



Rebuilding and running a community railway through the Purbecks

HISTORY OF THE SWANAGE RAILWAY – 1847 to 2014.

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Located on the Isle of Purbeck in south-east Dorset, the award-winning Swanage Railway has an amazing story to tell.

It's a story of determination, of not taking no for an answer – a story of fighting, and winning, against all the odds; showing the strength and power of the human spirit.

The Swanage Railway has been rebuilt from nothing since 1976, after being controversially closed and demolished by British Rail in 1972.

Rebuilt and run by dedicated volunteers, the Swanage Railway is a story about ordinary people, across two generations, who have been – and are – part of an extraordinary story.

It took just seven weeks to lift the six-and-a-half miles of track and almost 30 years to relay them.

Everything needed to rebuild the railway – track, locomotives, carriages and other equipment – had to be brought in by road.

The ten-mile branch line from Wareham to Corfe Castle and Swanage was opened in 1885 when William Gladstone was British Prime Minister and Queen Victoria was on the throne.

Eighty-seven years later, British Rail closed the line in 1972.

That was the year of the last Apollo manned mission to the Moon when Edward Heath was British Prime Minister and there were power cuts because of strike action by the miners.

The Swanage Railway is not just a tourist attraction, it also reduces traffic congestion on the narrow and winding A351 road from Corfe Castle to Swanage by taking some 40,000 cars off the road every year.



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Visitors to Purbeck can leave their cars next to Norden station, in an attended 350-space car park, and board the steam train for the journey to Corfe Castle, Harman's Cross, Herston and Swanage – where the beach is a short walk from the station.

After the Southampton to Dorchester railway was opened in 1847, Swanage businessmen battled for almost 40 years to win permission – and raise the money required – to build a branch railway connecting Wareham with Corfe Castle and Swanage.

Wareham residents objected to a line cutting through their ancient Anglo-Saxon walls while the powerful landed gentry refused to sell land for a new railway, fearing the effects of more people coming to the area.

Finally, the Swanage Railway Company was formed and construction work started in May, 1883, at Worgret – a mile west of Wareham on the London to Weymouth line. Building work also started at Swanage.

Excluding the rails, the cost was £80,000 – £5 million in today's money (2014) – with the line opening in May, 1885.

The new mode of transport transformed Swanage from a quarrying, fishing and farming community into a thriving seaside resort.

The first passenger train – a Beattie Well Tank locomotive towing four London and South Western Railway carriages – ran from Swanage to Corfe Castle and Wareham on Wednesday, 20 May, 1885.

Amid public celebration in Swanage and Corfe Castle, a special train also ran from London on that historic first day of operation.

The impact of the new railway on Purbeck was tremendous and changed the area.

A Victorian train journey from Wareham to Swanage took 25 minutes and cost eleven old pence.

Compare that with the one-and-a-half hour horse and carriage journey costing two shillings and sixpence.



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Opening up the village of Corfe Castle to tourism, the new line enabled stone, milk and livestock to be exported from Purbeck. Coal and other essential items were brought to Corfe Castle and Swanage by rail.

Sidings were built between Corfe Castle and Worgret Junction – at Furzebrook and Norden – to export ball clay by train rather than by tramway and ship.

As the line entered the 20th Century, it became more busy – with more passengers and freight being carried as Swanage grew as a seaside resort.

With more people being given an annual paid holiday from work, the Southern Railway Company enlarged Swanage station to cope with the extra demand.

During the First and Second World Wars, the branch was visited by long army trains as Purbeck became a training area for soldiers, including preparations for the D-Day invasion of France in 1944.

With the end of rationing and increased prosperity after the Second World War, the line declined as people travelled to Purbeck by car rather than train.

Less passengers and goods were carried during the 1950s with freight facilities being withdrawn from Corfe Castle and Swanage in 1965 – the nearest goods facilities being at Wareham.

The branch had escaped closure after the Government's Beeching Report about the future of the railways in 1963. Sadly, that good fortune was not to last.

British Rail replaced steam locomotives with cheaper diesel units, changed the timetable and reduced the tracks at Swanage to just one. Staff were also made redundant.

In 1969, through trains from London to Corfe Castle and Swanage were stopped – passengers having to change trains at Wareham.

British Rail's first intention to close the line was published in 1967 because of fewer passengers and increasing operating costs.

Objections from local people and councils delayed the railway's end until 1972 – the branch's 87th year of operation.



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The last train left an almost derelict Swanage station for Corfe Castle and Wareham in January, 1972.

Crowds watched the departure of a special train driven by Johnny Walker who drove the last steam train from Swanage to Wareham in 1966.

Campaigners fought to prevent the track being lifted and persuade British Rail to sell the branch so it could be reopened.

British Rail kept the three mile line between Worgret Junction and Furzebrook for the export of ball clay and later oil and gas from the Wytch Farm oilfield.

Enthusiasts formed the Swanage Railway Society but could not afford the £126,000 – almost three million pounds in today's money – demanded by British Rail for the purchase of the six and a half miles of land and track.

During the summer of 1972, British Rail contractors lifted the track from Swanage to Corfe Castle – and beyond to Motala, near Furzebrook.

The work took seven weeks, with the metal rails melted down for scrap and the wooden sleepers sold to farmers for fencing.

British Rail sold the disused land between Motala, Corfe Castle and Swanage to Dorset County Council in 1974.

Swanage station was sold to the local council which demolished the main platform and other buildings – and stripped the canopy of lead and glass.

This was the lowest point for those wanting to rebuild the Swanage Railway.

There were plans for a bypass on the railway land at Corfe Castle and the demolition of a key bridge on the outskirts of Swanage.

It was also proposed to demolish Swanage station and replace it with a shopping centre, pub and car park.

It was only after a majority vote by Swanage residents in 1975 – wanting the railway to be rebuilt – that the local council gave the Swanage Railway Society a lease of the station.



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It was in 1976 that determined volunteers gained access to Swanage station for the first time. Slowly, track was laid – by hand. It was heavy work and very slow.

Locomotives needed to haul track-laying trains, and passenger trains, arrived at Swanage after being rescued from scrapyards and industrial premises.

The first was a petrol shunter called 'Beryl' and the second was the Swanage Railway's first steam locomotive.

Built in 1954, ex-British Railways Standard Class 4 Tank 80078 was the same type of locomotive that hauled trains between Wareham, Corfe Castle and Swanage in the 1960s.

Arriving at Swanage on a low-loader, No. 80078 had been rescued from a scrapyard in south Wales.

Carriages, vans and other equipment needed to run and maintain a railway – such as cranes – also arrived at Swanage station by road.

Metre by metre, the laboriously laid railway line slowly grew longer and longer. A diesel shunter, named 'May', arrived in 1977 with industrial steam locomotive 'Richard Trevithick' following in 1978.

In August, 1979, the Swanage Railway ran its first passenger train after volunteers formed the Swanage Railway Company – like their predecessors almost a century before.

Those first trains ran over just a few hundred yards of track and raised money to help rebuild the line.

The trains also showed the public, and potential supporters, that visitors would travel on a rebuilt Swanage Railway; even an initially small one.

The first steam trains at Swanage since 1967 ran in 1980. Volunteers ran passenger trains over a few hundred yards of track for five years.

With Dorset County Council allowing the volunteers to extend their track beyond Swanage station, the line reached the one-mile point at Herston during 1982, where a new halt was built.



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In 1984, the steam trains were extended to Herston while the track was slowly relaid towards the three-mile point at Harman's Cross.

Between 1987 and 1989, train services were extended half a mile past Herston Halt to New Barn – giving a total run from Swanage of one-and-a-half miles.

In 1987, the relaid tracks reached Harman's Cross where a new station was built, the first in Dorset for more than 50 years.

Accepting its first trains in 1988, the new station was opened by Gordon Pettit, the General Manager of British Rail's Southern Region – ironically the Region that closed and lifted the line to Swanage 17 years before.

The next challenge for the dedicated Swanage Railway volunteers was to extend their line two miles to Corfe Castle – and just under a mile beyond that to Norden.

Norden was where ball clay had been transferred from the mines to trains for export out of Purbeck from the 1880s to the 1960s.

There were two major obstacles to be overcome – the replacement of three bridges and Government permission to return the railway to Corfe Castle and Norden.

Large girders were obtained from British Rail so under-bridges could be reinstated ahead of the track relaying operation.

The plan for a bypass on railway land at Corfe Castle had been withdrawn by Dorset County Council in 1986 after a lengthy campaign by villagers and the Swanage Railway.

A public enquiry planning hearing before a Government inspector ruled against objectors and decided Swanage Railway volunteers could rebuild the line.

Station buildings at Corfe Castle were restored and the tracks relaid while at Norden a new station was built.



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Purbeck council built a car park next to Norden station to encourage people to leave their vehicles and take the train to Corfe Castle, Harman's Cross and Swanage.

The first passenger train from Swanage to Corfe Castle since 1972 ran in August, 1995.

In 1997, a new signal box was opened at Harman's Cross so two trains could run on the line at once, instead of just one.

Determined volunteers spent the late 1990s clearing the overgrown trackbed and relaying the track for another mile – from Norden to Motala and the start of the national railway network.

In January, 2002 – 30 years after the line was lifted – the Swanage Railway's tracks met the Network Rail line from Worgret Junction. A long, hard job – the volunteers had achieved one of their objectives.

Another piece of Swanage Railway history took place in 2002 – the running of the first train from Wareham to Swanage, albeit with no passengers between Wareham and Norden.

The new Virgin Voyager main line express diesel train was bound for Swanage to be officially named 'Dorset Voyager' by two veteran Swanage Railway volunteers.

With the Swanage Railway connected to the national railway network for just one weekend, the Virgin Voyager carried passengers between Norden, Corfe Castle, Harman's Cross and Swanage.

Further development followed in 2003 with the opening of a new signal box at Swanage – the first since 1967 when British Railways demolished the station's Victorian signal box.

In another exciting development, Swanage Railway volunteers have been spending ten years building an award-winning museum, about Purbeck's two thousand year old ball clay mining industry.

A mine building from Norden Farm – in the lea of the Purbeck Hills – was dismantled and rebuilt next to Norden station.



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Several generations of volunteers have worked tirelessly to rebuild the line seen and enjoyed today.

Sadly, many of those people have not lived to see the Swanage Railway's ultimate goals reached.

The Swanage Railway's rebuilding since 1976 has involved a huge amount of materials – 880 sixty feet long track panels weighing a total of 3,000 tonnes; the equivalent of 60,000 bags of coal.

Also used have been 1,760 rails, 3,600 fishplates to connect those rails; 22,000 wood and concrete sleepers, 44,000 track chairs to fix the rails to the sleepers, 100,000 chair screws, 44,000 track keys, almost 15,000 nuts and bolts, nearly 18,000 tonnes of stone track ballast and 25 track points.

Carrying more than 200,000 passengers a year, the Swanage Railway operates one of the most intensive train services of any preserved heritage railway in the country.

With 500 regular volunteers running the trains, the Swanage Railway contributes some £14 million to the Purbeck and Dorset economy every year.

It has also won awards for the quality of the line's restoration – and for its role in bringing tourists into the area.

Improvements to Corfe Castle station took place in 2005 when its 1950s British Railways signal box was restored, and re-opened, with the signalling system re-introduced so trains could pass each other.

That year also saw the last gas trains ran to British Petroleum's Wytch Farm oil field terminal at Furzebrook, after which the three-mile line from Worgret Junction was unused.

History took place in 2006 when the Swanage Railway signed an historic connection agreement with the national railway network. The boundary with Network Rail is at Motala, between Norden and Furzebrook.

Out came the Motala stopblock – installed in September, 1972, when the tracklifting from Swanage was completed – and in went a permanent connection.



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In 2007, that new rail connection was used for the first time, with visiting locomotives running in from Wareham for special Swanage Railway gala events.

Since 2009, the Network Rail line from Worgret Junction to Motala has been used by excursion trains visiting Corfe Castle and Swanage from various parts of the country.

The first London to Swanage diesel train since 1972 ran in 2009, as did the first steam train from the Capital to Swanage since 1967.

The main line link also meant that ballast to maintain the Swanage Railway's tracks could be brought in by rail instead of road lorry.

In 2011, volunteers completed a new Victorian-style signal box at Corfe Castle, on the site of the 1885 original demolished by British Railways in 1955.

Taking three years to build – and winning a national award – it was officially opened by a Government transport minister.

The junction between the Swanage branch and the main London to Weymouth line at Worgret was upgraded in 2012 with a new track point so passenger trains from Swanage and Corfe Castle can run on to Wareham.

The same year saw track improvements at Wareham for future passenger trains from Swanage and Corfe Castle.

The year 2012 also saw more history when a South West Trains diesel unit undertook a technical clearance run from Wareham to Swanage.

After that successful test, two sold-out excursion trains ran from London to Corfe Castle and Swanage during 2013.

There was more history that year when a 1970s Inter-City 125 high-speed train visited Corfe Castle with an excursion from the midlands.

In 2013, the Swanage Railway was awarded a 1.4 million pound Government grant to return passenger trains between Swanage and Wareham.



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That trial train service is due to start in September, 2015, and run for 140 selected days over the following two years.

Negotiations are taking place with Network Rail and Dorset County Council for the Swanage Railway to lease the three-mile line from south of Worgret Junction to Motala.

Once the Swanage Railway leases the line, three miles of track will be upgraded so passenger trains can again run to Wareham.

More than a thousand wooden sleepers have to be replaced and lineside vegetation cleared.

The new junction at Worgret is part of Network Rail's 40 million pound Poole to Wool main line re-signalling scheme due to be commissioned during 2014.

Linked into that scheme, the Swanage Railway has been installing a new signalling system between Corfe Castle and the start of Network Rail south of Worgret Junction.

In an historic and trail-blazing move, early 2014 saw Swanage Railway signalling equipment installed at Wareham station.

Once the Poole to Wool re-signalling scheme is commissioned, trains between Corfe Castle and Wareham will be signalled by Corfe Castle signal box and Network Rail's area signalling centre at Basingstoke in Hampshire.

It's the old and new, the heritage and hi-tech, working together to bring important and environmentally friendly transport benefits to Purbeck.

The Swanage Railway is not only a tourist attraction, it's a people mover too.

In rebuilding the line from nothing – over more than 35 years against all the odds – back to the national railway network, the Swanage Railway proves that preservation really is the art of achieving the impossible!

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