

A relic from the early days of one of the West Country's busiest railway branch lines and which was rescued when it was axed in the 1970s is to go on public display for the first time.

The now-tattered ledger was kept at Minehead station and was used for more than 60 years to record many thousands of items which were found after being left behind by forgetful passengers between 1904 and 1968.

The property ranged from false teeth to guns, farm machinery to jewellery, bowler hats to swimming costumes, and picnics to Christmas crackers.

The register was originally saved by a railwayman who was afraid that otherwise it would have been dumped when the line was closed, and it has now been handed to the West Somerset Railway Steam Trust, which runs the museum at Bishops Lydeard station.

The very first entry was made 114 years ago in now-faded pencil: "November: package containing pig net" which had been left on a train from Taunton and was never claimed. The terse last one, as services were being run down and staff made redundant: "Umbrella 8/5/68."

Over the years the hundreds of pages show that much of the property was claimed by telephone, telegram, letter or personal visit and returned on payment of anything from a few shillings to several pounds. All the rest was sent to Paddington to be sold or destroyed.

Throughout the year early morning and late afternoon services from Taunton to Minehead yielded countless school caps, satchels, football boots, cricket bats and tennis rackets

Trains from London, the Midlands and South Wales brought a harvest of suitcases, tin trunks and briefcases, hundreds of hats – even bowlers – gloves, fur wraps, coats, waterproofs, shoes, walking sticks and brollies, often left by passengers who had got off at Taunton for connections to South Somerset and North Devon.

Oddities included an iron saucepan, a ploughshare, a bag of seeds, a basket containing "shirts, corsets and a pair of shoes," bicycles and even a white hen and chicks.

The ledger reveals evidence of considerable military use of the line during both world wars: in May 1914 there were two soldiers' kitbags plus "captain's luggage" found on a platform bench after a Yeomanry regiment's special train had departed. At other times there were countless officers' coats, sailors' hats, military gas masks, and tin helmets

Despite the food shortages in 1915 there was a basket containing four bananas, a bunch of flowers and a purse with 19-and-a-half pence and some stamps (the basket and purse were returned to Paddington, the flowers and bananas destroyed) while other edibles included a clutch of eggs, parcel of herrings, package of 2-and-a-half

pounds of margarine (destroyed) and a brown paper parcel containing tomatoes, gooseberries and flowers.

Weaponry occasionally came to light including “a miniature rifle” left on the 8.55am train from Taunton in November 1910. There were sporting guns and in 1945 a Service revolver and ammunition which were handed over to the local police.

Some 26 years earlier, mystery surrounded an unclaimed package containing “14 imitation gold watches, five imitation silver watches plus other watches, six fountain pens in cardboard boxes, six gold watches in brand boxes” – possibly the stock of a forgetful travelling salesman or even the haul of a shoplifter!

Steam Trust chairman Chris Austin and his team of volunteers are carrying out a major revamp of the museum where this historic relic from the branch line’s past will be in safe keeping.

More on what it reveals can be seen in the latest edition of the West Somerset Railway *Journal*, free to members of the WSR Association or available from the Bishops Lydeard station shop.

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