

## WASP VM17

**Characterless but luxurious accommodation  
for those who remember the retired TOAD.**

*To devotees who know of the former Great Western Railway's colossal factory, "built Wigan, 1996," will have none of the cachet of "built Swindon, 1949."*

*And, in every sense, the accommodation that has been substituted for the venerable brake van at Christow, after 21 seasons, has none of its weight and standing.*

*But it's at the same place and in the same surroundings—and nearer the khazi.*

*No useful comparison can be drawn between the old and the new. Character and charm, always victims of progress, have been exchanged for comforts and cheapness.*

*Steadfast sentimentalists, who were content with the simplicity of TOAD, are unlikely to be weakened by such trumperies as hot running water and an indoor toilet.*

*The rubber-wheeled interloper does have some distinction, though not outwardly. The maker, Vanmaster, turns out only a small number of "touring homes" for the most discerning buyers. Today's equivalent of the railway's Vanmaster—the 17th made—sells for well over £50,000, vastly more than the largest and most expensive mass-produced British caravan.*



*The charge of **£35 per night** (from April, 2022) for one or two occupants, includes cotton sheets, blankets, duvets and covers, pillows and slippers, towels and many kitchen essentials. Equivalent accommodation elsewhere starts at around £60 per night.*

*Most of WASP's interior can be seen in the photographs which follow. Further description can be confined to detail or to fixtures and fittings whose functions are not obvious.*





*The tambour pull-out table will seat two. A freestanding table, kept in a washroom cupboard, allows six places to be set, if necessary. All the windows are double glazed and can be locked in a ventilator position or opened fully using the struts. The rooflight can be raised and slid forward. Windows and rooflights are fitted with insect screens and blinds. The doorway also has a screen.*



*TOAD's striplight and carriage compartment reading lamps pale when compared with the abundance of illumination in WASP. Most luminaires (24 at the last count) are now fitted with LED replacement lamps.*





*The sink and drainer can be covered, or exposed partly or fully, with the flap becoming a worktop extension.*

*Two pull-out leaves further extend the counter space.*

*All gas appliances are fitted with electric ignition and conform to the latest standards.*

*A full complement of crockery, pans and utensils is kept.*

*An extractor fan is fitted above the hob.*



*The pressurized water system is fed from an internal eight gallon tank. A further 14 gallons is held in *Aquarolls* outside, which can be pumped onboard.*

*After the water provided is used, guests will normally be expected to fetch more from the site tap. The nine- and five-gallon *Aquarolls* make this an easy task, but assistance can be given.*

*Hot water is produced by a thermostatically-controlled electric and gas geyser.*



*The single beds are 6ft. 3in. x 2ft. 4in., the same as those enjoyed in *TOAD*.*

*Sheets, pillows and duvets are kept in the drawers below.*

*The slatted bases pull out to support a double bed.*



*The double bed is 6ft. 9in. x 4ft. 9in., more ample than the standard size.*

*Upholstered ventilation boards keep bedding away from the walls.*





*The shower has a folding door and the whole cubicle is sealed.  
 The chemical toilet has a flap which hides the waste and the bowl can be given a short flush.  
 As most guests will be used to the old k&hazí, it has been kept. It is suggested that the indoor loo is used for night-time visits or when pouring with rain.  
 Luggage can be stowed in the wardrobe.*

*The hinged, slatted bases at the front end have a ratchet mechanism which allows the cushions to be arranged for reclining.  
 Another pull-out table leaf can be seen.  
 Overhead lamps are perfectly positioned for readers.*



*The "coach cloth" covering the ceiling may be unique to Vanmaster.  
 The door frames are crafted in ash.  
 Warm air from the balanced flue gas heater or electric elements can be ducted to four outlets around the van.  
 The stainless steel overhead rails are for stowing and drying.  
 U.S.B. ports, almost unheard of when TOAD was introduced, can be found next to the drawer unit on this side.*



When, in early January, 2019, the search began for a suitable stand-in for *TOAD*, the scout had no desire to view a succession of old caravans.

A 1980s two-berth had been broken up at Christow a few years before. There was one in Sheldon Lane which he could have had for next to nothing, but this had lost its interior and was beyond economic repair. A four-berth for sale just east of Exeter attracted the scout's attention, but before he could look at it an unusual type appeared on *Preloved*.

The advertizer referred to German build-quality; it was not German but vans made in Germany are reputedly very well made. The description was intriguing enough for the scout to pay the £5 fee necessary to make contact. There were only a few photographs and the scout wished to see more, which the advertizer promptly sent.

Thinking there would be some other interest, the scout wasted no time in taking the train and bus to Carhampton and walking the one and three quarter miles to the campsite in Blue Anchor, on the West Somerset coast.

At first sight of the caravan, it was obvious from crudely-applied sealant that the seams had been leaking. Inside, there were the usual signs of damp. The owner claimed that there was nothing wrong with it, although he must very well have been aware of its condition.

The scout had brought a cash deposit. He was impressed by the generous washroom and the faded, but unmarked, upholstery. He guessed that there would be much work to do but that there would be nothing beyond the Teign Valley workshops.

Any caravan of this age, being offered at the price it was, would have had faults, and the scout thought it unlikely he would see another *Vanmaster*. So he coughed up the deposit, thanked the seller and walked along the deserted coast path to Watchet for the bus back to Taunton.

### **TADPOLE** for little people

**Surely the most unusual camping  
accommodation anywhere on earth**



*TADPOLE* is a narrow gauge brake van, or *WHELK*, which ostensibly has been converted by the E. & T.V.R. into comfortable sleeping quarters for those of lesser stature. *TADPOLE* is a virtual imitation of the standard gauge *TOAD*.

The compartment has two bunks, each with two-foot wide foam rubber mattresses. The top one is 4ft. 4in. long and is clearly intended only for a very small person. The bottom bunk is 5ft. 9in., making it possible for a parent to accompany one small person. With the top bunk stowed, a single occupant has more space than may be suggested by the external appearance.

*TADPOLE* has a battery-electric system which enables it to be disconnected from the ground supply. A heater is fitted and a listening device allows big people in to hear what is going on and know that all is well in the diminutive counterpart.

The little van is normally berthed in a siding but may be left on the running line; larger occupants may prefer a berth on the river bank. The van has a fail-safe brake and is always chained to the rail after being moved.

A reading lamp, radio and kettle are provided when the van is occupied by a single larger soul.

A bedtime story, "A Journey in *Tadpole*," will send small people away into the land of dreams, allowing their seniors to relax at the end of the day.

To minimize costs, the railway's *utilicon* was spared what would have been a 105-mile working. The day's expenses were the *utilicon* to Exeter, a £9 bus fare and lunch in the caff on Blue Anchor front, which surprisingly was doing a brisk trade in mid-January. A pleasant day was had and there need not have been a caravan purchase to justify the outing. Nevertheless, the scout was very pleased that he would not have to look at any more of the wretched things.

Within a week it was brought to Christow where, upon examination, it was found that a great deal of work would be needed, much more than the Road Transport Department would have liked. Between 1st April and 10th July, 290 hours were spent on repairs and modifications.

*TOAD* was vacated for the last time on 9th May and the first booking of *WASP* was 19th July, by a regular guest who bravely got to grips with all the new comforts and facilities.

A further 66 hours (making a total of 356) has been spent on additional work.

Much of the information on the railway's "Camping on Rail" web pages remains true, though it has not been amended for years.

<https://www.teignrail.co.uk/camping.php>

In particular, *TADPOLE* may be hired alone or with *WASP* for £20 per night.

For all that a stay in *WASP* is as indulgent as any "glamorous camping," the new van still hasn't any of what was listed as missing from *TOAD*, the exception being the walkie-talkie signal which now penetrates to the river bed.

One of the smaller attributes of *TOAD* was *Bodkin*, who turned down the opportunity finally to retire in 2019. Oddly, in *WASP* there is no means of summoning him.

### "Room Service"

Quite why the railway chose to employ a retired butler to serve campers' needs is now lost in the annals. Whoever made the choice never twigged that the man's references were concocted by exasperated employers desperate to pass him off as a satisfactory servant.

Plush places have a Lifestyle Concierge to do the bidding of guests; the railway has Bodkin.

Most of the time he never even answers the bell, feigning deafness. When he does respond, campers are often too afraid to ask for what it is they want because of his surly and supercilious manner.

Of course, it did not help to begin with that children rang the bell just to see if he would come and that some married women who should have behaved better made outrageous demands of him.

When he was called upon to pull a tick from a camper's bottom, he muttered that his career had climaxed long ago. And he is often heard to sneer that none of those who now summon him has the standing of his last gentleman.

Presumably, this unfortunate one did not see the soup stains on Bodkin's waistcoat or the fag ash down his trousers.

Nearer the truth, no doubt, is that Bodkin has exercised a tyranny wherever he has been and managed always to blur the roles of master and servant.

This probably will be Bodkin's last post and the railway can hardly let him go. Campers can therefore ring the bell long and repeatedly if they dare, but should not entertain high hopes of getting any service.

### It is said that the accommodation at Christow should be sold on what it hasn't got

Hasn't got:

Walkie-talkie signal  
Wi-Fi  
Television  
Tourist board listing  
The usual forced flannel  
Other campers  
Club singer  
Trousers press

Ah! But what it has got:

A river  
(*"What else do you need?"*  
*Ratty might have asked*)  
Stuff to make you think, instead of  
stuff to stop you thinking  
Very little that can be quantified  
Charming Railwayman  
Bodkin



### Camping on Rail as it used to be on East Dartmoor.

Above: an official B.R. Western Region photograph of a six-berth coach at Lustleigh, on the Moretonhampstead Branch, five miles from Christow as the crow flies.

### Railway Creatures

Otter	Hedgehog
Mink	Deer
Heron	Fox
Duck	Badger
Kingfisher	Owl
Salmon	Trout
Slowworm	Glow worm

### Bicycle Hire at Christow Station

Two AfricaBikes – 18 in. steel-framed roadsters – are available for hire by campers and others.

Half day, £3; Day, £5; Week, £25 (each).

AfricaBikes have step-through frames. They are equipped with three-speed hub gears, lamps, bell, front basket, rear carrying frame with rubber straps, mudguards, chainguard, pump, reflective sash, first aid kit, map and tool pouch. Helmets are not issued.

By arrangement, bicycles can be delivered to and collected from stations in Exeter and Newton Abbot.

For the least energetic, these bicycles can be used simply to jaunt along the valley floor; for example, up to Steps Bridge for a meander by the river or for an evening at one of the local pubs. For those prepared to win the high ground, the roads across the Haldon plateau and around the Torquay Reservoirs allow easy going. And for the really intrepid, the Exe Estuary and the sea can be reached in about an hour.



The AfricaBike was chosen by the railway because of its ruggedness and simplicity, and because of the Good Works initiative of its American manufacturer, Kona. For every two AfricaBikes sold, Kona donates one for use by healthcare workers in rural parts of HIV-AIDS-devastated African countries, where few cars, poor roads and long distances make the distribution of drugs and support a major issue.

[www.konaworld.com](http://www.konaworld.com)  
[www.bicycology.org.uk](http://www.bicycology.org.uk)

[www.getafixcycles.org.uk](http://www.getafixcycles.org.uk)  
[www.bikeforlife.org.uk](http://www.bikeforlife.org.uk)