

Didcot Railway Centre, living museum of the Great Western Railway – the blueprint

This Blueprint sets out Didcot Railway Centre's interpretation plans and guides the future visitor around the Centre.

Walk through the subway from the 21st Century railway to the golden age of the Great Western Railway. At Didcot Railway Centre visitors can experience 175 years of railway history and see how the Great Western Railway (GWR) developed from its start in Victorian England through the Edwardian period to the 1930s and beyond. All of this supplemented by the mainline trains running past the Centre on today's high speed services.

Climbing the ramp takes you back in time to an era where steam trains were the norm. The timeline shows the history of the GWR from Brunel's Great Western Railway in 1835 to the establishment of Didcot Railway Centre in 1967. At the top of the ramp the art deco style Visitor Entrance Building welcomes you to Didcot Railway Centre and offers light refreshments and souvenirs as well as entrance tickets for the Centre. From there you can walk around the Centre or ride behind steam locomotives in genuine vintage carriages. You may also see one of our small locomotives shunting wagons in the yard.

The displays in the Visitor Entrance Building illustrate the development of the Didcot, its place in the GWR region and the GWR's influence on transport and the local community, as well as a typical day at Didcot in 1880 and 1935.

Leaving the Visitor Entrance Building, ahead is the bank of the Coal Stage, topped by the water tank which supplies the coal and water needed for steam engines. To the left is the Steam Railmotor Shed, housing the Edwardian Steam Railmotor, and in the distance the Exhibition Hall Complex.

As you walk along the path, the Engine Shed comes into view. There may be locomotives standing over the pits or being filled up with water from the water columns. You can soak up the atmosphere of an original GWR Engine Shed and climb into the cab to see how steam locomotives are driven. Along the side of the Engine Shed are the original offices, workshops and toilets, all restored to their 1947 condition. Look up at the steam chutes, which let the steam escape through the roof when the locomotives are being prepared.

At the back of the Engine Shed, railway tracks lead to the original Lifting Shop and the Locomotive Works. You can see locomotive projects in various stages of restoration and conservation and there may be restoration work going on. Leaving the Engine Shed complex, look past the Turntable and picnic area to the brick fronted Carriage Shed. The picnic area is a great place to sit and watch trains go by on the Branch Line, the Main Demonstration Line and the modern mainline railway beyond.

The Carriage Display stores the GWS's collection of carriages. Inside you can follow the history of train travel GWR style and see carriages and wagons being restored to

working order. Walking down a country path alongside the Carriage Shed you may catch a glimpse of a steam train on the Main Demonstration Line before arriving at Oxford Road Station, where the Cotswold stone station building was moved from Heyford to be re-erected at Didcot.

Leaving Oxford Road and passing the Broad Gauge Engine and Carriage Houses, which are home to the only working broad gauge GWR locomotives, Fire Fly and Iron Duke, you reach the original Victorian Transfer Shed and recreation of Brunel's Broad Gauge railway with its period signal box and signalling apparatus. Walk back beside the Broad Gauge past the Atmospheric Railway pipes, which show that not all Brunel's grand schemes endured to the present day. The level crossing and signal box are typical of the GWR in the 1930s and capture the feel of a branch line. Didcot Halt is a typical sleepy halt which characterised the local railway before the Beeching axe.

Beside Didcot Halt, Wantage Road Garage houses a display of GWR horse drawn vehicles, the GWR's diesel era is illustrated in the Diesel Shed and the history of signalling in the Controlling the Trains exhibition.

Nearby is the training facility which complements the locomotive, rolling stock and site workshops to provide classroom tuition for schools and college apprentices and community volunteers of all ages. The archive and research building provides permanent archival conservation, storage and research access to paper and photographic collection.

The Exhibition Hall Complex displays the remaining collections and is a chance to have a refreshment break, browse the galleries, do research or do a bit of shopping. A gallery wall demonstrates the evolution and delight of GWR graphic design and publicity with displays of posters, brochures, leaflets and books. Displays show the "non railway" aspects of the GWR (including shipping, air services, hotels & catering, docks, canals, road motors) and the GWR as a benevolent institution (Staff working conditions and their welfare & recreation organisations). For more technical visitors, there are displays showing how the GWR led in technical evolution from Brunel to Churchward and Gas Turbines, illustrated by our own locomotive collection.

From the top floor you can get a good view of the Coal Stage, Steam Rail Motor Shed and Engine Shed, as well as the modern Thames Valley Signalling Centre, which controls most of the old GWR from Didcot. On your way back, visit the Steam Railmotor Shed and the Goods Yard.

All this is set in the context of a living history museum with steam and diesel trains in operation. Visitors can ride on the train from the Main Line Platform at the entrance to Oxford Road Station. Leave Oxford Road Station and cross to the Transfer Shed for a ride on Brunel's Broad Gauge or catch a branch line train to Didcot Halt, the Refreshment Platform by the Exhibition Hall Complex or back to the Entrance Platform.