

As in the days of horse-drawn transport, a steam-operated railway needed “drinking troughs” at many places.

The 1928 Pumphouse

To replace the facility at Ashton, the passenger terminus of the original Teign Valley Railway, a locomotive water supply was installed at Christow in 1928.

This hut stood above a seven-foot diameter well beside the river and a pump lifted water to the adjacent 10,000-gallon capacity tower, the leg stumps of which can still be seen. Pipes fed cranes on each platform where the tenders of tender locomotives would stop. The blanking discs lying on the ground reveal the size of the pipework. The whole installation can be seen in the later photographs of the station on show in the Temporary Booking Office and in the photograph below.

The expenditure was authorized by the Great Western board of directors in December, 1927, on an estimate of £3,535. This figure inflates to about £204,000 today.

If not at first, then in later years, the pump was controlled by an automatic float switch in the tank. The presence of a large battery in the pumphouse may account for the corrosion pitting which has occurred on parts of the steel framework.

In areas of “hard” water, a softening plant would also have been needed to prevent scaling of boilers. Water from the well here would only have needed filtering.

Tank locomotives (those without tenders) which worked Teign Valley trains had capacities of between 800 and 1,300 gallons, which would have been more than adequate for a run from Exeter to Heathfield and back to Christow.

The makers, Joseph Ash & Sons of Birmingham, must have supplied thousands of huts to the railways. In pictures of stations, one or more of these huts can often be seen. A similar one survives on the platform at Trusham, formerly the goods lock-up. The corrugated cladding is made from 18-gauge galvanized steel. This is 1.2 mm. thick, whereas the heaviest today is 0.7mm.

Another maker, Samuel Taylor & Co, also of Birmingham, is represented here by a smaller hut.

The pumphouse was given back to the railway in 1995, when the building was dismantled and the well capped. After lying in heaps for many years, the parts were repaired and the pumphouse was finally re-erected in 2017.



A locomotive taking water at Christow's Down platform on the last day of the passenger service. The Fireman has the "bag" in the side tank filler while the Driver operates the valve.

When it was taken down, a pencil inscription was found on the inside of a wall: "Date started pumping ____ 1928." Sadly, this has since disappeared.

"During the course of its 225-mile non-stop run from Paddington to Plymouth, the "King" class locomotive hauling the "Cornish Riviera Limited" evaporates some 8,000 gallons of water, or 36 tons."

Meccano Magazine, December, 1933

The tender of a "King" had a water capacity of 4,000 gallons. Non-stop running was made possible by the installation of troughs between the rails at intermediate places (the nearest being Exminster) where water could be spectacularly picked up at speed by means of a scoop beneath the tender.