

“Tales of the West Somerset Railway”

New book launched by West Somerset Steam Railway Trust recounting personal recollections from some of those stalwarts who helped rebuild the railway over the last 40 years.

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When the former British Rail closed the once-bustling former Great Western Railway 25-mile branch line to Minehead from Taunton in 1971, a local businessman and railway enthusiasts simply refused to let it die.

They all thought the railway was well worth saving, as did many in the local community, and so they battled with both the National Union of Railwaymen and British Rail to be allowed to run their own trains again as a private line to be called the West Somerset Railway (WSR).

Crucially, the WSR lobbyists gained the support of Somerset County Council which bought the track bed from British Rail with a view to perhaps turning much of it into new roads if the embryonic line failed.

The WSR company and support organisations were set up and steam locos, coaches and diesel multiple units were gradually acquired to use on the nascent line's planned services; staff were trained and recruited; skilled volunteers and railwaymen and women came to help from all over the country; funds were raised by whatever means possible; and the track work and signalling was slowly reinstated, often using recovered, redundant items from around the rail network. A lot of work was done in a fairly short time to get the line ready for business again.

After five years, their persistence finally succeeded and, in April 1976, the new West Somerset Railway was born and it reopened initially on just the three miles from Minehead to Blue Anchor. But it was an auspicious start!

Over the next three years, the line was steadily reopened in stages. First to Washford, Watchet and Williton, and then to Stogumber, and finally to Crowcombe and Bishops Lydeard as the line's new southern terminus which was reached in 1979 making it the country's longest heritage line at some 20 miles.

Now, the West Somerset Steam Railway Trust (WSSRT) is set to publish a new 40th anniversary book chronicling some personal memories and momentous events of the last four decades years on Friday 7 June 2019 compiled by three long-serving supporters who produced it.

West Somerset Steam Railway Trust Chairman Chris Austin OBE comments:

“Sadly, WSR trains could not run on to Taunton as was originally hoped for by the line’s founding pioneers. However, the two-mile line close to the former mainline junction at Norton Fitzwarren was retained as a tantalising glimpse of what might yet come to pass in years to come.

“And I’m pleased to say there is now a mainline rail connection there again and trial GWR shuttle services from Taunton to Bishops Lydeard are starting this summer!

“The last 40 years have seen the West Somerset line largely go from strength to strength, and through some rocky times too, but it is now one of the top heritage steam and diesel railways in Britain, and a powerhouse in the Somerset tourism economy.

“It’s fitting that, four decades on, three of our WSR volunteers and stalwarts for most of that whole period have joined forces to edit a lavishly illustrated historical book of ‘Personal Reminiscences’ of the railway entitled ‘Tales of the West Somerset Railway’.

“The new book is jointly authored and edited by Ian Coleby, Allan Stanistreet and Ian Tabrett who all have strong, long-standing connections to the WSR and over 111 years of experiences on the line!

“This new book, launched to coincide with the 40th anniversary of trains returning to Bishops Lydeard on the weekend of 8th & 9th June and a special event on the railway, fondly recalls the efforts and memories of a few of those who worked so hard to rebuild the railway in that time and help achieve some great things which were once pipe dreams.

“All funds raised by the book sales will go towards supporting the railway which is now making rapid progress on a recovery plan to ensure the line has a sound future for the next 40 years too.

“The new book forms part of the Trust’s outreach work to encourage interest in the railway and its history, and the line’s social and economic significance.”

NOTE: *The book is due to be launched at a special private evening event by invitation only on Friday 7 June in the WSSRT’s Gauge Museum at Bishops Lydeard.*

Published by the West Somerset Steam Railway Trust, the 130-page book is illustrated in colour throughout, and very reasonably priced at £8.99.

It has a personal Foreword from former Bridgwater MP Tom King, now Lord King, who took a keen interest in the line.

ABOUT THE THREE EDITORS

ALLAN STANISTREET

Allan was born in 1940 and had a career as a soldier and civil servant. He joined the WSRA in July 1974 and has been a shareholder since 1976. He volunteered prior to reopening on Permanent Way and subsequently as booking clerk and TTI. He now assists in the WSR Association office at Bishops Lydeard and as a 'PIC' at Norton Fitzwarren during the annual rally. He wrote the first four editions of the guide book and, with Steve Edge, the first stations and buildings book. He is the founder editor of the Journal and now on the editorial team. He compiled "Portrait of the West Somerset Railway" (Ian Allan, 1996) and has written or co-written seven other books. It is understood that "Portrait" was the first book to describe a railway in the preservation era.

IAN COLEBY

Ian is a life-long railway enthusiast and has been a volunteer on the West Somerset since 1983 as a signaller and a director (at various times) of the WSSRT, the WSRA and the WSR PLC. During 2018, he served briefly as plc Chairman. Having taken a keen interest in railway history, Ian wrote the definitive history of the Minehead line in 2006 and has continued to study the history of the line. Ian has been the editor of the WSR Journal since 2017.

IAN TABRETT

Like most small boys in the 1950s, Ian became interested in railways in general and steam in particular while travelling on the Cheddar Valley branch to and from school for seven years. He has been a member of the WSRA and a shareholder of the WSR for three decades, and is on the editorial team of the *Journal* and a regular contributor. Now retired, he worked as a journalist for 50 years on regional papers, BBC Points West in Bristol and finally for HTV as senior news producer.