



The Dartmoor Pony

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Bridge Re-opening

The Dartmoor Pony

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The views expressed in the newsletter are not necessarily those of the Dartmoor Railway Association.

FRONT COVER: The re-opened footbridge with a 3-car Class 166 unit at the platform (Photo: Sue Baxter).

BACK COVER: Top: DRA outing to visit the Friends of Crewkerne Station (Photo: Jon Kelsey). Bottom: Cast of the Holsworthy Amateur Dramatics Society production of The Ghost Train, taking part in a photo shoot on Platform 2.

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Chairman's Update

Sue Baxter

Since our May Annual General Meeting station life has been as varied as ever. So, with the help of photos, I am reporting on a conference, a ghost train, taking friends to jail, from inside the quarry, Devon in the 1920's, footbridge reopening (with slip testing), and sending special thoughts to Crewkerne Station Friends.

The vast Swindon Works with the STEAM Museum at its centre was the inspiring setting for the Great Western Railway (GWR) Community Rail and Stakeholder Conference in June. The theme was a 'Green Railway for Growth'. The industry is, for example, targeting the development of batteries which would certainly help improve the air quality on our station. Similarly the delivery of 26 sets of the Class 175 units to GWR to cover 20 diagrams, should mean welcome spare capacity to improve reliability, from the end of the year.

Also we should encourage our local youngsters to look at jobs on the railway. It is not an industry overtaken by IT. It has plenty of technical and customer facing jobs, and in fact looking to employ another 120,000 by 2030. I think the variety of staff that we have on our Okehampton service illustrates well their ethos of inclusivity. All invariably courteous and helpful in my experience.

We were encouraged to widen the appeal and usage of the railways. In Bristol 'The Sustainable Hive CIC' has used grants to bring low income families into the city by rail to enjoy canal trips. In a boat made from recycled plastic they fished out floating litter. They then used it to make art work and finished off with a BBQ. There was a heart warming film made by a Down's Syndrome couple who were linked up by the railway. Rail travel does give people confidence.

I was also very encouraged that GWR is keen to green stations with hibernaculars, bugboxes and even wildlife nightwatch cameras (n.b. no mention was made of dormice boxes!).

In the breaks, a meeting with the right people meant that I could highlight our own station concerns. For example around the PA announcements which still fail to identify the destination of most buses, and our wish to have the bus replacement service for planned closures shown in advance.

All in all it was good to feel that there is a wide body of professional committed individuals who will power our railway through the next decades. Our volunteer contribution was keenly acknowledged. For example, that on lines with volunteer support passenger figures are increasing more, by 46% in the time leading up to the pandemic, contrasting with 35% on others.

Hosting 'The Ghost Train' cast on Platform 2 was just a joy. Seeing the station populated with the kind of travellers it might have had in the past, including a lady with a canary in a covered cage, and a dandy with vibrant stripy socks below his breeches. They were players from HATS, Holsworthy Amateur Dramatics Society, who had a very successful run over six nights of the thriller drama by Nicholas Ridley of Dad's Army fame. They may return to us in connection with their production of The Railway Children next year.



Cast of HATS production of The Ghost Train, on Platform 2



Tom and I have volunteered on the Welsh Highland Railway since 2000, and were delighted that some 26 of their volunteers visited us during their summer holiday coach tour. Two days later we joined them at Bodmin Railway and then a few of us went to Bodmin Jail (pictured left).

An impressive building and excellent visitor attraction, we had not expected to find a railway connection. However on 7th April 1840, three special excursion trains from Wadebridge to Bodmin were laid on carrying 1,100 passengers each, to join the crowd of some 25,000 to see the hanging of two brothers who had robbed and killed a market trader. The boisterous atmosphere akin to a fair!

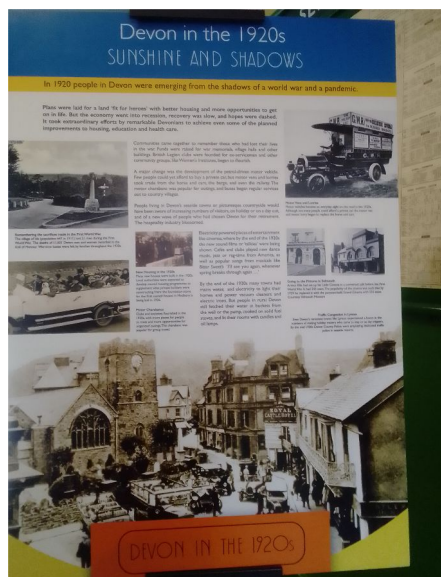
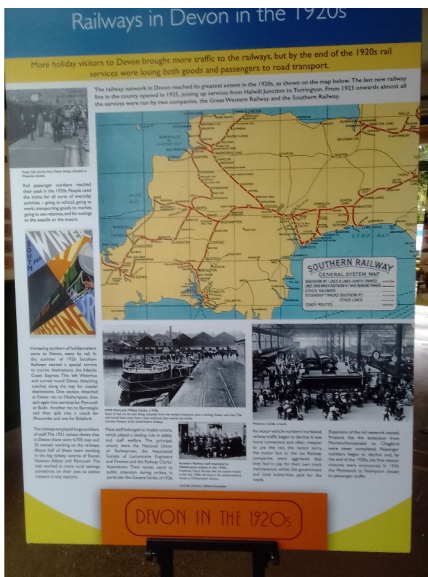
At Meldon we have secured tarpaulins over the LMS Brake Van and repaired a tarpaulin over the FK carriage. There is no decision yet on our use of the shed. Meldon Aggregates Limited are working steadily towards rail operations. At the present time they are busy with some blasting and sales of varied aggregates going out by road over the new weighbridge. In the distance we spied a mobile crusher being controlled remotely by a walking operator. Impressive equipment.

Activity at Meldon Quarry with a truck on the new weighbridge and a mobile crusher in action in the distance.



Judge for the Stations in Bloom competition, Derek Beer, visited us again this year and told us that his earliest visit was on a troop train in 1966, probably behind a Warship (Class 42) locomotive. This year our station was the 90th he had judged across the South of England.

Banners celebrating Devon in the 1920's are on display in the Booking Hall, courtesy of organiser Julia Neville. A map shows the route of the last branch light railway to be built, between Torrington and Halwill, which opened in 1925. It first served the existing Peters Marland clay quarry and then the clay workings which opened up at Meeth. As expected, it was welcomed for taking heavy traffic off the roads. It is worth noting that half of the cost, £126,000, was raised mostly amongst local private investors, after public meetings held to raise the funds to match the Ministry of Transport's promised grant.



Banners celebrating Devon in the 1920s

On 29th July Okehampton Station started to breathe again as the footbridge was finally opened and a gentle flow of passengers and visitors immediately started. It is nearly 19 months after Storm Henk

tore off its roof. Straight away the Arthur Westlake Museum regained visitors, and nearby seats are again used for relaxation and reading.



The bridge has better anti slip coverings now. The central span was duly tested for its efficacy under both dry and wet simulated conditions, using a well designed instrument by Stanley dating back to 1953. A strip of rubber is carefully placed on a swinging arm in such a way that it will brush a short section of the floor. The resistance is measured on each swing. The material covering the wooden step treads is particularly good.

The job had been complicated by having to have clearance to work over a live railway. However it is probable that the only longer train to pass under it did so about an hour after it opened. A class 166, being a three car set, pulled forward to the 3 and 4 Car Stop sign nearer the Signal Box (cover photo).

In the Signal Box there is a collection of hand lamps restored by Dick Burd on display, adding weight to the sense of the station's history already told in the model layout. Homeworking of all kinds that enhances the station is much appreciated. Also if any members could give some time to help us open up the Museum and the model railway more of the time please get in touch. If you are interested in helping out anywhere for a few hours a week or a month we'd love to hear from you.



Finally, we have been thinking about the band of volunteers we met on our exchange visit to Crewkerne Station who currently just see the trains go steadily through the station without stopping. Gail explained that the issue is basically due to the very low rainfall. “It is a bit upsetting to have the station closed but the only soil moisture deficit (dry clay under the track) they were sure about at first was that between Yeovil and Crewkerne. They have since found more! After August 11th the timetable will be changed and although Crewkerne will again be open there will only be one train every 2 hours.” very frustrating during the height of the summer season! Speeds have been dropped from 85 mph to 40 mph as trains pass over the affected embankments.

Climate change is certainly producing challenges. With our very high embankments crossing valleys could we have serious problems if summer rainfall were to drop? But, could that really happen to Soakhampton?!

Chairman’s Report - DRA AGM 28th May 2025

I would like to start by remembering two people who have played key roles in the life of our railway.

First David Anstee, our nightwatchman, who lived around Okehampton Station through six winters. Friendly and enigmatic he was a gentleman of the countryside with many interests. He enjoyed the company of many at the station. He also enjoyed helping passengers and was proud and protective of the station.

Then Gerald Smallacombe. Steam engine driver who knew Dartmoor Line round to Plymouth. Latterly he piloted engines such as *Clan Line* down from Exeter up to Three Arches or Welcome Bridge. In the early 2000’s he was again driving steam to the delight of Okehampton residents, such as *Darfield* an industrial locomotive and the Yugoslavian (US) tank engine. On one occasion he spent much of the night between shifts helping to sort out a reluctant fire from poor coal.

Dartmoor Railway Association has many sides and I will now attempt to review them. Key to everything we do is volunteering and we have been very pleased to welcome Christine Lane from Exeter to help with the gardening. She makes up the number to twenty one who regularly work around the station as well as on projects at home. We recently had a great “Away Day” at Crewkerne Station where we were hosted by compatriots to a tour and lunch together. GWR is very supportive enabling networking at various events.

We have watched the Interchange Station gradually take shape and have met the GWR project lead, but there have not been detailed stakeholder discussions involving us yet.

It is pleasing to say that we have notices now to put up for the refurbishment of the Station Footbridge starting on Monday 2nd June. After three weeks our Museum will again be open and accessible at more times than since Storm Henck on 2nd January 2024. We now have an excellent selection of archive photos for Okehampton and Meldon showing on a long loop in Museum Room 2 on Platform 2.

On Platform 3 our “Bookstall” (+ much more!) is consistently staffed 4 days a week and Bank Holiday Mondays. Always appreciated is the information and advice sharing with passengers.

The archive continues to grow in the Back Office and upstairs. Plans are underway for developing topic folders which could be accessed via a touchscreen in the Museum.

The Model Railway in the Signal Box is now open and staffed throughout the summer on Saturdays and Sundays. It is a real treat, and attracts all kinds of visitors, from returning enthusiasts to an enthralled toddler last Sunday. (Will he be given a chance to have a model railway? Catch them young!) It feels good to be welcoming the public to another area of the station.

At Meldon the year has been mixed. After last year’s AGM we had two legal agreements just about ready to be signed, on the two sheds, sidings

and Class 08 Shunter 08937. However AI procrastinated and then in late October the reason why became clear, when we were made aware of the likely sale of Meldon Quarry.

A new company arrived in January, Meldon Aggregates Limited. It has been encouraging to see how the site, including the sidings has been cleared and re-opened already for aggregate sales by road. We have been pleased by the open engagement they have had with the DRA committee. They intend to use the railhead to reach the London market, and they are in process for triggering the funding of the relaying of the line up to Meldon to the same standard as the rest of the Dartmoor Line.

DRA has in its constitution the objective “to explore the possibility of operating heritage services between Okehampton and Meldon”. Meldon Aggregates Limited would have liked to have retained the 08 engine for shunting operations. The engine affectionately known as Bluebell Mel, although “left behind” was not part of the quarry sale. Aggregate Industries finally withdrew it to the Mendip branch of their operation in mid May.

So currently we have a nearly refurbished Southern Brake Van in the Carriage and Wagon shed. Outside a severely weathered and part vandalised LMS Brake Van. Also two carriages. Lab 11 is multipurpose with generator and saloon. FK is a first class Mark 2, compartments with corridor connection. Both have been attacked by vandals and we have done what we can by way of wooden shuttering and tarpaulins to secure them. Under MAL there is now a site manager, an on site watchman and CCTV, but a little vandalism has continued.

Meldon Aggregates Limited have explicitly given us permission to access our stock. They suggest that an agreement with them can be discussed, once they, as a new railway business understand how they are going to use the site.

I believe the refurbishment of the two Brake Vans is within the skill set of DRA members and will maintain our heritage connection with the ‘Big Railway’. However there are many angles on these issues for your

committee to discuss, alongside as yet unknown actions by MAL, and the wider railway industry.

This year is the 200th anniversary of the passenger railway in Britain. When our station opened in 1871 and the sidings were put in, there would have been a huge increase in goods moving across the country. Perhaps milk, cheese, rabbits and lamb up the line, and bricks, coal and cloth down to Okehampton. Today our passengers consistently comment on the lovely nature of our station and enjoy the 7 day a week hourly service which is the most frequent in its history. A big thankyou to your committee for all the hours of work behind the scenes, as well as in their customer facing roles!

We have been represented at a Railway Archive Exhibition in Crediton of visual and sound memories of our railway. It included a lovely recording of Gerald Smallacombe recalling his days as a steam engine driver. We are also going to have banners celebrating Devon's railways in the 1920's, including the opening of the last railway in Devon which was between Torrington and Halwill Junction.

This year we won a Gold Award in the Stations in Bloom Competition across the SWR and GWR railway. The lovely citation read "The volunteers here really make a difference maintaining and promoting the local heritage at the same time as producing fantastic and varied floral displays over many years. A great station to visit in its own right".

We can be justifiably proud of what DRA continues to achieve. 21 volunteers continuing to contribute to the success and increasing passenger numbers at Okehampton Station. Each reporting period up by between 5 and 15%.

The challenges that could be testing this coming year include Great British Railways, Meldon and Okehampton Interchange Station. But I have no doubt that our DRA members will work our way through them and continue to enjoy being a valued part of Okehampton Station and the Dartmoor Line.

Membership & Volunteer News

Geoff Horner, Membership Secretary

Over the past few months we have been pleased to welcome the following new members to the association:

- Tracy & Paul King of Folly Gate near Okehampton
- David Lees of Okehampton
- Daniel Roche of Ilfracombe

Our team of dedicated volunteers have continued to be busy around the station at Okehampton. Thanks to the 'Flower Fairies' the floral displays are looking as attractive as ever whilst the painting teams and litter pickers hard work continues to keep the station looking smart.

In what seems like a remarkably short period of time the Model Railway group have the layout up and running and open for public viewing. Do pay it a visit if you are in the area.



Work on footbridge before the re-opening

The re-opening of the footbridge seems to have led to an increase in the number of visitors to the Museum and it is well worth a visit. The Shop continues to do well and the stock of new railway books has been replenished. Details of titles can be found on our website. There is as always a large selection of 'pre-loved' railway books available.

Taking advantage of the recent spells of fine weather, a visit was made to the yard at Meldon to put in place new tarpaulin covers over the LMS brake van.



DRA rolling stock at Meldon Quarry

If you are in the area do pay us a visit and let us know that you are a member. The Model Railway, Museum and Shop are open on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays usually between 10.30 and 15.30.

DRA Members' Socials

Dates for upcoming DRA social evenings at the Taw River Inn, Sticklepath, Okehampton, EX20 2FG. Held on the first Wednesday of each month starting from 18:30. All DRA members are welcome!

- Wednesday 1st October 2025
- Wednesday 5th November 2025
- Wednesday 3rd December 2025
- Wednesday 7th January 2026

DRA Members' Library

A reminder that we have a collection of books on (mostly) West Country railway themes. Current local DRA members are welcome to borrow from the library. The latest list is shown here:

<https://www.dartmoor-railway-association.org/library>

Please contact us on info@dartmoor-railway-association.org if there's anything you are interested in – please don't just turn up at the station unannounced.

The Bookstall

Our DRA shop, 'The Bookstall', on Platform 3 at Okehampton station opens on Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and Holiday Mondays throughout the year thanks to the dedicated team of volunteers who make this possible. As well as the varied selection of 'previously loved' railway books and DVD's available in the shop, new railway book titles are available to order online via the DRA website:

<https://www.dartmoor-railway-association.org/shop>

The shop also stocks a selection of local hand crafted candles, glassware, jewellery, cards etc which make ideal gifts. There is also a selection of DRA and Dartmoor Line souvenirs. Do visit the shop when you are in Okehampton.

Magazine Contributions Invited

We invite contributions for the magazine of items likely to be of interest to members – photos, memories, articles, history. Any photo contributions preferably in jpeg format and less than 2MB, and text preferably in Word (.doc/.docx) or Open Office (.odt) format or similar. Please get in touch if you'd like to ask any questions or send in material for consideration: museum@dartmoor-railway-association.org

1997: A new beginning for Okehampton Station - Part 1

David Naylor

As work has been completed on the Okehampton Station footbridge, it's interesting to look back 28 years to another repair, this one a major undertaking, which would bring back to life the station that almost died a death 25 years previously when the last passenger train departed for Exeter in June 1972.

As can be seen from the following photos, a colossal amount of work was undertaken to bring the station back into the proper working order we see today.



The above photo, undated looks like it was taken in the late Summer or early Autumn of 1996, showing the Class 08 shunter parked up at a dilapidated looking Platform 3.



After years of neglect, rust had well and truly taken its toll on the canopy supports on Platform 3. Below is the footbridge on the Platform 3 side. These were taken on 15th March 1997.





Another two photos showing the Signal Box, above, on 15th March 1997, and below, on 4th April 1997, showing broken window panes as work commenced to repair the platform.





The above picture, taken on 29th March 1997 shows the canopy support struts replaced and the work in full swing to repair Platform 3. After the completion of Platform 3, it was the turn of Platform 2.



Hopworthy Farm Crossing Accident

Tom Baxter

This relates to a tragic accident that occurred on the Bude branch between a Halwill to Bude train and farm tractor towing a trailer in September 1950. It resulted in the deaths of 3 people riding on the farm trailer and destruction of the tractor and trailer. The tractor driver amazingly survived, having been thrown clear of the tractor and over a hedge into a field alongside the railway.

I was asked recently if we had any details about this accident by a passenger returning to Exeter and waiting on the platform at Okehampton for his train. Apparently one of his relatives had been involved in the accident as a member of the train crew. I believe his relative was the driver and at the time was based at Exmouth Junction depot.

The accident occurred on the evening of 7th September 1950. It involved the 5.8pm (17.08) passenger train from Halwill to Bude. The train consisted of two coaches hauled by a class M7 0-4-4 tank engine. The train had three train crew on board. The Driver, Fireman and a Porter Guard. The report does not describe how many passengers were on board.

The train and loco were only slightly damaged in the accident. This consisting of some minor damage to exterior fittings on the loco and coaches. In contrast the tractor, a Fordson Major, and a heavy two axle agricultural trailer were completely destroyed. The farmer, his wife and daughter who were riding on the trailer were killed instantly. The son who was driving the tractor survived despite being thrown off the tractor. The front buffer of the train it seems hit the rear of the tractor and probably in close proximity to where he was sitting. So despite the horror of the whole event he must have been a very lucky man to survive with only what are described as minor injuries.

I'd previously heard of this accident but not had the full details. It is mentioned briefly in the book 'The Bude Branch' by D.J. Wroe on page

33. Although the year quoted – 1943 – is incorrect. Also some years ago I had a conversation with an elderly gentleman from Pyworthy. Knowing of my interest in railways he'd asked whether I remembered the accident. At that time I hadn't. I now realise that I wasn't even born when it occurred!

Anyway all this provoked my interest and I decided to do a bit of research about it. Which was remarkably easy as an Accident Report exists courtesy of the Railways Archive which in itself is a huge source of railway archive material:

<https://www.railwaysarchive.co.uk/>

The accident is listed there together with the full accident report. We probably can't publish it the Pony due to copyright reasons but you can easily download it by clicking on the link below. It downloads in pdf format:

<https://www.railwaysarchive.co.uk/widesearch.php?text=Hopworthy>

For anyone wanting to know more it makes for interesting reading and probably shows crossing standards at that time were somewhat less rigorous than they are today. In fact Network Rail list crossings as one of the more significant sources of danger on the railway network and seeks to close and replace them wherever possible. Sometimes replacing with what are some very expensive alternatives.

On our own line, before the Dartmoor Line re-opened, considerable work was implemented on warning systems for the farm and footpath crossings now existing between Coleford and Okehampton. Given the enhanced speed and frequency of trains. Today's trains also tend to be lighter in weight and farm tractors and machinery bigger and heavier so the contest may not be as unequal as was the case in 1950.

The North Devon and Cornwall Junction Railway's Centenary

Dana Wiffen

In the year of #Railway200, when Britain's railways are celebrating the bicentenary of the Stockton & Darlington Railway, other less well known lines are also reaching significant anniversaries. Sunday July 27th 2025 marked the centenary of the opening of the North Devon & Cornwall Junction Light Railway - the last standard-gauge steam operated branch line to be built in England.



Commemorative Plaque (photo: Chris Jackson)

Running from Torrington to Halwill Junction, the light railway was intended to connect towns in North Devon with the lines from Okehampton to Bude, Launceston, Wadebridge and Padstow. Its construction was partly government-funded in a bid to provide local employment in a depressed economy following the end of World War I. The route incorporated that of the narrow-gauge Torrington & Marland Railway which had been built to serve the area's ball clay workings at Meeth and Marland.

Unfortunately the railway only operated for 40 years before closure although freight trains continued on part of the line until 1982. Much of

the route is now part of the Tarka Trail long-distance footpath and cycle track.

The ND&CLJR was the last project to be completed by the well-known light railway promoter Lt-Colonel Holman Fred Stephens, who engineered the route and obtained the necessary Light Railway Order authorising construction. He subsequently stepped in to complete the construction after the principal contractor went into administration, and then served as the first Managing Director of the railway company. The line remained legally independent until nationalisation in 1948, even though the trains were operated by the Southern Railway from the outset.



CSS Plaque presentation (photo: Sharon Lambert, TVR)

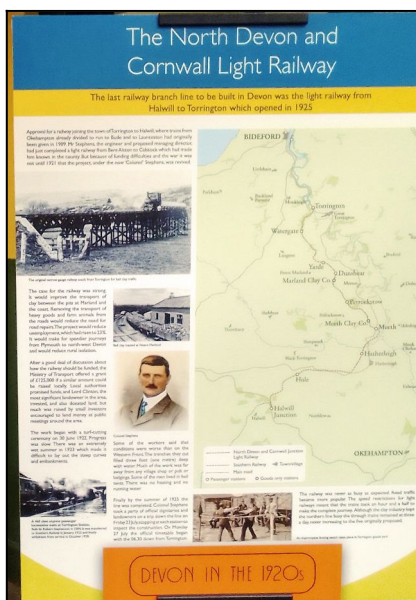
To mark the centenary of the line, the Tarka Valley Railway CIC, which is working to develop a heritage railway and has a short running line which it hopes to expand, hosted a gala weekend at Torrington Station over the weekend. Various historical artefacts were on display,

including the headboard from the last train in 1965, along with a number of fund raising stalls for local charities.

Regular train services were operated on the short line using preserved 'Pacer' Railbus 143617.

The Colonel Stephens Society - which studies and celebrates the work of the Victorian entrepreneur, was delighted to participate in the centenary event, with two of its committee members staffing an information stall. The Society has commissioned a commemorative plaque to mark the centenary, which will be displayed at Torrington Station.

The plaque was presented to Councillor Doug Smith of Torridge District Council, a former Mayor of Torrington and current TVR Chairman, by Chris Jackson from CSS who is also the editor of the CSS magazine The Colonel and Curator of the Colonel Stephens Railway Museum based at the Kent & East Sussex Railway in Tenterden, he was accompanied by CSS Secretary John Ball.



The banner with information and route map of the ND&CLJR on display in the Okehampton Booking Hall.

Miah's Diary – It's The Life

You may, or may not know, that I am a fine ball chaser. I prefer to have a ball on a cord thrown over my head so that it bounces high. Then I can jump up and get it with a daring leap through the air. Or I catch the cord, swing it all about my head and drag it about, bouncing along after me. This morning the ball escaped, but I pounced on it with a leap like a fox, my front paws almost together. I had it!!

Surprisingly, I am increasingly discovering that fellow four paws enjoy spending their days quite differently. To be fair, I suppose that if you were a Chihuahua, you would not think that leaping several feet off the ground in long grass was much fun, would you?



However the stately ride in a carriage, through quiet country byways is how our recent friendly four paws condescended to visit our station. After deigning to sup from the proffered bowl of aqua vita, the regal pose was struck for the photo on the back of the carriage. Starting out at Exmouth with 2 x 2 legs and 2 x 2 wheels, the journey to Barnstaple was made by grumbling monster. Then they took the Tarka Trail to Okehampton before returning to Exmouth in the monster with hissing breath (apparently air brakes? Why doesn't it use claws? Which are bound

to be stronger than air!). The outing was thoroughly recommended by my friend, for all those who own 2 x 2s.

The Bulleid Buffet

Named after Oliver Bulleid, the Southern Railway's innovative engineer, the excellent station cafe is run by Leanne Knight and her team.



The Bulleid Buffet

Barista Coffee, homemade cakes, quiches, pies, pasties & treats. All day breakfast, lunch & takeaway. Picnic pick up point for your Granite Way exploration. Open: Summer 7am-5pm, Winter 8am-4pm.

f Tel: 07410 609160 • thebulleidbuffet@gmail.com 

Okehampton Railway Station, Station Road, Okehampton EX20 1EJ

Okehampton Train & Bus Information

With bus connections available from the station, please visit our Service Information web page which can give you pointers towards information to help plan your journeys:



<https://www.dartmoor-railway-association.org/services>

Committee of the Dartmoor Railway Association

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Membership Secretary & Volunteer Coordinator:

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