



The Railway in Weston

'Noisy, smoky steam engines...' come to Weston!

It doesn't sound like the residents of Weston-super-Mare exactly welcomed the arrival of the railway, does it? Yet the railways kick started the growth of Weston as a seaside resort and transformed the way in which ordinary people spent their hard earned leisure time.

In 1822 it took five hours to reach Weston by coach from Bath, journeys from London and Birmingham would have taken days and longer distances could have taken weeks.



An artist's impression of Weston's first train station © John Crockford-Hawley

The first railway station in Weston-super-Mare was opened to the public on 14 June 1841 built by the Bristol and Exeter Railway Company. This organisation was closely linked with The GWR and shared the engineering talents of Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

But the residents of Weston didn't want a nasty, dirty station in the centre of the town so the station was built about 1 ½ miles south east of the town on the main line to Exeter. Passengers were then ferried along a branch line into the centre of town by horse drawn railway carriages (quiet and not smoky). Some travellers commented rather ungratefully that it was quicker to walk to town!

Weston was one of the first seaside resorts in the world to receive a rail link and the impact was immediate, the number of travellers quickly grew. So the branch line was developed to leave the main track at Weston Junction and follow the line of what is now Winterstoke Road to the station in the centre of town. Here a platform, ticket office and waiting room were built (where the floral clock is now). The gothic style buildings were designed by Brunel himself.

In 1850 a steam engine was bought for use on the link line during daytime (horses were still used at night). The following year steam took over entirely, (the journey now took two to three minutes).

These new holidaymakers needed somewhere to stay so a hotel called The Railway Inn and a pub called The Bristol and Exeter were built.



A replica of 'North Star', an early steam locomotive © Geof Sheppard

But it wasn't only people that were travelling by train; in 1861 the amount of goods going in and out of Weston by rail meant that a separate Goods Station was needed. This was built in front of Whitecross House. In 1862 the first goods despatched were three wagon-loads of flower pots from the Royal Potteries in Locking Road.

By now the small single track station could not cope with the amount of passengers and a new, larger building was planned. On 20 July 1866 the old station closed and the town's second station was opened on a site now occupied by Tesco.



Weston's current station, built in 1884 ©James F Clay

The new station was still on a branch line but this had been made into a double track and the station now had two platforms and sidings.

Accidents

Because people were unused to fast moving trains; the early years of the railway were plagued by frequent accidents, especially on the level crossing over the busy Locking Road.

In April 1854, nine year old James Smith - son of a Railway Policemen - was killed when he fell off the platform and was run over by a railway carriage after taking his father's lunch to the station. The local newspaper reported gory details; the wheels "broke his left arm and nearly severed his head from his body".

Day trippers

The railway allowed ordinary working people to have a day out at the seaside. At first, firms hired their own trains for trips to Weston. In 1847, for example, some 1,200 workers of Stothert's Iron Works arrived for the day.

It wasn't until 1851 that the Bristol and Exeter Railway began to organise its own trips, but then they really took off. On Whit Monday 1851, 2,000 trippers arrived from Bristol.

By 1854 there were so many day travellers that the Company built a special excursion train platform long enough to take 46 coaches. An "excursion hall" provided tea at 1 1/2d a cup, or you could bring your own from home. Return fare from Bristol was 1 shilling and six pence (5 1/2 pence today). Weston was no longer the playground of the wealthy.

In 1884 the rapid growth of the town and increasing seasonal traffic led to a new station being built on the loop line into Weston, with access to main line connections to London and Birmingham. By 1904 day trips were being run from London and in 1914 another Excursion Station was opened in Locking Road for use during the summer.

The site today

What can still be seen? The Railway Hotel is now "The Tavern Inn The Town". The Bristol & Exeter is now known as "Bonds Wine Bar". The old B&E Railway signal box from the branch line survives as a store. It can be seen to the left of the up-platform at the current station which has hardly changed since it was built.



The original Bristol & Exeter Railway signal box © Geof Sheppard

Devil's Bridge, built in 1841 to carry the early road from Uphill to Bleadon over the railway, is the highest single open railway bridge in the country. Its importance has been recognised and it has been designated a Listed Building.

