

MODEL RAILWAYS ON-LINE

Signalling for Ashburton

By Paul Plowman



Ashburton – Photo Peter Gray - www.alextrack.co.uk

Introduction

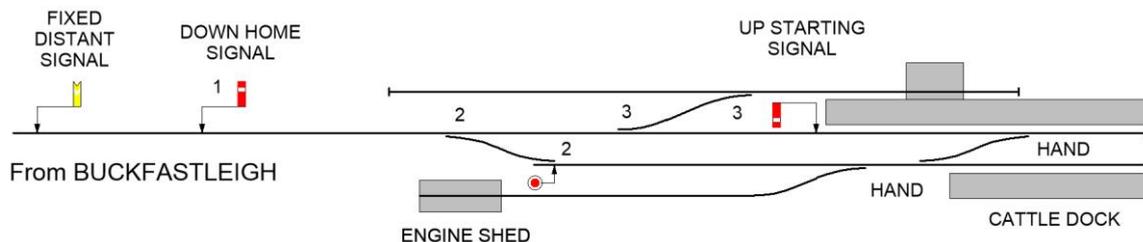
The signalling described in this article should not be regarded as typical of small Great Western termini. Ashburton was in many ways unique.

The branch was built to the Broad Gauge of 7ft 0¼in and was opened throughout to Ashburton on 1st May 1872.

The (original) South Devon Railway installed

some rudimentary signalling at Ashburton in the nineteenth century. For various reasons, apart from (say) extending the run-round loop, the GWR never did anything (at least, not that they publicised) which would have warranted an Inspection by the Board of Trade, so there was never an opportunity for the BoT to enforce an upgrade. Even the signal-boxes at Buckfastleigh and Staverton

were not brought in use until 1906 and 1912 respectively. The GWR did produce a plan in 1911 (and revised it in 1913) to provide proper signalling and a new signal box at Ashburton, but WWI got in the way and it was never pursued thereafter. The details below describe the signalling installation which existed from the mid-1920's onwards.



Signalling Described

There was a fixed Down Distant, a Down Home and an Up Starting signal. The 'ground' signal near the engine-shed was merely a non-independent 'point indicator' for the trap-point at the exit from the run-round loop.

There was a 3-lever ground frame by the engine shed, which worked:

1. Down Home
2. Facing point into the run-round loop and its associated trap-point.
3. Facing-point into the goods shed and its associated trap-point leading into Tucker's siding.

There were no facing point locks!

The Up Starting signal was controlled by a single lever sited on the platform, up against the fence, near the station building, by the seat on the platform. This signal apparently was not interlocked with anything else, not even the points in advance of it! The signal wire ran along the fence and in front of the goods shed and can be seen in several photographs.

The crossover between the platform and loop line was worked simply as two independent hand-points, each with its own lever. The lever in the 6-foot working the point in the platform line was clearly an older design than that on the loop line point and it may have been padlocked when not in use. Photographs from the BR era show that it was not uncommon for the point in the loop to be left for the 'crossover' route while the one in the platform road was set normal.

From 1889 onwards the branch was operated as two Train Staff & Ticket sections Ashburton Jcn (later Totnes) – Buckfastleigh (square red staff) and Buckfastleigh – Ashburton (round blue staff), but in 1956 that was reduced to a single One Engine in Steam section Totnes - Ashburton. Block control was listed in the Working Timetable Appendices as "South Devon Block Telegraph Instruments" – almost certainly some ancient form of single-needle telegraph, in effect working museum pieces.

Operation

The passenger service was a simple operation. The locomotive (usually 1470) was stabled at Ashburton overnight. An auto coach was stabled in the platform under the roof. Once the locomotive was coupled to the coach, they remained coupled all day. An additional coach might be added for school or workman's trains which would be left stabled in the cattle dock siding. Photographs show up to three auto coaches at Ashburton at any one time.

When the locomotive needed to be moved to the loco shed for servicing it would take the coach with it. The branch goods arrived in the afternoon while the passenger loco was being serviced. The goods loco ran round its train. The passenger train then shunted across to the platform while the goods train was shunted into the loop to clear the way for the passenger train to depart.

There would then follow some unusual shunting moves. Empty wagons from Tucker's siding would be moved up to the goods shed. This would be achieved by attaching a cable from the loco (on the running line) to a wagon in the siding and hauling them forward. It is reported that the cable often end up wrapped around the loading gauge and starting signal. The loco would then shunt the empty wagons from the goods shed and replace them with incoming wagons. The process would then be reversed with the cable being used to haul wagons down Tucker's siding.



In this photograph the lever for the Up Starting Signal is barely visible. The lever is difficult to see against the railings. It is level with the front of the bus. Photo: Bob Griffiths - www.alextrack.co.uk



The wire for the Up Starting Signal ran along the fence line. The wire can be seen attached to a fence post just above the lamp on the loco. By this time the signal arm had been removed and the wire was slack. Here 1470 is seen during the goods only period, by then in lined green livery with late logo and turned to run with chimney towards Ashburton. Photo: Alan Taylor Collection - www.alextrack.co.uk

Market Days

Market days found Ashburton Station very busy. Cattle wagons were brought to the sidings at Buckfastleigh in the days before the market. A photograph by Peter Gray in his book "Steam in Devon" shows one of these workings at Dainton. On market day they were hauled to Ashburton where the loco would stop clear of the release crossover with the rear of the train extending back beyond the loop points by the engine shed. The loco would be uncoupled and shunted into the loop. 'That' cable would again be attached between the loco and a suitable location on a cattle wagon.

The wagons would then be pulled forward to the buffer stops. The number of wagons in the train was limited such that when pulled forward there was clearance at the loop points for the loco to 'escape'. The formation consisted of around 32/33 cattle vans plus brake vans, possible one at each end. The loco would then shunt the train into the loop providing an opportunity for a passenger train to arrive and depart. Fig.AN39 in Paul Karau's book Great Western Branch Line Termini shows one of these trains shunting out beyond the home signal. One wonders how the driver knew when the points had



GWR Train Staff Ticket from July 1942
Photographer unknown

been changed for the reversing move into the loop. A similar move is made at Devils Bridge on the Vale of Rheidol Light Railway where, in 1965 I saw the guard waving the home signal up and down to indicate that the loop points had been set.

As the cattle wagons were loaded at the dock they were shunted across into the platform so that more empty wagons could be moved up to the dock for loading. While

this was going on, passenger trains were still operating but on occasions there was only sufficient room for the coach to be brought alongside the extreme outer end of the platform. When the station became too congested the loco might make a trip to Buckfastleigh with the loaded wagons where there was more space in the yard.

This was the basic pattern of operation on

market days but it became interesting when a second train of cattle wagons was brought up to Ashburton. It was reported that on one occasion two locomotives managed to get themselves into a situation where neither could move. Sometimes the passenger service would terminate at Buckfastleigh and a bus be provided for passengers to complete the journey to Ashburton.

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to Chris Osment for providing some of the text for this article.

Paul Plowman - 12 February 2021

Related Articles

[Ashburton O Gauge Articles](#)