

Dartmoor line regular passenger services back on track after 50 years

November 17, 2021



The very first reinstated route from the Restoring Your Railways scheme has reopened, and its first passenger train has travelled along the track.

The public will be able to travel on the Dartmoor line, linking Okehampton to Exeter, from Saturday 20 November – 50 years after the last full passenger service operated along the line.

The Dartmoor Line has been transformed from a mothballed former freight railway with occasional services to a full seven-days-per-week passenger operation. Since 1997, the line has only been open during some Sundays in summer after regular services were withdrawn in 1972.

The service was restored in 9 months, and cost £10m under the allocated budget. The work was carried out as part of the £40m project to reverse many lines shut down by the Beeching cuts of 1963.

The first train ran today, travelling from Okehampton, and carried local school children, campaigners and railway staff: all of whom helped make the project happen.

A service will run every two hours – and there are plans to expand to an hourly service in 2022. This will benefit students heading to colleges in Exeter as well as tourists travelling towards Dartmoor, easing congestion on local roads and helping boost local economies.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said: “Improving transport links is essential to levelling up and spreading opportunity across the country, which is why we are driving forward our pledge to reverse the Beeching cuts in Devon today.

“As we reopen the Dartmoor line, we are rightly reconnecting communities, giving passengers the chance to choose rail over the road and travel from Exeter to Okehampton on greener, cleaner modes of transport.”

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said: “By restoring the Dartmoor Line we are undoing 50 years of damage, reconnecting a community and creating new opportunities for jobs, tourism, education and recreation.

“We have made it our mission to reverse cuts made in the Beeching era of the 1960s. The passion, nostalgia and enthusiasm for that ambition is clear right across the country.

“People love their railways, and rightly miss them when they’re gone. Today – ahead of time, and under budget – we’ve made a decisive step in fixing that, cutting the ribbon on a line and making a real difference to people’s lives.”

Reinstating the line involved Network Rail’s engineers laying 11 miles of new track and installing 24,000 concrete sleepers and 29,000 tonnes of ballast – all within a record-breaking 20-day period.

Repairs have also been made to 21 structures along the route including 4 bridges. Other infrastructure work has included level crossing improvements and the installation of railway communications equipment. Vegetation clearance, earth and drainage works and fencing have also been completed and further infrastructure work will continue to take place to increase the line speed to enable an hourly service in 2022.

Michelle Handforth, Network Rail’s Wales & Western regional managing director, said: “Today marks a significant milestone for the railway and the local community and I am delighted to have been able to welcome the Secretary of State to Okehampton to mark this special occasion.

“I am so proud of our engineers whose hard work and dedication has resulted in this line reopening ahead of schedule and today enable the Secretary of State, campaigners and supporters of the Dartmoor Line to enjoy a first passenger journey.

“I would like to thank the local community, our partners and everyone who has supported us in reopening this railway line and I am excited to think that this Saturday, regular passenger services will resume for the first time in nearly 50 years.”

Great Western Railway identified suitable rolling stock and developed a timetable with franchise funding

ahead of funding being agreed for the infrastructure elements of the project. The project has also had local support spearheaded by Devon County Council.

Great Western Railway, Dartline Coaches and Devon County Council have also ensured local transport is coordinated, ensuring easy bus and train connections to the rest of Britain are easily accessible from the Dartmoor Line.

More work will be carried out over the winter including on the station buildings to enable the restoration of the café and other facilities.

Mark Hopwood, GWR Managing Director, said: "This has been a key aspiration for the community and the rail industry for some time and today is a significant day for everyone who has been involved. I am delighted to have been able to invite the Secretary of State, and leading community campaigners, to enjoy a first passenger journey on this restored line.

"The support and advocacy of the local campaigners over the years has helped deliver a fantastic new service for customers, which we hope will grow from strength to strength."

Image provided by Network Rail