

A corkscrew of a railway

A Wimborne solicitor, Charles Castleman, was behind the project to build a railway across the New Forest, linking Southampton with Dorchester and beyond.

This was a challenge. The New Forest originally stretched from the Avon at Christchurch to the Test at Southampton and today it remains the largest tract of unenclosed pastureland, heathland and forest in Southern England, carrying the highest levels of environmental protection.

At the time of construction many landowners did not want the railway crossing their land. Notably there was resistance from landowners to the line passing through Lyndhurst. This meant the track faced a significant diversion south, with a large curve at Woodfildley.

Arguments about the route were rife and eventually the advice of famed engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel was sought. He agreed the diversion.

Concessions were made by some landowners such as at Beaulieu Road station where Lord Montagu permitted the line to run across part of his land in return for a 'personal' station being built. If he required a train to stop, a special signal was deployed.

At Brockenhurst the Morant family similarly allowed access to their land. Their deal is reputed to have been that the majority of trains had to stop at this 'country outpost', for their convenience.

The line continued westward via Ringwood and Wimborne, then south to Hamworthy (for Poole) and onward to Wareham and Dorchester. It opened in 1847. At that time Bournemouth was only a small village and was bypassed.

Through its shape on the map the line got the nickname of 'Castleman's Corkscrew'.

The line used today, through New Milton and Christchurch, opened in 1888. By then Bournemouth had grown with seaside resorts across the country, and a direct connection was necessary.

Castleman's original line closed in 1964 under the 'Beeching Axe' which closed hundreds of less well used routes. His wish for the rail to extend westward from Dorchester to Exeter and beyond was never fulfilled. Brunel's Great Western Railway had become the route to the South West.

Brockenhurst—a surprisingly big station

Brockenhurst Station owes its size to being on the original line to Dorchester via Ringwood and Wimborne, completed in 1847. A branch line to Lymington and the Isle of Wight ferry opened in 1858 and then the direct line to Bournemouth in 1888. With severe gradients to the south west, it was also the point where heavy trains were split to enable them to be hauled up the inclines.

The First World War saw a lot of activity - large commonwealth hospitals were in the village and both staff and patients travelled through the station. In WW2 many sidings were added to disperse the goods wagons from the threat of air raids on sidings at Eastleigh and Southampton.

While the line to Ringwood was closed in 1964 Brockenhurst remains a busy station, with around one million passengers a year the station is an interchange for the train/ferry connection and take off point for work or leisure journeys into the New Forest by public transport or bike hire. In 2009 it was judged the best 'medium size' station in Britain.

As you pass through you may see flower baskets, or the history displays. These are examples of voluntary work by the Friends of Brockenhurst Station. You are welcome to join our small happy group if supporting the station and railway interests you.

Please email us at:

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Across the New Forest

Views from the train window



Be inspired - take a train to a New Forest station; walk into the forest and immerse yourself in this wonderfully unspoilt area.

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Brockenhurst to Christchurch track guide

The 'Down' line

Brockenhurst - Sway (4.4 km)

From Brockenhurst the main line and Lymington branch line pass the wartime sidings and under a road bridge. This is where the village gas works were, supplying heat and light until 1938. After the bridge, to the north, you'll see Brockenhurst Golf Club. It uses traditional spelling for its name. In the 1860's an extra 'c' was mistakenly used on a railway station sign. The new spelling stuck, with some local exceptions.

After this the Lymington branch line turns to the south and the path of the old railway to Ringwood peels north. From here you will be greeted by uninterrupted glorious views of New Forest heathland and its wildlife including the famous New Forest Ponies.

As you approach and pass through Sway the railway lies in deep cuttings. These took years to dig, and at least ten navvies died in the construction.

Such were the delays, that the station house at Sway Station was finished two years before the railway arrived. The problem was the thin mud the navvies had to cut through, and an initial attempt to save money by having the cuttings with deep sides which kept collapsing. Workers complained about having to scrape the clay off everything, their families saying it looked like they'd been dunked in treacle, adding to their strenuous workload.

Treacle stuck as a nickname, and the engineer Joseph Firbank said it was: 'treacherous and slippery in the highest degree.' But it left a legacy—for many years local people teased outsiders about the Sway 'treacle mines' which, they said, was a source of wealth.

Sway - New Milton (4.8 km)

From Sway the journey takes you again through a cutting skirting the edge of Arnewood Manor. This is the setting of the classic novel of the English Civil War "Children of the New Forest". The area around Sway also features in this story.

At New Milton you'll see the large water tower, built to supply the local area in 1900,

which holds nearly a million litres of water.

Originally the village of Milton was a mile south, but the railway didn't want to deviate that far. So the station was built, and soon after a neighbouring Post Office, served by the trains. The Postmistress wanted to differential this place from Milton (with its own Post Office) so she named it New Milton. And in due course Milton has itself become Old Milton!

New Milton - Hinton Admiral (4 km)

New Milton adjoins Barton-on-Sea and is a market town with holiday parks, campsites and guesthouses serving visitors to the Forest, and coast.

Two kilometres further, Hinton Admiral station shares its name with the estate and ancestral home of the Tapps-Gervis-Meyrick family, the landowners responsible for the development of the fishing village of Bournemouth into a Victorian resort.

Hinton Admiral - Christchurch (5.3 km)

After Hinton Admiral, you cross the River Avon. This river rises near Devizes and flows south through Salisbury, to the sea at Mudeford, which is noted for its expensive (£300,000+) private beach huts.



To the south you'll see Christchurch Priory built between 1094 and around 1350 on the site of a ninth century church. A story tells of one 'miraculous' wooden beam which was cut too short to fit. Overnight it was altered, some said by a carpenter resembling Jesus. The Priory is one of the longest churches in the country - and in size exceeds 21 other cathedrals.

Brockenhurst to Totton track guide

The 'Up' line

Brockenhurst - Beaulieu Road (7.7 km)

Leaving Brockenhurst you cross the Lymington River over a small viaduct. The adjacent private fields typically provide vital winter grazing for Commoners animals.

To the south of the line you'll see a large building - today it is a hotel. It was originally built as a hunting lodge, called Whitley Ridge, and later owned by the Bowes-Lyon family.



The young HM Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother (né Bowes-Lyon) use to stay here.

Then entering the Forest's timber enclosures you'll see the wide tract of grassland alongside the track - a favourite grazing spot for New Forest ponies and deer.

At one time Woodfidley was a busy crossing.

The signal box closed in 1965, but a foot crossing remains today.

On each side of the track were sidings to enable timber extraction from about 1916-1922. These were also used for loading tanks and military supplies for D-Day.

On the north side is a figure of 8 shaped 'track', laid by the Forestry Commission in the 1960's with different materials such as concrete and crushed stone. Lorries were driven round and round to discover which was the most durable track surface for the New Forest.

The landscape soon becomes a vast area of open heath some of which is extremely boggy. Three miles on, Beaulieu Road station stands in almost total isolation with Beaulieu and Lyndhurst villages some way away.

This station opened in 1847; closed in 1860;

reopened in 1895 and survives until today as the least used station in Hampshire with about 9,000 passengers annually.

Beaulieu Road - Ashurst (New Forest) (4 km)

The New Forest pony sales yard is across the road from Beaulieu Road station and was moved from Lyndhurst to provide livestock transportation when the railway was built.

The sales yard was rebuilt in 2002 and while today ponies and cattle are transported by road the yard remains a perfect location in the centre of the New Forest where animal owners buy and sell livestock. The bigger pony sales take place in the autumn, following the "drifts" when all the New Forest ponies are rounded up for health checks.

Again north of Beaulieu Road you pass through heathland, but as you approach Ashurst New Forest you'll see one of the largest campsites to the west of the railway, which is very busy in summer. This started life in the First World War as a large camp for Indian soldiers preparing to fight in France.

At Ashurst-New Forest Station, formerly Lyndhurst Road station, you'll see the large building - the 'New Forest' public house.

This was built by one of the original railway Directors who was a keen huntsman. He started by building stables here so he and his friends could catch the train from London, and spend the day hunting, before returning home. He then expanded this into a business and built to what was then the Railway Hotel, taking advantage of bringing visitors to the forest for hunting and other recreations.

Ashurst (New Forest) - Totton (4.9 km)

As you leave Ashurst the area gradually becomes less rural. Just west of Totton station the mothballed Fawley branch line joins from the south. Investigations are taking place to see if the line can be reopened.

You then reach the busy town of Totton. Until 1974, when it was designated a 'town' this was officially the largest village in Britain.

After Totton you cross the River Test into Southampton. The docks to the south are the second largest container port in the UK.