverton. Cove Halt has a single platform on the east of the line, and the view from it is extremely beautiful, with the Exe below, and the trees clinging to the steep sides of the valley above.

A mile to the north of Cove, the railway leaves the Exe and follows the River Bathern as far as Bampton. Here there is a signalbox, and a passing loop with two platforms. A nearby quarry is served by a siding, but most of the stone is sent now by road. There is also a goods shed and a coal yard. The station is always referred to as Bampton (Devon) to avoid confusion with Bampton in Oxfordshire.

The ground signals are connected to the point rodding instead of having separate levers in the signalbox. They are of the rotating lamp type with red and green faces. In common with Thorverton, Cadeleigh, and Tiverton boxes, Bampton signalbox has a ganger's key which, when released simultaneously by the signaller at each end of the block section, locks the staff instruments, and enables the petrol-driven ganger's trolleys to occupy the line. The staff instruments may be released by replacing the key in any of the telephone sets between Bampton and Bolham.

Beyond Bampton, the line climbs on a ruling gradient of 1 in 67, and then curves to the west to join the Barnstaple branch at Morebath Junction Halt. Morebath Village is $\frac{1}{2}$ mile away to the north-east. From Bampton to Morebath Junction box the distance is just over $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles. The line is now running in a westerly direction, and Exmoor can be seen on the right. The Exe is crossed for the last time a mile before Dulverton is reached.

Dulverton Station is just within Somerset, and is over $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles from the town. The two platforms are connected by a footbridge and there is a separate platform face on the south side for the Exeter trains. The River Barle flows down from Exmoor near the station and joins the Exe.

The maximum speed allowed on the branch is 35 m.p.h., and most of the trains are allowed 80 min. for the journey from Dulverton to Exeter. Passenger traffic is handled by pull-and-push trains, worked by "14XX" class 0-4-2 tank engines, or by "45XX" class 2-6-2 tank engines. Despite a competitive bus service, the trains are quite well patronised. There are nine services in each direction between Exeter and Dulverton on weekdays, and a reduced service runs between Exeter and Tiverton on Sundays during the summer months. The last train from Dulverton to Tiverton in the evening returns to Exeter *via* Tiverton Junction, as the Exe Valley signalboxes have then been closed. Freight traffic is light, but one up and two down trains are run on weekdays. Recently consignments have been sent by road from Exeter to places in the valley.

The Exe Valley Line

(See article on preceding page)



Dulverton Station from the west in July, 1949. The platform used by the Exe Valley branch trains is on the right



Photos]

[J. J. Davis

Cadeleigh Station, looking towards Tiverton, in September, 1948