

The lost lines of Cornwall

Remnants of track beds, lonely chimneys and ivy-covered platforms;
Jacob Little goes in search of the old railways that once hauled tin,
copper and holidaying passengers along the Cornish coast

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Travelling around rural Cornwall by train can be time-consuming. Frustrating, if you're in a hurry.

In the middle of the night – caught in a storm, in the middle of nowhere – it can be downright creepy. The mainline traverses the coast for 79 miles, from Plymouth to Penzance at a top speed of 65mph, teetering around the crevices of Cornish topography, passing ever diminishing stations along the way. It's a strangely intoxicating, liberating experience to be pulled slowly but surely towards the far reaches of the British coastline.

It wasn't always this way. Branch lines, such as the Helston Railway, Hayle Railway and the famous North Cornwall Railway (now part of the Camel Trail) zig-zagged across the county, as companies competed for a share of the lucrative mining and fishing industries as well as the emerging tourist market. During Cornwall's most lucrative years, when it was said that one square mile around the rural village of St Day was among the richest in the world, freight and passengers used these lines with increasing frequency.

By the early 20th century, however, Cornwall's prominence as an industrial powerhouse had faded. With the demise of the mining industry and

diminishing fishing fleets, many of the railways were struggling to make ends meet.

During the 1960s, when progress eschewed any sense of historical responsibility, widespread cuts were felt in rural communities across the country. In the latter half of the 20th century, rather than reshaping and modernising, the Beeching Report became synonymous with the dereliction of the British rail industry. Nowhere were these cuts felt as deeply as in the rural South West.

Disparate communities, once linked through their shared expertise in the industries of the day, today seem rather less connected. Roads seldom evoke the same connections, memories and meaning as the humble rails.

Among these derelict services lie the abandoned railway lines and stations of Cornwall. Once frenetic with activity, they now lie on the fringes of the mainline, many of them repurposed for walkers and cyclists, punctuated by halt stations overgrown with moss and ivy. Platform signs bear names that probably don't mean too much to those that pass them by: Ladock Halt, Gwinear Road, Burngullow. How many are aware of the trackways' heritage, and their belonging in the landscape?



LOST INDUSTRY: THE HAYLE RAILWAY

The Hayle Railway was constructed in 1836 to transport copper and tin ore from the great mining lodes of Camborne and Redruth to the harbour quays of Hayle and Portreath. By the early 1900s, its days were numbered. During the First World War, conscription took 75 per cent of the miners in this area and, in 1928, metal prices dropped for good. Many of the mines, and so this remote branch line too, closed in the early 1930s.

A network of trails thread beside these old branch lines, maintained by the Mineral Tramways Heritage Project. Starting at the most easterly point, Tresavean, the line begins in a typical mining landscape. Chimneys puncture the horizon, wildflowers line the edge of the paths and the hilltop monument of Carn Brea can clearly be seen. This landscape is dominated by windswept moorland and large swathes of excavated earth; scarred from a previous era. Continuing west through built-up areas, more disused railway lines come into view, such as the Redruth and Chasewater Line and the Portreath Branch Line. Then, passing Tram Cross Lane, the route descends into the pretty village of Lanner via a granite cutting, now a damp haven for shade-loving plants, and a short tunnel that smells of moss.

The Redruth and Chasewater Railway trail (7.7 miles) follows part of the Hayle Railway from Twelveheads to Redruth, via the mining villages of Carharrack and Lanner. It was the first railway in Cornwall to use wrought-iron rails and wagons with flanged wheels (flattened rim for maintaining position on rails). Originally it used horse-drawn wagons to carry ore from the mines, but was converted for steam locomotives in 1854. With the demise of the the mining industry, the line closed in 1915.

Despite its name, the railway didn't actually run to the village of Chasewater, which is a mile north of Twelveheads (named for the 12 hammers that crushed ore here). The abandoned station was part of another branch line, the Chasewater to Newquay. Chasewater Station closed in 1963, one of many stations axed due to low passenger numbers. On the overgrown platform, there are subtle reminders of station life: foot and grip marks signify the edge of the platform – a strangely human connection to a patch of concrete. Years ago, people would have waved their loved ones away from this station.

People tell of a relief signalman, a bit of a practical joker, who used to throw stink bombs on the footplate of the Chasewater-bound train. Not to be outdone, on the return run the engine crew would heat a token (a metal

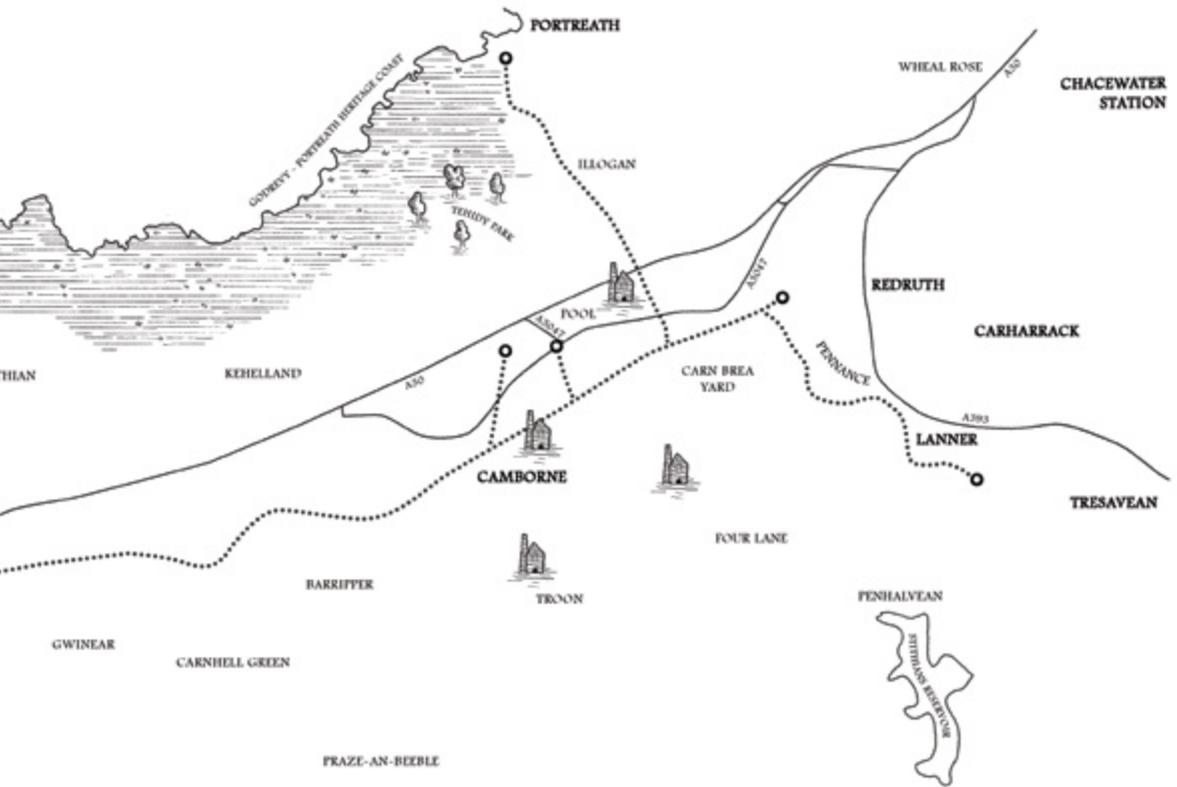


key required to gain entry on single tracks) in the engine fire before handing it over to the unwitting signalman.

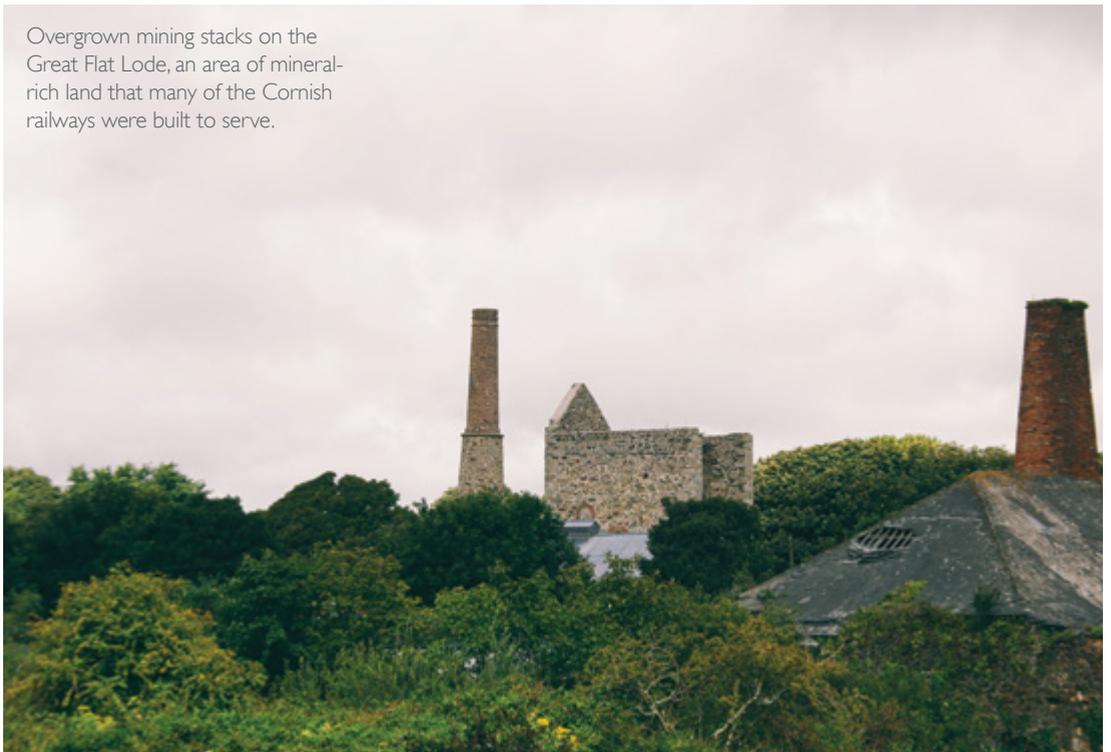
Many people in the area still feel connected with these abandoned branch lines. "My dad worked here years ago," says a local man at Chasewater. "On the old branch line that went up to Newquay. All gone now of course." He points to a picture on the wall of a building with a 1950s diesel locomotive approaching, taken from the same point he's standing; the view is now obscured by hedgerows.

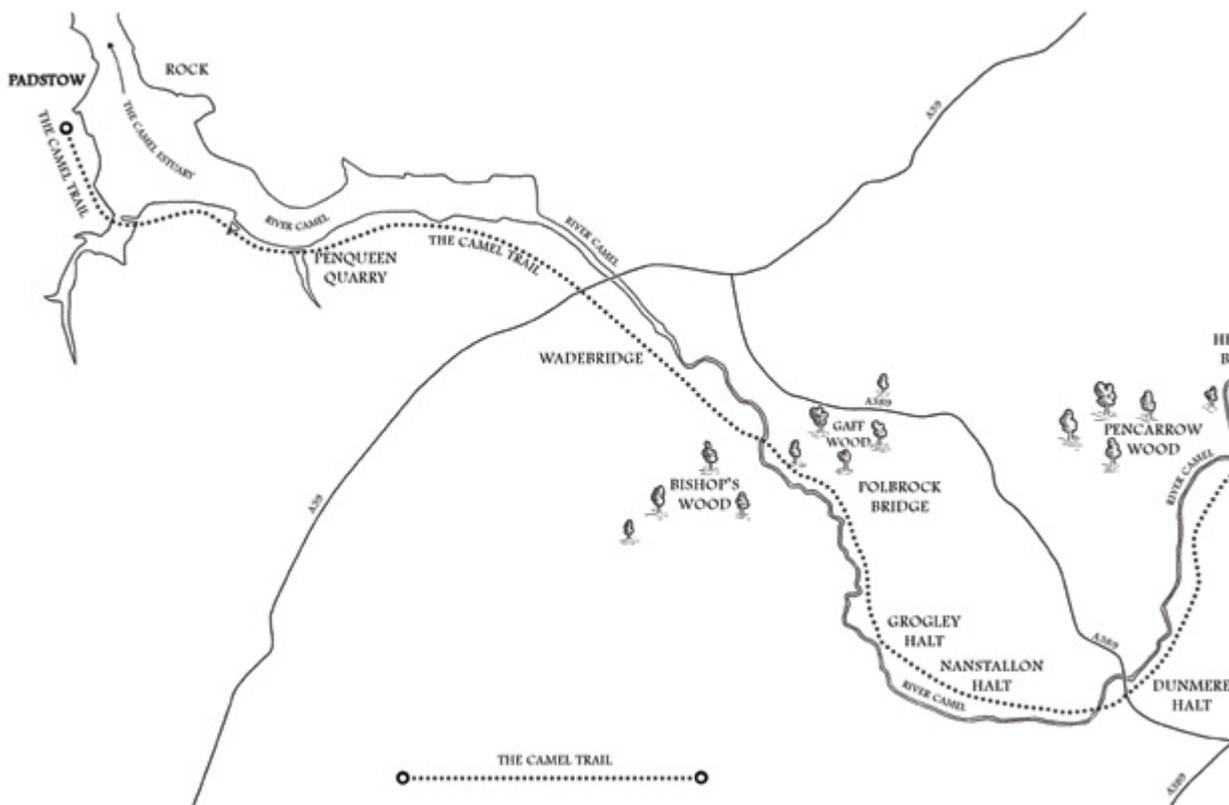
It's a similar story at other stations along the line. "At one point, there were two signal boxes and 25 staff employed at Gwinear Road Station," says another local. "It was a busy station; broccoli was loaded on to trains along the Helston branch to be transferred on to a London train up the line." It's easy to paint a romantic picture of a bustling provincial economy, but he points out that sometimes, only one train a week would run on these lines. It was never going to be financially viable.

The Trevean Trail veers off at Lanner, following the Tresavean branch of the Hayle Railway, which hauled copper and Welsh coal along its entirely horse-drawn section from the top of Buller Hill in Tresavean. Granite sets for the gauge rails line the former track bed; a recreated section of railway runs close to the remains of the mine. Views stretch to Carn Marth hill in one direction, and to the north Cornish coast in the other.



Overgrown mining stacks on the Great Flat Lode, an area of mineral-rich land that many of the Cornish railways were built to serve.







An old iron railway bridge on the final stretch of the Camel Trail towards Padstow.

BODMIN TO PADSTOW: THE CAMEL TRAIL

The Camel Trail is an 18-mile cycle path that follows part of the North Cornwall Railway, and the Bodmin and Wadebridge Railway. Originally these railways were a means of transporting sand dredged from the estuary to the inland farms, to fertilise the heavy moorland soil. Later they carried slate and china clay mined from the moorland quarries to Padstow, where it would be loaded on to ships destined all over the world. Fish was transported in the other direction, to markets in London and beyond.

The starting point is in a damp, dense wooded valley cracked with tiny brooks and streams at the edge of Bodmin Moor. The route follows the River Camel (the name Camel derives from the Cornish for 'crooked one') from its source in the damp and densely wooded Upper Camel Valley, passing old spoil heaps and abandoned platforms at Grogley Halt and Dunmere Halt. At Grogley Halt you can see where the embankment was gorged out by labourers over 170 years ago.

Tracks are still embedded along the trail and level crossing signs left intact as if an approaching train could be imminent. Further along, there are signal posts, water tanks and control terminals, punctuated by halt platforms overgrown with ivy and moss, keeping watch over passing cyclists and walkers.

The landscape widens, the trees disperse and a smell of sea salt replaces that of pine cones and oaks. Oystercatchers, egrets and cormorants forage on the muddy banks of the estuary, which gives way to sand dunes covered with marram grass, and families armed with buckets and spades.

Approaching the end of the line at Padstow, the trail crosses Pretherick Creek on the original railway bridge. In the first half of the 20th century, tourists, many of them excited children, would have crossed this bridge on the Atlantic Coast Express to see the sea for the first time. One of them was the poet John Betjeman. Wadebridge Station now houses a little museum in his memory, displaying many of his personal artefacts, including his typewriter and his harmonium. He wrote of his boyhood Cornish summers in his autobiography *Summoned by Bells* (1960):

*On Wadebridge station what a breath of sea
Scented the Camel valley! Cornish air;
Soft Cornish rains, and silence after steam. ●*