



ON THE ROAD TO PARIS

CN Dundas Sub

MARCUS STEVENS/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

A LOW RUMBLING from the constant flow of the Grand River passing over the unique “S”-shaped dam in Paris, Ont., almost completely mutes the horn from Chicago-bound Train 397 as it warns three teenagers crossing the bridge of its passage. The steady noise of the train crossing the old double-track steel bridge high above hardly catches the attention of a handful of people fishing in the river. Meanwhile, the trees along the west bank of the river are showing off the beautiful shades of autumn, illustrating one reason why Paris is by far one of the prettiest towns in southern Ontario. The town is filled with beautiful architecture, features a scenic riverside downtown core, and possesses deep railroad history. Today, freight and passenger trains

traversing Canadian National’s Dundas Subdivision pass through the town.

Until the 1990s, both CN and Canadian Pacific served the town, although CN and its predecessors have always played the main role. CP accessed Paris on the town’s east side over the CP-controlled Lake Erie & Northern. LE&N was once an electric line, and CP dieselized the line by the end of the 1950s when regular passenger service ended. What little freight traffic that remained gradually dried up, and the line was abandoned in 1990.

For Canadian National, Paris was once a key junction between two important routes. One was a shortcut, known as the “Brantford Bypass,” running between Paris and Lynden and a vital link for the line extending between London

and Bayview Junction near Hamilton. The other trackage runs between Paris and Stratford to the north and Paris through Brantford and onto Fort Erie to the south. The bypass was the original through route, but as the years rolled on the need for a direct route through the industrial-rich city of Brantford prevailed and the bypass was gradually eliminated. Today, the majority of trains passing through Paris don’t stop, including passenger trains operating for VIA Rail. A few trains do still work the yard on the west side of town, lifting and setting off traffic that connects to Nanticoke. Until 2018, Genesee & Wyoming’s Southern Ontario Railway used Paris as an interchange point with CN.

Sadly, all rail-served industries in

Paris have since vanished. Paris once had a small but majestic stone station, but it was destroyed decades ago; the freight station that sat beside it was removed in the late 1990s. Today, numerous CN through freights still roll through town, along with well over a handful of VIA trains. From bustling towns and cities, to rolling farmland and deep river valleys, the CN Dundas Subdivision has much to offer the visiting railfan.

Growth and Retreat

The history of the line goes back to 1853 when Great Western Railway built a single-track line between Bayview Junction near Hamilton and London. In 1856, Grand Trunk Railway would build a line extending from Fort Erie to Goderich, including a junction with Great Western at Paris. Years later, GWR would come under the control of Grand Trunk. After that time a connection

would be built between Brantford and Harrisburg.

In 1904, the entire line would be double-tracked. This included the section to Brantford, but not the bypass. By the 1920s, Grand Trunk’s financial problems forced the railroad into bankruptcy. Canadian National Railway was created by the Canadian government to take over numerous railroads on the verge of bankruptcy across the country, and GT was absorbed into CN.

The creation of CN meant that a number of existing rail lines would be considered either duplicates or unprofitable,



OPPOSITE: The crew of Canadian National GP9RM 4112 with Train 580 has its train tied down in the yard at Brantford, Ont., while awaiting the arrival of VIA Train 72 on November 13, 2013.

LEFT: The Burford Spur, which connects to the Dundas Subdivision in Brantford, has a colorful history. What remains today is a couple miles of former CN and TH&B trackage now owned by the last customer on the line. The section along Clarence Street was the most photographed, and on January 16, 2013, CN was still operating over the line heading light to the last customer.

BELOW: A CN local is travelling over a short section of CP’s St. Thomas Subdivision after leaving the Dundas Sub on March 7, 2011. From here, the GMD1 and GP9 will soon back into the Cami auto plant after clearing the switch.



and abandonment would soon follow. In 1923, a short section of duplicate track between Alford and Harrisburg was removed, and between 1926 and 1938 two sections of the Brantford bypass between Paris and St. George were abandoned. The gradual decline of passenger service during the 1950s impacted many branch lines across the country as well, and in 1962, the section of the bypass between St. George and Harrisburg was lifted.

By 1986, the rest of the bypass, along with the branch extending to Galt, was abandoned. CN's line between Brantford and Tillsonburg would also find itself severely altered over the years as service was cut back. Within Brantford, industries gradually vanished as the years passed, and by the 1980s, the city looked at redeveloping the former industrial land south of the downtown core, including where CN's Burford Subdivision passed through town. When the redevelopment was completed, the original CN line was removed in exchange for trackage rights over a portion of CP's former Toronto, Hamilton & Buffalo line within the city limits, and a new pair of connections was built to connect to the original Burford subdivision.

As the 1980s progressed, CP abandoned both its TH&B and LE&N lines

RIGHT: The autumn colors are beginning to take over as CN stack Train 148 rolls through Bayview Junction on October 21, 2019. The switch in the background is for the "cow path" that connects to Hamilton Junction. CP's Hamilton Subdivision can also be seen in the background.

BELOW: Before the pandemic, VIA Rail's classic stainless-steel cars were still a common sight on trains. Most have since been placed in storage. On December 12, 2018, VIA Train 70 has an all-stainless consist as it passes Brantford yard and slows for a station stop.

extending outside the city. CN would in turn take over what remained of these lines within the city, along with any remaining customers. As for CN's line extending to Tillsonburg, it would be lifted between Tillsonburg and Buford in 1987.

In 1998, CN would lease Brantford Yard, along with all remaining spurs and the Hagersville Subdivision to Nanticoke, to Railink, which later became Southern Ontario Railway. This agreement would last until 2018 when CN took back the yard and local lines several years earlier. During that time, the branch to Burford was cut all the way back to Brantford, and by 2014, the former LE&N trackage in town was also lifted. Today, the last customer on the former TH&B section switches its own cars and interchanges them with CN as needed.

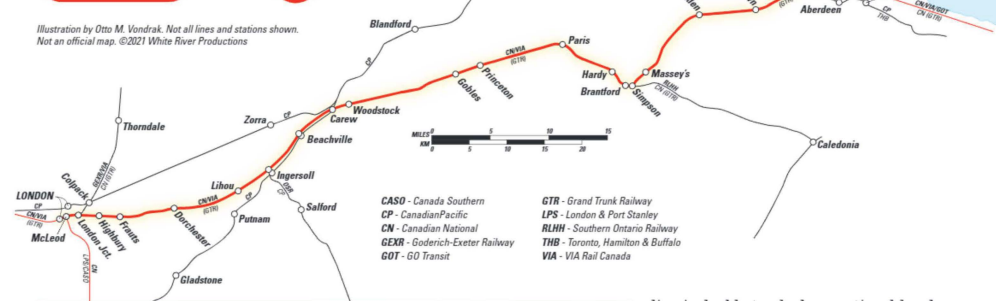
At Paris, the line extending to Stratford was lifted between Paris and Tavistock in 1981, with the rest of the line abandoned in 1987. At Woodstock, another lightly used former Grand Trunk branch line ran north to Tavistock and south to Port Dover. Between 1935 and 1936, sections between Tavistock and Hickson, Woodstock and Burgesville, and Otterville and Simcoe were removed. Between 1963 and 1965, the rest of the line would be eliminated, except a short section between Simcoe and Port Dover that would survive until 1987.

Following the Dundas Sub

Bayview, at milepost 0, is the beginning of the Dundas Subdivision. Here the line departs the busy Oakville Subdivision and begins its gradual climb up the Niagara Escarpment, which it won't crest until Copetown. While the entire

CN Dundas Sub

Illustration by Otto M. Vondrak. Not all lines and stations shown. Not an official map. ©2021 White River Productions



line is double-tracked, operational headaches do still occur when trains occasionally stall on the hill.

Halfway up the Escarpment, the line enters the town of Dundas. At one time CN and TH&B both served Dundas, as well as a large gravel pit on top of the Escarpment. Unfortunately, the TH&B line has long since vanished; the gravel pit (that at one point had its own railway) no longer has anything to do with the railway. CN's station grounds here are mainly unused and overgrown.

Copetown at milepost 10 is the next station on the way west and marks the end of the climb up the Niagara Escarpment. An old grain elevator still stands at the station site, although rail service to the elevator has long since vanished. A pair of service tracks occasionally are used for storing maintenance-of-way cars. A set of crossover switches is also located at the west side of town.

After passing through a few miles of rolling farmland, the railroad encounters the small town of Lynden. On the west side of town is where the Brantford bypass left the main. That line once traveled to Harrisburg, where a junction carried one line north to Galt and the other on to St. George and, finally, Paris. Since both lines were never converted to rail trails, they are very hard to follow and are severely overgrown.

LEFT: Carew, located at Woodstock's west end, is where the former CP St. Thomas Subdivision crosses the Dundas Subdivision at grade. Today it is operated by Ontario Southland Railway, which uses a selection of first-generation EMDs and MLWs for power. The railway also has a trio of former VIA/CN FP9s, two now in full OSR point. On April 16, 2016, a pair of F-units, still in previous owner Railink livery, crosses the diamond as it heads for the CP interchange.



ABOVE: The scenic highlight of the entire Dundas Subdivision is the river crossing in Paris, with the S-shaped dam and downtown core in the foreground. VIA Train 72 rolls high above Grand River with a pair of rebuilt F40s in the lead on October 23, 2020.

RIGHT: London is the largest city with the largest yard along the Dundas Subdivision. A number of locals are assigned here and many crew changes take place. On August 26, 2020, CN Train 402 is busy switching the east end of the yard with a cowl Dash-8 in the lead.



The main line from Lynden angles southwest through more farmland before crossing Fairchild Creek on a long, steel bridge before entering Brantford. After ducking under Highway 403, the line arrives at a location known as Massey's, named for the large farm machinery company, Massey Ferguson, that was once located here and supported a big part of Brantford's economy. Today, the large factory has been repurposed and no longer uses rail service. A set of crossovers is also located here, and up until the early 2000s an industrial spur also left the main line here. Just west of the crossovers on the south side a short spur serves a couple industries, while on the north side a spur serves a busy kitty litter plant which is often switched daily.

Beyond this point, near milepost 22, there are two branch lines that depart the main line. The first one at Brant Junction is where the one-time Brantford Subdivision headed southwest for

Tillsonburg. Sadly, this somewhat scenic line has been drastically cut back since the 1980s and only survives today to serve one remaining customer. CN's refusal to operate over the line after taking it back from Southern Ontario Railway has forced the industry to contract a Trackmobile operator to deliver any cars to and from the CN interchange — a sad end for a once-interesting line.

The next junction, known as Simpson, is where CN's connection to the Hagersville Subdivision is located. Just west of here is the yard and impressive VIA Rail

station. A roundhouse was once located at the west end of the yard. As the line departs the city of Brantford it passes Hardy, where there is another set of crossovers.

Eight kilometers (4.2 miles) west of Brantford is the very scenic town of Paris. The town is nestled between the junction of two river valleys, as the Grand and Nith rivers connect here. As the Dundas Subdivision enters town, it crosses over the abandoned Grand River Railway (CP) right-of-way, which was converted into a rail trail in the late

1980s, and then soars over the Grand River on an impressive steel bridge. A quarter-mile west of the river crossing, at mile 30.9, the line encounters the abandoned junctions to not only the Brantford bypass, but also the abandoned branch to Stratford. Up until the early 2000s, a short section of the old bypass remained to serve one industry; the wye to the Stratford branch was also still in service. Both have since been removed.

From here, the line passes a small yard with a set of crossover switches at both ends. CN once had a large coaling tower here, as well. Traveling from Paris to Woodstock, the line passes through lush farmland and through the small towns of Princeton and Gobles on the way. Princeton still has one rail-served industry in town.

On arrival at Woodstock, the line ducks under busy Highway 401. A few rail-served industries are located in

Woodstock's east end but, unfortunately, recent years have claimed a number of other customers once served by the railway, such as Firestone and the large General Motors facility. Moving westward, the line passes a long-abandoned diamond with an old branch line that vanished over a half-century ago. The unusual VIA Rail station is located on the south side of the tracks here, while a pair of unused service tracks that once served a freight house sits on the north side.

After passing under Wellington Street, the line passes the large Ralston Purina feed facility, which has been a landmark here for generations. The facility had loading bays on both sides of the track, but today only the one on the north side is in service. Beyond the plant is an impressive steel bridge that crosses Mill Street as well as a creek.

Carew is next and is the location of the diamond between CN and OSR's former

CP St. Thomas Subdivision. A connecting track was located here but was removed a few years ago. Leaving Woodstock, the Dundas Subdivision follows along a river valley, never far from the OSR line, passing through Beachville on its way to the next sizable town of Ingersoll.

Beachville is the home of a very large limestone operation that CN does serve, but switching here is nothing like it was decades ago. At Ingersoll, interchange with OSR is made at the east end of town. Ingersoll is home to the very large CAMI auto assembly plant, which builds cars for General Motors. Both CN and CP once had contracts to switch the facility; today OSR does all the switching, then interchanges to both CN and CP.

Beyond Thames Street is the location of the VIA Rail shelter that replaced the old station years ago. Sadly, years of neglect left the old station in a state that required its demolition in 2020. A small weed-infested yard beyond the station was once used for sorting autoracks used at the CAMI plant, but today that is done near Beachville at the OSR interchange.



LEFT: CN still operates some unusual locomotive models, even though the fleet has been thinned out in recent years. One of CN's original four-window cab-version Dash-9s, paired up with a BC Rail cowl body Dash-8 upgraded years ago to a Dash-9, is on daily Train 435 on February 15, 2021. The train is down to a crawl as it nears the top of the Niagara Escarpment at Copetown.

BELOW: CN stack Train 149 is storming westward at Powerline Road south of Harrisburg, just east of Brantford on October 23, 2020. The original track alignment here ran in a straight line to Harrisburg, but was realigned to bypass the village many decades ago.





ABOVE: CN Local 580 is switching out the large lumber facility at Cainsville on February 17, 2021.

RIGHT TOP: Local 580 typically works most days of the week, with enough switching to keep it busy. If not in the yard at Brantford, such as on February 17, 2021, it can be found switching around town or in Cainsville or to the west at Paris.



RIGHT BOTTOM: The VIA station in Brantford is one of Ontario's most beautiful. Several daily VIA trains, such as Train 70 seen here with a P42 up front on October 23, 2013, keep the station busy throughout the day.



Once out of Ingersoll, the line again follows a river valley for a bit before heading back into farmland. Lihou at mile 61.6 is the location of another set of crossovers. The line then passes through the small town of Dorchester before passing another set of crossovers at a location known as Frauts.

Highbury at mile 75.5 marks the large CN yard in London. Several locals are based here, working around town as well as making daily runs down to St. Thomas. London East at mile 76.5 is where the yard office and local power are stored. London Junction at mile 76.7 is where the Guelph Subdivision departs to the north; this is a secondary main line that travels through Stratford, Kitchener, and Guelph on its way to Toronto. The Talbot Subdivision also departs here to the south and heads to St. Thomas, which was once considered Canada's railroad capital; sadly, that is not the case today. London at mile 78.2 features the large VIA station rebuilt just over a decade ago. It is also the start of the Strathroy Subdivision, which continues on to Sarnia and, eventually, Chicago.

Current Operations

Train action along the line is split throughout the day, with the nighttime hours often busiest. Typically, crew changes do not take place along the Dundas Subdivision, as that occurs in Toronto or Sarnia, but unforeseen issues do sometimes force a crew change along the line.



The majority of through trains along the line are in the 380/390 number series, while trains 434 and 435 work wherever needed as they operate between London and Toronto. Currently, trains 148/149 are the only intermodal trains that operate over the Dundas Subdivision, and automotive trains in the 270 series are assigned as needed, as well. Locals numbered in the 580-series are assigned to both London and Brantford and work along the line as needed, and also serve the connecting branch lines and spurs.

While the current pandemic and the all-around struggling economy have definitely had an effect on railway operations, there is still a fair amount of traffic throughout the day. VIA Rail service has been drastically affected as well, with only a handful of trains currently operating daily. Traffic is expected to gradually improve though, and the scenic nature of the line certainly makes any time track-side worthwhile.

Today's economy has also affected the motive power operating over the line. With the more recent arrival of numerous new GE-built locomotives, as well as a downturn in traffic, older motive power is being disposed of, especially GE's Dash-8 series locomotives. All leased power was also returned early in 2020. But motive power is still interesting with a number of Dash-8s remaining on the roster (at least as of late 2020). The gradual arrival of heritage-painted units, as well as an ongoing rebuilding program for many SD70 series locomotives, are still keeping things interesting. Local and yard power is also of interest, with old GP9RMs and leased GMTX GP38-2s, as well as CN's GP38s and GP40s, mixed in consists.

For the visitor, all the major cities along the subdivision provide ample food and lodging. The Dundas Subdivision has a lot to offer railfans, from the ever-changing scenery to a handful of unique and charming stations, to a decent mix of motive power. A day along the line can be very rewarding. The autumn season is one of the best times to spend along the line, especially while trains are traveling through the Niagara Escarpment. 📍

LEFT TOP: CN Train 397, with a good mix of General Electric locomotives up front, leans into the sweeping curve at the Garden Avenue overpass in Brantford's east end on October 20, 2020.

LEFT: CN Train 331, with a rare double-BC Rail set of a C40-9M and C40-9M, storms westward through Princeton on September 16, 2014. While the town's station vanished years ago, there is still one rail-served customer, seen in the background.