



## Canoes by Train

By Tony Harris

In 1958 I was an engineering apprentice at VOKES LTD, at Henley Park. Whilst on day release to Guildford Technical College I met up with another engineering apprentice from DENNIS BROTHERS of Guildford. We found that we had a common interest in canoeing and canoe touring, and because both companies closed down for the same two weeks in summer, we planned that year to make a sea canoeing trip along the south Devon coast, starting from Exeter and hopefully ending in Plymouth.

As we lived in St Johns, Woking and Farnham, respectively, the first question was how to transport the two sixteen-foot-long rigid wooden framed canvas covered canoes to Exeter, and two weeks later, back again from Plymouth? We decided that the best solution would be to take them by train, if possible, so we duly went along to Woking station to make enquiries. At that time, as far as I can recall, rail passenger's bicycles, folding canoes, and luggage in general went free, but we were not so sure that this would apply to our rigid non-folding canoes. However, it's not a problem, were told, and all we had to do was to decide which train we would like to travel on from Woking to Exeter, and that British Rail would then arrange for a suitable longer passenger luggage van [PLY] to be attached to that train.

For the envisaged return journey from Plymouth back to Woking, the canoes were to be taken to the luggage office at the railway station in Plymouth, and they would then put them on the next available long PLV That would be some time after we had travelled back on a routine passenger service train, and we would be advised when the canoes were available for collection from Woking station.

We purchased passenger tickets, for the 09.00 Waterloo to Exeter train on the third Saturday in July, and as I recall, there was no additional charge for the canoes or the long PLV. And so it was on that Saturday morning of the last week in July we wheeled the canoes on their little folding trolleys, down from my friend's home in St. Johns to Woking station, and on to the platform, to await our "special" train. It duly arrived on time, hauled by a West Country class locomotive and complete with the long PLY. We duly arrived at Exeter Central where we off-loaded the canoes, assembled the trolleys and wheeled them down to the quayside on the river Exe. Here we launched and set off on our voyage.

We did not reach Plymouth as planned, because bad weather with high winds and seas set in during the second week, and we were unable to round Prawle Point, the most southerly and exposed point on the Devon coast. Instead we portaged the canoes overland from Prawle Point to the Salcombe estuary where we spent the remaining days of our holiday exploring the more sheltered coves and creeks. On the last Saturday we paddled up to the



head of the estuary at Kingsbridge, which at that time was still served by the western region railway branch line from the main Paddington to Plymouth line at South Brent.

We handed over the canoes to the luggage office at Kingsbridge station, for return shipment to Woking later the following week. We then took the train that day back to Woking via South Brent, and Exeter. Hauled by an ex-GWR tank engine [I think that it was Prairie], the first leg of the journey took us up the delightful Avon valley, with stops at the local stations of Loddiswell, Gara Bridge and Avonwick, at least one of which, still had its camping coaches.

