



To Watchet

For up to date information check the Travel Line website at www.travellinesw.com or the Exmoor National Park "Getting around" pages at www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk/getting-around.

By bus

From Taunton: No. 28 (Taunton to Minehead serves Watchet and Washford).

From Bridgwater: No. 14 (Bridgwater to Watchet only).

By car

From the east: Leave the M5 at Junction 23 (Bridgwater) and follow the signs for Minehead (A39). After about 16 miles (25.7 km) turn right down minor road signposted to Watchet.

From the west: Leave the M5 at Junction 25 (Taunton) and follow the signs to the A358 towards Minehead. At Williton turn right onto the main street and then left following the signs to Watchet (about 18 miles (30 km) from the motorway).

Parking: There are four pay and display car parks in Watchet: Anchor Street, Swain Street, Harbour Road and Market Street. Please note, there is no parking available in Washford.

By train

Alight at West Somerset Railway stations in Watchet and Washford. Visit www.west-somerset-railway.co.uk for times and details.

On foot

Many WSMR sites are accessible by foot following public rights of way. Ordnance Survey map OL9 covers Exmoor National Park, and includes the Brendon Hills and Watchet. Other maps are also available from most Tourist Information Centres.



West Somerset Mineral Railway

THE
OLD
MINERAL
LINE

An introduction to the Old Mineral Line

Although iron ore was occasionally mined on the Brendon Hills before the nineteenth century, it was only in the 1850s that iron mining formed part of a significant industrial enterprise. This was as a result of the Ebbw Vale Company, established sixty years earlier, developing the mines.

The West Somerset Mineral Railway was an 11 mile (18 km) long railway constructed from 1857 and 1864 to transport iron ore from the Brendon Hills to the harbour at Watchet, for shipment to Newport and thence by rail to one of the Ebbw Vale Company's works.

The ore found in the Brendon Hills was low in sulphur and phosphorus, and rich in manganese, which meant it was valuable for making Bessemer steel. The Bessemer process was the first inexpensive industrial process for the mass-production of steel.

By the 1870s, more than two hundred men from Somerset and Cornwall were employed in the mines and on the railway, and they formed new communities along the "Old Mineral Line". Although built specifically to transport ore, the railway was opened to passengers in 1865. This bold industrial venture had a profound effect on the rural landscape and local economy.



Esperanza at Whitehall, c. 1894. Photograph courtesy of Mike Jones.

Discover the Trail

The Watchet to Washford Trail is a flat stroll along a dedicated public footpath which follows the route of the Old Mineral Line, and is approximately 2 miles (3.2 km) long. The route is flat, level, and stile free. Stout footwear is recommended.

① Start on the Esplanade in Watchet, from where there is an excellent view of the harbour, and the West Pier, from which ore was offloaded into waiting ships bound for Wales.



The view of West Pier from the Esplanade.
Photograph courtesy of ENPA.



Mr Angus and the Russians, c. 1913.
Photograph courtesy of Mike Jones.

Cover image: The Watchet to Washford Trail in summer. Photograph courtesy of ENPA.

2 Where the Esplanade meets Market Street you can find **Watchet Market House Museum**, which has an interesting display of Mineral Line artefacts and photographs in the window, as well as inside.



The old Station House in Watchet.
Photograph courtesy of ENPA.

3 Continue along Market Street past the London Inn, and Yankee Jack's cottage. Turn right into the car park, formerly known as the Old Mineral Yard. Walk through the car park to the West Pier, and look at where the iron ore used to be discharged into waiting boats.



The old Goods Shed in Watchet.
Photograph courtesy of ENPA.

4 Retrace your steps through the car park, and standing on the pavement by the entrance of the car park, look at the Old Station House. To the right of the Station House are the old Goods Sheds, now the Fish Plate Restaurant. Next door but one to the Fish Plate Restaurant is the former WSMR Engine Shed.

5 Cross the road, and pass the Old Station House on your right. Continue down Mill Lane past the Star Inn, and follow the footpath alongside the river. You will pass a small footbridge, keep going along the pavement until it joins the road.



The West Somerset Railway passes over the track bed of the Old Mineral Line.
Photograph courtesy of ENPA.

6 Continue along the road through Whitehall, until the path forks. Take the right hand fork and before long you will come to a gate. Pass through the gate and under the railway bridge. You are now on the old track bed of the Mineral Railway.

7 Soon you will see the Paper Mill on your left. On the hill above the Paper Mill you can see St Decuman's Church.

8 Continue along the path until you reach a point where the paths cross from both sides. To the left is Kentsford Farm, which will take you back to Watchet via St Decuman's Well, and the Church. The right hand path crosses the railway line and will meet the road for Blue Anchor and Watchet. Continue going straight to stay on the Trail.

9 Keep following the path straight on. After a while you will see a tiny bridge on the right which allows cattle to pass under the West Somerset Railway line.



The end of the trail in Washford.
Photograph courtesy of ENPA.

10 Eventually the trail passes into Washford playing field. Keep going across the field, pass through the gate, and enter a small lane.

11 Pass Glen Cottage on your right, continue along the road and you will come out opposite Old Cleeve School. Turn right here and you will quickly come

to a junction beside a stone bridge which carries the railway line over the road. Look through the arch of the bridge and you will see steep stone steps. These steps are part of the "Monks' path" which the monks of Cleeve Abbey used to traverse.

12 Turn left and walk along the road for 50 metres before turning right into Castle Mead Road. Walk along the pavement until you reach the A39. Turn right onto the pavement next to the A39 and you will see the Washford Station in front of you, which houses the Somerset and Dorset Railway Museum.



Return to Watchet the way you came or catch a train or bus.

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The first stage of the Railway



The West Somerset Mineral Railway was an 11 mile (18 km) long railway constructed from 1857 and 1864 to transport iron ore from the Brendon Hills to the harbour at Watchet.

It was opened to passengers in 1865, and was a new and important means of travel between communities in the Brendon Hills and Watchet. It was only on rare occasions that miners' families could afford to spend an eighth of their weekly wage on a railway ticket. The seats of the first and second class compartments were upholstered, those of third class had timber boards. The mines closed in 1883, but the railway stayed open until 1898.

The trains

Because the railway lost money for the whole of its life, the Ebbw Vale Company, who had leased the line with responsibility for all repairs and maintenance, never spent money on the line if they could avoid it. The rolling stock was ill maintained and there were frequent breakdowns.

Pontypool with a mixed train of carriage and wagons waiting to depart from Watchet Station in 1866. The horse was used for shunting wagons between the station and the pier. Photograph by Bert Hole, courtesy of Mike Jones.

While the line was being constructed in 1857, two locomotives were bought new from a Glasgow engine builder. They were delivered to Taunton and then brought by road to Washford where they were put on the rails. In that summer the two locomotives collided head-on near Kentsford crossing on this trail, three people were killed, and one locomotive had to be scrapped and a replacement ordered, at a cost then of £1000, the equivalent of about £50,000 today.

While the mines were working there were two locomotives on the upper section and two on the lower, one working passenger trains, and the other goods trains. The line had more than fifty small goods wagons each carrying about 6 tons of ore and at least one covered wagon for carrying gunpowder to the mines.

Quite often mixed trains were run, and this caused an accident on one occasion. A mixed train with three wagons of mine timbers stopped at Roadwater, when the chain coupling of the first wagon became detached and the three wagons free-wheeled back to Watchet and fell into the harbour.

After the mines closed in 1883, the line possessed one locomotive on the upper section and one on the lower, and three decrepit coaches, which were secondhand when they came to the line in 1865. When one of the locomotives needed heavy repairs it was returned to Ebbw Vale and a temporary replacement sent over.

When the line closed for the first time in 1898, all the locomotives and rolling stock were returned to south Wales and put up for sale. Most of them were sold for scrap.

Passenger tickets on the West Somerset Mineral Railway.
Photograph courtesy of Mike Jones.





The Railway in the twentieth century

From 1907 to 1914 parts of the line were re-opened to serve the Somerset Mineral Syndicate, which aimed to produce iron ore briquettes from the crumbly ore stockpiled at Colton pits mine.

The briquetting plant was sited in a small field at Washford, and they were then taken to Watchet for shipment. In March 1910 the directors of the Somerset Mineral Syndicate and the Watchet Briquetting Syndicate wound up both companies, and in July the effects of the Watchet Briquetting Syndicate were sold.

Arthur Angus, a solicitor from New South Wales, conducted research into all aspects of railway signalling safety, which was a forerunner of automatic train control. He was a prolific inventor, and between 1911 and 1914 he experimented on various parts of the Mineral Line. After leaving England he continued his work in Russia and Sweden, before returning to England.

The West Somerset Mineral Railway Project

In 2007 the Heritage Lottery Fund awarded the West Somerset Mineral Railway Project a grant to conserve key Mineral Line sites and improve public access. For more information please visit www.westsomersetmineralrailway.org.uk.

Nature reclaims the Mineral Line

After the railway line was abandoned natural processes have been at work to return this man made feature to a natural habitat.

The line would have been laid onto a hard core base which is not a good growing medium for plants. However at the edges of the line plants dropping leaves in the autumn were adding organic matter to the stone base and starting the process of soil formation. Smaller plants moved in first making use of the nutrients available from the accumulating organic matter.

As the soil became richer, deeper and suitable to support the nutrient requirements of larger plants such as blackthorn, hawthorn and forest trees the transition from a linear plantless desert to developing woodland was complete.

Wildlife to look out for along the Line

- **Birds** - wrens, robins, blue and great tits, wagtails, dippers and kingfishers.
- **Otters** - look out for their slides along the banks.
- **Badgers** - look out for shallow pits created with strong claws whilst looking for earth worms, and badger spore.

Is the railway being rebuilt?

The project received funding to conserve several important industrial structures associated with the West Somerset Mineral Railway. Many other remains of the railway are on privately owned land; some people live in the former WSMR buildings, others have the route of the old line running through their gardens. It is not the intention of the project to open up the entire section of the railway, or to put trains back on the track.

The Mineral Line reopens in 1907, the new locomotives are transferred. Photograph courtesy of Chris Tilley.

