

Line Guide

WORCESTERSHIRE COMMUNITY RAIL PARTNERSHIP

Worcestershire and the flat Vale of Evesham. Like Kingham, Honeybourne was once a massive freight marshalling yard and junction, with lines to Stratford upon Avon (still open for freight traffic as far as Long Marston) and Cheltenham (the preserved trackbed of which may one day form a connection with the heritage Gloucestershire and Warwickshire Steam Railway, currently operating between Broadway and Cheltenham Racecourse). Closed in 1969, the station was reopened in 1981, and regained a second platform in the 2011 redoubling programme.

Crossing the Vale with its farms and glasshouses, we meet the navigable Warwickshire Avon as we enter Evesham where the Great Western and Midland stations face each other across the station drive, but only one of them now welcomes trains, the former Midland line from Redditch to Ashchurch having closed in 1963. Departing over the Avon again with Bredon on the left and the Malverns beyond, the railway becomes single track shortly before Pershore (whose station is a good mile from the glorious riverside town it serves).

Opened in February 2020, some 50 years after it was first mooted, Worcestershire Parkway station has a single platform at high level on the North Cotswold line and two platforms on the low level serving the Birmingham to Bristol trains currently operated by Cross Country Trains. On leaving Parkway, the line joins Bristol-Cheltenham-Worcester line at Norton Junction for the run through the ever expanding suburbs of the Faithful City in to Shrub Hill station along lines first laid in 1850 to link Worcester to the 1840 Birmingham to Gloucester Railway at Spetchley. Shrub Hill was the centre of railway development in the 19th and 20th centuries, with locomotive, carriage and wagon building and maintenance sheds as well as extensive signalling equipment manufacture and a number of short branches serving local manufacturers. There was also trans-shipment to the River Severn and Birmingham and Worcester canal at Diglis Docks.

Cut off from the commercial and civic centre of the city by the canal, the railway was extended to Foregate Street station in 1860 when the line to Hereford was opened. Crossing over what was once the A38 Birmingham to Bristol trunk road, the line traverses an impressive 69 arch viaduct to reach the River Severn bridge (star of an episode of Impossible Engineering because of its Warren trusses) with its iconic view of Worcester Cathedral. Passing through the western suburbs with long closed stations at Henwick, Boughton, and Rushwick not to mention Bransford Road and Newlands (where the former branch to Bromyard began) we cross the River Teme on its way to join the Severn, and the skyline begins to be dominated by the magnificent Malvern Hills.

Like Worcester, Malvern is blessed with two stations, $\frac{3}{4}$ mile apart. The first is Malvern Link, walking distance from the new hospital and medical centre and the Morgan car factory, where sports cars are still built by hand with loving care and a very long waiting list. Rising to 1400 feet, the near 10 mile long chain of the Malvern Hills proved a major obstacle to the builders of the Worcester and Hereford Railway. Great Malvern station, built in the Gothic style to match the Grand Imperial Hotel (now a girls' school) replaced the original timber building in 1863. Initially it served only First Class passengers including Lady Foley of nearby Madresfield Court after whom the admirable tea room is named. Until 1982 the station had a bay platform for the Midland Railway's branch from Ashchurch, which joined the Hereford line at Malvern Wells, where the present line reverts to a long single line section (singled as recently as 1981) through both the Colwall and Ledbury tunnels and as far as Shelwick Junction just outside Hereford.

Returning to Worcester we need to explore two of the other routes serving the city from Worcestershire. Leaving either Foregate Street or Shrub Hill towards Birmingham, the route converge at Tunnel Hill Junction (where the remains of the Worcester depot now stand), and diverge again at Droitwich, which was famous for its salt deposits since Roman times, and still enjoys its status as a spa town boasting brine baths ten times more salty than sea water.

From Droitwich station a single track to the right follows the salt trail past the recently reopened Droitwich Junction Canal, John Corbett's magnificent mansion (the Chateau Impney), and the source of all his wealth, the salt works at Stoke Works, where our line joins the main Midland Railway Birmingham to Bristol line. The radio transmitter masts at Wychbold, and the M5 motorway overhead signal the end of the single track, and Bromsgrove's new 4 platform station marks the beginning of the 2 mile ascent of the Lickey incline (1 in 37 ¼) to Blackwell (where banking engines used to detach themselves, and on occasions still do) and on to Barnt Green, junction for the other southern terminus of the 6 electric trains per hour Cross City line in to Birmingham New Street at Redditch (famed in the past for its metal bashing prowess in the manufacture of needles, pins, nails and fish hooks) The branch has one intermediate stop at the historic village of Alvechurch.

Returning to Droitwich the Kidderminster route into Birmingham Snow Hill station passes through Hampton Lovett and the station at Hartlebury, whose castle once housed the Bishop of Worcester's Palace and is now the County's museum. In the Second World War Hartlebury was home to one of the RAF's largest ordnance depots (25MU) not closed until 1977. Beyond the station the Severn Valley Railway originally branched off towards Stourport and Bewdley, joining the restored heritage line's extension to Kidderminster just outside Bewdley station.

The approach to Kidderminster over the impressive 20 arch viaduct in engineering bricks with the extensive Severn Valley Railway's carriage shed, diesel depot and replica Great Western station (built from scratch in what was part of the old goods yard) is a highlight of any rail journey, with the chance of sighting steam if not the actual engine emitting it.

Following on from the new station at Worcestershire Parkway and the complete rebuild of Bromsgrove station we are promised a 21st century station at Kidderminster complementing the convincing 18th century Severn Valley Railway replica on its doorstep. The journey towards Stourbridge continues through rolling greenbelt and golf courses with two busy commuter belt stations at Blakedown and Hagley where Worcestershire.