

South Devon Railway – on the rails to recovery

March 16, 2021



After being closed for exactly one full year next Wednesday (17th March) as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the scenic [South Devon Railway](#) (SDR) has just announced its outline programme today for a Spring re-opening of the seven-mile heritage line running from Buckfastleigh to Totnes.

The last SDR steam trains ran virtually empty on Tuesday 17 March 2020 after visitors deserted Devon just ahead of the first lockdown the following weekend. This dramatic change came straight after a very popular weekend SDR steam gala event featuring former branch favourite loco No. 4555 as the star visitor. What a contrast!

It's now the longest period that the quintessential former GWR branch line has been closed in its 52-year history after re-opening as a tourist railway in 1969 following closure by British Railways in 1962.

Now, the SDR says it will re-open to visitors in phases starting with the large Buckfastleigh site first on Monday 12 April when national CV-19 restrictions are set to ease significantly for attractions.

The site 'Open Days' will follow a similar format to those successfully staged last summer and autumn. Opening up the site was very popular with SDR visitors last year, and includes the gardens, workshop viewing, riverside picnic area, children's playground, Lee Moor Tramway museum, north signal box, and

the gift & model shop will be open too.

Many of the SDR's steam and diesel locomotives and historic coaches will be on display and, on selected days, both the miniature railway and the garden railway will be in operation too.

The SDR site will be open all of the week commencing 12th April for the half-term holiday, then on every Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday until 16th May. Entrance is free, but the SDR does ask for a donation at the gate. There is plenty of free car parking at Buckfastleigh station too.

And, at long last, the really good news is that SDR trains are set to start steaming down the picturesque valley of the River Dart once more from Monday 17 May, and the fantastic sight, sound and smell of them are now almost as much a natural part of the landscape as the trees, green fields, cattle and Devon's rolling hills.

Not surprisingly, SDR staff can't wait to welcome visitors back to the railway. A timetable of four steam trains per day will be in operation, leaving Buckfastleigh at 10.30, 12.10, 2.15 and 4.00, and arriving back about one and quarter hours later.

The SDR is putting in a range of measures to ensure that customers can travel on trains in confidence and safely. This includes reduced capacity on trains, all tickets booked in advance, socially distanced passenger flow systems, hand sanitisation stations and enhanced cleaning regimes. Unless visitors are exempt on health grounds, the SDR is asking everyone to wear face coverings on its stations and trains.

Train tickets will be available from Monday 12th April on the SDR website www.southdevonrailway.co.uk and booking website. As further restrictions on social distancing and household mixing are hopefully reduced, the SDR hopes to be able increase the number of trains it runs, so watch this space.

South Devon Railway Marketing Director Peter Treglown said: "It has been such a long time with no visitors to the South Devon Railway, but the whole SDR team is getting very excited to be able to welcome people back and it's the news we have eagerly been waiting for. We are now on the rails to recovery.

"Whilst the re-opening is later than we had hoped and it misses Easter of course, it's vitally important that CV-19 restrictions are eased cautiously and safely as the national vaccination programme is rolled out.

"This means our visitors and volunteers will still need to wear masks while on our station platforms and when on the trains, unless in their own social bubble in a closed compartment, and we expect these restrictions to continue until late June, depending on further Government guidance.

"So, we're delighted to announce our outline phased re-opening plans today for the railway. The safety and wellbeing of our visitors, volunteers and staff is paramount.

"We have Visit England's "We're Good To Go" accreditation in place and are working on other accreditations, plus we will continue with the adaptations implemented on site last year to allow us to welcome visitors safely and provide the reassurance they need.

“Feedback from visitors in 2020 about the measures we adopted to welcome people safely was very positive and we will again re-open gradually, in line with government guidance.

“We have a lot for visitors to discover at Buckfastleigh and we’re making use of the whole 12-acre site to ensure there is plenty of room for them to relax and enjoy a gentle stroll as they explore. And then, we’ll have the steam trains back running again soon in May which will be a real red letter day for the whole railway!

“Each stage of lockdown easing may change of course, as the Government regularly highlights in their briefings, so our planned opening dates may change too, but we’ll be keeping everyone up-to-date if that happens.”

“We are aware that some other heritage railways are planning to start train services earlier than 17th May, many of whom use compartment coaches. However, after much careful consideration of the Government’s roadmap, we cannot justify an earlier opening date as our train rides are a predominantly indoors attraction that sees different households within the same indoor space.”

Photo credit: South Devon Railway/ Andy Lock