



**A general view of Friary station, looking west towards the buffers, on 8th July 1924 from Tothill Road overbridge. No fewer than five sidings are occupied by empty coaching stock. Adams T1 Class 0-4-4 tank departs on the lengthy 1.54pm run to Tavistock via North Road, whilst later Adams O2 No.218 waits by the Friary 'B' signal box. The O2 was to end its days as No.W33 Bembridge on the Isle of Wight, surviving until December 1966 but sadly not being preserved. (H. C. Casserley)**

## SOUTHERN GONE WEST

# PLYMOUTH AND ITS BRANCHES

## PART ONE • BY DAVID THROWER

**P**ast features in this occasional series have concentrated upon the various former Southern branch lines east and west of Exeter Central, as far east as Seaton and as far west as Padstow. Future articles will retrace our steps from Plymouth and from Barnstaple to Exeter, along the former Southern Railway main lines. However, we start with a detailed look at the ex-SR lines in the Plymouth area, a city whose services were, of course, dominated by the rival Great Western Railway.

As is very well known, fate has not been kind to the Southern in the Far West, and today virtually all that remains in the Plymouth and North Cornwall areas is the former Callington branch truncated back to Gunnislake and the remains of the Friary approaches and the Cattewater branch, together of course with the outpost of the western end of the preserved Bodmin & Wadebridge Railway at Boscarne Junction, hopefully to be extended soon to a new station on the edge of Wadebridge. Plymouth's former joint station at North Road nevertheless remains a very important InterCity railhead for the West Country and now-distant 1960s Beeching and 1980s Serpell threats to cut Plymouth off altogether from the rail map only seem like a bad dream nowadays.

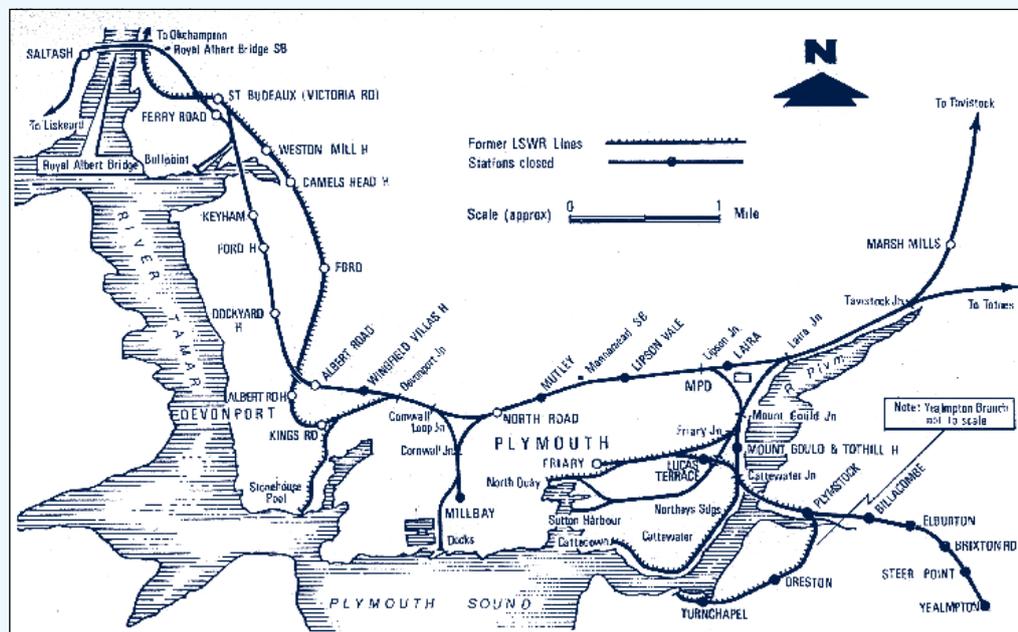
The Southern's presence in Plymouth

**(From *Plymouth Steam 1954-63* by Ian H. Lane, Ian Allan Ltd.)**

was a particularly interesting one and has a more complex history than might at first be imagined. Surprisingly, it has received relatively limited coverage, either in book or article form. Moreover, the loss of the former SR route to Plymouth has become very topical with the repeated and sometimes very severe damage to the GWR route at Dawlish. Many enthusiasts with long memories will recall saying "we told you so". Reopening of the SR

route via Okehampton and Tavistock is now being seriously examined, partly as a result of the wish for better connectivity between West Devon/North Cornwall and the main line network at Exeter and partly as a result of the Dawlish sea wall troubles. Another sea wall collapse may force the issue.

Incidentally, on a purely personal note, my interest in the SR in Plymouth – which I never got to see in real life, even in its early-



1960s swansong – commenced when I took out a library book, Pat Whitehouse's original *Branch Line Album*, in the mid-1960s in faraway Chester-le-Street. I was completely riveted by photographs of O2, M7 and B4 tanks (the latter with jaunty wire-basket spark arresters) puffing along obscure lines such as to Turnchapel, Stonehouse Pool and Cattewater. Cattewater? As an SR fan, I had never even heard of it! Did it really exist at all?

### Historic port

Even before the Industrial Revolution, Plymouth had become the westernmost large port on the South Coast. Famously, the sailing ship *Mayflower* had set out from Plymouth in 1620. The original port at Plymouth was at Mount Batten, but this was later overtaken by the sheltered harbour that was to be created at Sutton, along with the strategic naval base established further to the west at nearby Devonport. The relatively deep natural harbours later made the city accessible to the largest passenger ships of the day, with these anchoring in The Sound and then being served by tender. There were also quays at Cattewater Harbour. Sutton Harbour was run by the Sutton Pool Company, which was empowered to construct "additional piers, quays, wharves, wet and dry docks and cranes" on land around the harbour. Later, this became the Sutton Harbour Improvement Company.

There was also one more natural harbour, the poetically-named Hamoaze, but this seems to have been reserved for Royal Naval ships. Naval activities and dockyard repairs were to become the major employer in the city for several centuries, indeed until very recently when dockyard activities were steadily run down as part of reductions in 21st-century British defence expenditure, with the port finally losing out to its historic eastern rival, Portsmouth.

The commercial port of Plymouth also served agricultural imports and exports, light engineering exports and fishing, with an important fish quay serving the city's population. Other typical imported cargoes handled through Plymouth during the 1950s were petroleum, coal, phosphates, timber, grain, fruit and vegetables, along with other commodities. Exports included china clay, stone and general goods. Much of this arrived or departed on the landward side by rail.

### Rival routes

Although the history of the main line route between Exeter and Plymouth will be covered in detail in a future article, a very brief description of the sequence of events is appropriate.

As is very well known to readers, the LSWR's and Southern's presence in Plymouth was something of a geographical oddity and its arrival in the port a protracted process. Because of the GWR's control of the South Devon Railway, which had reached Plymouth Laira in January 1848, the south-of-Dartmoor corridor to Plymouth became exclusively GW territory at a relatively early stage and it was left to the LSWR to eventually and rather belatedly gain access to the Far West via the north-of-Dartmoor route, striking westwards via Crediton and Sampford Courtenay, then heading southwards through Okehampton.

Like the alignment of its route, the LSWR



**An interesting view from the train of double-headed T9 4-4-0s Nos.E403 and E721 leaving Devonport King's Road on 6th August 1928 in the up (north westerly) direction with the 4.05pm Plymouth Friary-Waterloo through train. The locomotives are just about to pass under Paradise Road bridge and then enter the tunnel beneath Devonport Park. In the foreground is the track from one of the centre roads at the station, with the down platform line to the right. (H. C. Casserley)**

organised its arrival in Plymouth in a decidedly roundabout way. The broad gauge lobby did not want to see the LSWR in Plymouth at any price and naturally wished to keep the city and Cornwall for itself. As early as 1847 the LSWR promoted its ambitions towards the city through its support in Parliament for the Cornwall & Devon Central & Plymouth Railway, as well as backing promoters of Sutton Harbour.

Little actual progress ensued. The next attempt to construct a railway to Plymouth to rival the Dawlish route was the clumsily-named Plymouth, Tavistock, Okehampton, North Devon & Exeter, which failed to make progress in 1853 (promoters of today's HS2 and HS3 can take comfort from these exasperating Victorian stalemates). This was followed by the Plymouth, Tavistock & Devon Central Railway initiative, which was no more successful than the others. A House of Commons Committee meanwhile had urged that the standard gauge route to Okehampton should be allowed to extend to Plymouth and was particularly mindful of the strategic importance of the naval dockyards at Devonport.

The Devon & Cornwall Railway meanwhile made slow progress in its quest westwards to tap into West Devon and North Cornwall. The company had reached Okehampton by October 1877 and, in readiness for extending south of that town to Lydford, under an Act of Parliament of 1865 it served notice on the broad gauge South Devon Railway to add a third set of rails from the latter's station at

Lydford to Plymouth Millbay station plus the branch to Sutton Harbour. Not content with this, the D&C submitted plans for a new line from Marsh Mills onwards to new (non-South Devon Railway) stations in Plymouth and in Devonport. This threat was again selfishly fought-off successfully by the South Devon in Parliament.

A wholly new railway was therefore opened from Okehampton to Lydford, via the lofty Meldon Viaduct, in October 1874, where a connection was made with the South Devon Railway's branch from Launceston via Lydford to Plymouth, coming south and then approaching the city from the east. This obviously again involved conversion of the Lydford-Plymouth section to mixed gauge, which was eventually successfully completed and opened for standard gauge traffic as far as Devonport Junction on 17th May 1876. The event must have made the GWR and its allies grind their teeth.

The South Devon then obtained powers to expand Millbay station and agreed to convert both the Millbay branch and the Sutton Harbour branch to mixed gauge, plus (doubtless unwillingly) agreeing to the construction by the Devon & Cornwall of a branch on the east side of the city to serve a new standard-only gauge goods station at Friary. This was initially to be known as Friary Gardens and later as Friary Green.

From 18th June 1878 the standard gauge was completed into Millbay Docks. However, most oddly, standard gauge wagons were then





**A spot of shunting is taking place at Devonport King's Road on 30th August 1945, with O2 0-4-4 tank No.216 (withdrawn in 1957) and attending goods shunters and pointmen. Note the characterful wire basket spark arrester, for shunting the timber yards at Oreston and probably of more imagined than real benefit. In the background the tracks disappear round the curve towards the GWR at Devonport Junction and North Road, whilst platelayers' trolleys rest on the ballast in the foreground.**  
(H. C. Casserley)

reputedly worked into and out of Millbay by broad gauge engines, which if true must have required some considerable care.

Finally, amicable agreement was fully reached between the Devon & Cornwall and the South Devon. The D&C would construct the Friary (goods only) and Devonport (passenger and goods) stations and the branches to serve them. In return for this it would abandon running powers over the line connecting the South Devon and the Cornwall Railways. It would also abandon running powers over the Sutton Harbour branch (beyond the new junction for Friary) and the Millbay branch further west. The 1865 Act requiring standard gauge rails on these routes would be repealed.

In return for this, the South Devon was to convert the route that ran east-west through Plymouth North Road to mixed gauge. It would also construct standard gauge sidings at Laira Junction and double the Sutton Harbour branch (then only broad gauge) to make it mixed gauge as far as the junction for Friary, from where it would of course be standard gauge only into Friary and broad gauge only to Sutton Harbour. In addition, there would also be mixed gauge on the first stretch of track into Keyham Harbour (Devonport dockyard) and the Devon & Cornwall would have immediate running powers over all these mixed gauge sections of line.

### Peace at last?

The agreement was a triumph of common sense, with Parliamentary pressure at long last putting the economic well-being of Plymouth

and Devonport above the narrow interests of squabbling private companies. The Devon & Cornwall thus effectively became part of the LSWR, whilst the South Devon amalgamated with the Great Western, both in 1875.

Down LSWR trains from Exeter and Okehampton were then at last able to pass through Mutley and North Road, along mixed gauge lines, and then diverge south westwards to terminate on the metals of the Devon & Cornwall Railway at a brand-new terminus west of the city, at Devonport. After some finishing-off works, LSWR trains first arrived at Devonport on 17th May 1876. Almost a year later, the enlarged joint station at North Road opened on 28th March 1877.

But why have an LSWR terminus at Devonport at all? Why not just terminate LSWR trains at North Road? The reason seems to have been that, as well as having a place of their own, the station was sited in a more prosperous community than the relatively low income Plymouth city centre, while North Road, as its name implies, was not actually in

the heart of the city centre.

Contemporary reports in the *Exeter & Plymouth Gazette* related that the much-delayed arrival of the standard gauge into Plymouth was greeted with "enthusiasm and rejoicing". It had taken a long time and might have been by a roundabout route, but at long last the LSWR had finally got there. Importantly, it also met the Admiralty's strategic wish for a direct standard gauge link with the remainder of the national network.

The arrival of the line was celebrated by distributing food vouchers to 800 of the poorest local people, with a civic dinner in Devonport goods shed plus fireworks and a bonfire. However, the Great Western was predictably dilatory in providing mixed gauge further east, towards Friary, and it was to be not until 1st February 1878 that the goods station at Plymouth Friary was at last fully opened for traffic.

Needless to say, the single track access to Plymouth via Lydford, with passing places, and then the brief section of double track

**A general view of the frontage of Plymouth Friary in 1913. Although the station was solidly-built and pleasing in appearance, it was perhaps slightly odd that a city terminus was constructed as a single-storey structure, in contrast to Devonport.**  
(H. C. Casserley Collection)



South Devon Railway immediately east of Plymouth, was never likely to satisfy an ambitious company such as the LSWR and the bottleneck which this created both damaged punctuality and restricted the number of services that could be operated. The route, too, was scarcely a main line, either in terms of geographical directness or maximum line speeds.

A wholly new route, the Plymouth, Devonport & South Western Junction Railway, was the outcome. This took a 22-mile alignment south from Lidford (note the varied spelling) through Tavistock, Bere Alston and the east bank of the Tamar, eventually coming into Devonport via St. Budeaux and Ford. The route into Plymouth from the west and north (from Okehampton and Lydford) featured several stations plus some major pieces of engineering within the Devonport and Plymouth area.

On 2nd June 1890 the PD&SWJR finally opened the new line from Lidford through Bere Alston, coming into Devonport King's Road from the west. This reduced the distance between Plymouth and Waterloo by no less than fifteen miles, accelerating through expresses by about half an hour.

There had only been one snag. The still almost new Devonport terminus had been constructed as a terminus facing east. Fortunately the PDSWJR and LSWR were able to convert it to a through station by breaching the solid stone west end walls and creating two new archways within them for the platform lines. The two centre roads of the original east-facing layout remained as underused dead ends, still approached from the east. The layout at Devonport subsequently puzzled those not in the know, including myself when I first saw it illustrated in books, for many decades afterwards.

There was a further significant problem, for Exeter-bound and London-bound passengers, in that the main buildings at Devonport, being on the north side of the tracks, were now all on the 'wrong' platform. The south-side platform, formerly merely a dead-end arrival platform from the east, was now the departure platform for up services which henceforth departed westwards via St. Budeaux and Okehampton. There was a booking hall and waiting room on this newly-designated up side, but these were only wooden and nowhere near as grand as their counterparts across the tracks. A further minor alteration was the provision of water columns on the up platforms, whereas previously water supplies at the adjacent small shed had sufficed.

Opening of the new route into Devonport King's Road was greeted by cheering crowds and bands playing (they did not have "Stop the..." protestors and obstructive great crested newts in those days), but clearly having a station at Devonport was still not wholly sufficient, with GWR trains enjoying the more convenient (for Plymouth) North Road and Millbay to the east.

### The LSWR becomes established

On 1st April 1891, the GWR opened its Lipson Junction to Mount Gould Junction curve to freight trains, with the curve open for passenger trains by 1st July. This gave the GWR a more direct access from west of the city and from Millbay to its goods branch to



**Gleaming Adams X6 4-4-0 No.660 in full LSWR livery and with striking stovepipe chimney proceeds round the south-to-west curve at Lipson Junction with a short express rake in about 1905, with the Great Western route to Exeter on the extreme left. The locomotive was to be withdrawn by the Southern Railway in October 1936. No X6s are preserved, sadly, but magnificent and very similar T3 No.563 was part of the National Collection until regrettably it was recently given away. (H. C. Casserley Collection)**

Sutton Harbour, of which more later. It also gave the GWR access to an aspired-to local passenger and goods route to Plymstock and Yealmpton. Again, this is detailed later.

The LSWR was then able to exercise running powers along the new Lipson Junction to Mount Gould Junction section and, as noted, already had running powers over the Laira Junction to Mount Gould Junction part of the Laira triangle, and along a short section of the GWR's Sutton Harbour branch. The opportunity for down LSWR services to then run right across the city (note, from west to east), calling first at the reconfigured Devonport King's Road, then at the enlarged joint North Road, and finally to operate southwards over the new Lipson Junction to Mount Gould Junction curve and terminate on the east side of the city centre at Friary, was obvious.

On 1st July 1891 Plymouth Friary passenger station therefore came into use, having been a goods terminus since February 1878. The Friary curve thus resulted from then onwards in down LSWR trains turning sharp right at the Laira triangle. The curve still exists today, to the relief of steam special operators wishing to turn locomotives.

Plymouth, like Exeter St. David's, thus famously thus became a West Country city which for most of the next eight decades was peculiarly served by both the Great Western and LSWR, later Southern, but with respective services to London running in opposing directions. This must have been very confusing for unwary passengers, although today's excellent train departure announcements and platform indicators make light of such trivia at places such as Exeter St. David's, but it crucially gave both these two important centres a better service than they otherwise might have had.

Creation of the northern route via Okehampton thus brought the LSWR's trains into Plymouth from a north westerly direction, through St. Budeaux. Indeed, passengers in down trains travelling more or less south westwards from London would bizarrely find themselves at one stage travelling north eastwards, as they made their way around this great hook-shape of a main line to come into

Plymouth from Devonport. An uninformed late-afternoon passenger sitting in a window corner seat from Waterloo certainly might wonder why the sun was apparently boxing the compass, shining from behind as they still supposedly travelled west.

However, this new northern route to Plymouth was actually less roundabout than might at first be assumed. Indeed, were the ex-SR route to be reopened to main line standards, it has very recently been calculated that a hypothetical Cross-Country 'Voyager' diesel would take only a few minutes longer to travel from Exeter to Plymouth via Okehampton than running via Dawlish, although necessarily smart reversals at Exeter St. David's and (if the train was continuing to Cornwall) Plymouth North Road would add further to this. The LSWR route via Okehampton was very well engineered and mostly suited to fast running, even right up until closure.

Devonport was well-located in relation to its namesake and was reasonably close to the docks at Millbay but these latter, of course, were also directly served by the GWR's own branch. Once east of Devonport the LSWR line, as before, joined the GWR main line near Molesworth Road. To the east of this junction the GWR's Millbay branch struck southwards, from a triangular junction with its main line, until it reached the terminus at Millbay station, sited on Millbay Road.

Incidentally, although this article is about the LSWR and SR in Plymouth, very brief mention must be made of the GWR's broad gauge and its sad but inevitable demise in 1892. In that final year, the following sections of GWR route in the Plymouth area that are relevant to our story were still broad or mixed gauge:

- Tavistock Junction–Millbay Docks Junction
- Millbay Docks Junction–Millbay station
- Plymouth North Road–Devonport Junction
- Cornwall Junction (on the Millbay branch)–Keyham Junction
- Marsh Mills–Lydford
- Laira Junction–Friary Junction
- Friary Junction–Sutton Harbour–North Quay

*(to be continued)*

