



# **PRESS PACK**

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**Mid Hants Railway Ltd 'Watercress Line'**

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## **EXCURSIONS STAND SE40**

## Key Points

- Living history steam train journey in Hampshire
- 7 miles from historic city of Winchester
- Northern border of South Downs National Park
- 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2015
- 10 miles of track
- One and a half hour round trip (non-stop)
- Four period stations (1930's – 1960's)
- Famous iron footbridge from King's Cross station
- Highest station in Southern England
- Viewing galleries and tours of extensive preservation engineering works
- Cream teas & lunches onboard for midweek groups May – Sep
- \*NEW\* Basket of Memories groups leisure-learning session
- Combined visits with nearby attractions: Jane Austen's House Museum, Milestone's Museum & Basingstoke Canal
- Group rates for 15+ and 30+
- Curriculum based education packages
- Special events throughout the year

## PRESS RELEASE

Experience the golden age of steam travel at the Watercress Line

Let the train take the strain as you sit back, relax and travel through the heart of the English countryside. Whether you are taking a trip down memory lane or creating new ones, it's the perfect way to unwind and experience the nostalgic sights, sounds and smells of steam travel from a bygone age.

Running along the edge of the South Downs National Park in Hampshire, this heritage steam railway starts in New Alresford, just 7 miles from the ancient city of Winchester and famous for its clear chalk streams and watercress farms. Treat your group to a single or return trip back in time as you travel over the ten mile line. Groups can enjoy the wonderful experience of a delicious lunch or afternoon cream tea whilst travelling by steam train. New for 2015, book an onboard leisure learning activity with memory prompts to get your group chatting and sharing memories of the days of steam travel, sitting on your case on a packed holiday train or your days as a train spotter!

As the Watercress Line celebrates its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, your group can book a tour to see behind the scenes in the engineering workshops, where the locomotives and carriages are skilfully restored to their full glory. Or you may wish to combine your visit with another local attraction; spend the morning at nearby Jane Austen's House Museum, Milestones Museum or the Basingstoke Canal and then join this leading heritage railway in the afternoon.

*"I had no idea that the railway had workshops... I thought that there were some well meaning volunteers, not a proper programme. The apprentices programme is commendable."*

Group bookings can be made throughout the operating calendar with discounted fares for 15+ and 30+ available on standard travel days. To find out more visit [www.watercressline.co.uk](http://www.watercressline.co.uk)

Standard Fares: Adult £16, Child age 2-16yrs £8, Family (2A+2C) £40

15+ GRAdult £14 GRSenior£13 GRChild £8

30+ GRAdult £13 GRSenior£12 GRChild £8

Discounted group rates are not available during special events.

Catered journeys can be arranged Tuesday – Thursday from May to September, subject to availability.

Combined attraction booking available via the Mid Hants Railway.

FREE pre-booked coach/mini bus parking at Alresford Station

## Background

Originally opened on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1865, the Alton, Alresford and Winchester Railway was predominantly a goods line and was well known for its role in transporting locally grown watercress to the markets at Covent Garden in London and beyond. The 'Watercress Line' nickname was coined early on and is still used today. The railway is also famed as one of the most steeply graded lines in the country with a ruling gradient of 1 in 60. Such is the effort required by man and machine to crest the summit at Medstead & Four Marks, that it became known as 'Going over the Alps'. This gradient means the railway needs a fleet of large, powerful steam locomotives capable of working heavy passenger trains over the line.

Listed for closure in the famous Beeching plan in 1963, the line was eventually closed by British Rail on 4th February 1973. Plans for preservation were already in place and the 10 mile route from Alresford to Alton was secured pending purchase. In April 1977 the Mid Hants Railway Ltd opened for business running steam trains over 3 miles between Alresford and Ropley stations, with further extension to Medstead in 1983 and finally through to Alton in 1987 after extensive fundraising to purchase and relay track removed by BR.

The Mid Hants Railway is a not-for-profit organisation run by over 450 volunteers and a core paid staff. Virtually everyone you will meet during your visit is a volunteer; from the station staff, guards, signalmen and loco crews to the engineers, builders and gardeners. Whether it's behind the scenes or helping our visitors, volunteers are the backbone of the railway. The Railway's mission is to preserve part of the country's railway heritage for generations to come. The four stations along the route have been restored to depict periods from the 1930's to 1960's. Artefacts from other closed railways have been added to accommodate increasing visitor numbers, including iron footbridges and other heritage structures. At Ropley station extensive engineering works now house restoration of both locomotives and carriages; where the Mid Hants Railway has a successful apprenticeship scheme, part funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, to retain key preservation skills for the industry.

Today the Watercress Line carries over 120,000 passengers per year and is one of the largest in a national network of over 100 preserved heritage railways, both standard and narrow gauge. In July 2013 the All Party Parliamentary Group for Heritage Rail published a Report on the Value of Heritage Railways detailing the £250million input of the preserved railways to the British economy, both locally and to tourism. A number of recent TV documentaries about the history of steam railways and locomotives have helped popularise the sector to the UK audience. Although considered an important part of British industrial history, the preserved railways also have an international appeal due to the global spread of the industrial revolution and the railways. The industry is now seeing a natural shift from visitors reliving the 'golden age of steam' to those who are experiencing it for the first time.

The Watercress Line runs Standard Days and Special Events throughout the year, which include a Day Out With Thomas, War on the Line, Peppa Pig, Santa Specials and Christmas Leave, along with spectacular Steam Galas at the start and end of the season. On selected Saturday evenings the railway runs its famous Real Ale Trains from Alton station and its five course fine dining service, the 'Watercress Belle' from Alresford. 'The Countryman Pullman' offers a traditional Sunday lunch dining experience, with Murder Mystery Dining and Christmas Dining trains as well. All dining and Real Ale Trains are immensely popular and require pre-booking.