

The Friends of Honiton Station

Our Lockdown Story



Once lockdown started in March, one thing was immediately very clear. Everyone's safety and well-being was not just the most important thing; it was the only thing. All station adoption activities had to stop. And, as ours is a staffed station, that situation may continue for some time yet.

As the Chairman of The Friends of Honiton Station, one question soon came to dominate my thoughts: what does a station adoption group do, when the one place you cannot go is the station?

Thankfully, it was soon apparent that during these unprecedented times, advice and support was going to be there, just when we needed it most. Weekly mailings from the Community Rail Network did not just keep us up to date with what was happening nationally, but sent us encouraging words, case studies of what others were doing, and practical tips.

Dan Wright from Community Rail Network, our Community Rail Manager at South Western Railway, Andy Harrowell, and the manager of the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership, the incomparable Richard Burningham, were always there at the end of an email. I felt supported, that station adoption groups like us were being listened to, and that what happened to us mattered.

Two pieces of advice I received stood out. First, to use the opportunity when activities were cancelled, to take stock of what you are doing and planning to do, and why. Think about what you might change, what support you might need in the future. And above all, make plans.

We were happy with our progress on most of our aims:

To promote the line, we had sought and gained the inclusion of Honiton in a series of videos about the Jurassic Coast made by Geoff Marshall and Vicki Pipe, the railway adventurers from All The Stations, and sponsored by the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership. **(Photograph: Geoff and Vicki in Honiton, 2019)**

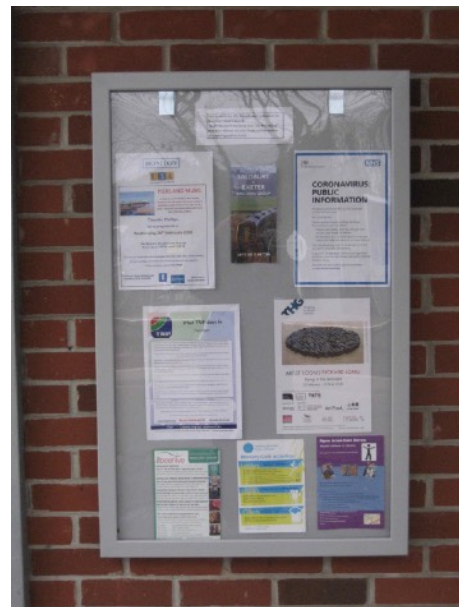
We are continuing to make good progress with our friends at the Salisbury to Exeter Rail User's Group, to campaign for much-needed track improvements between Honiton and Exeter. A new report published in July by Network Rail is an excellent blueprint for the future.



And we have made great headway with several small-scale improvements to the station we have been discussing with the rail company over the last year. However, lockdown has meant stepping back from some of the results of those successful discussions, and considering the next steps.

The community noticeboard we had worked so hard to get installed is shut down for now; the book swap has not even begun to operate yet. And the wonderful new display area SWR put up for us is still waiting its first exhibition.

However, as the first exhibition was to be on the history of the station, to celebrate the 160th anniversary of the opening, what started as a brief set of notes to be sent to the designer to accompany the chosen photographs, quickly became our first lockdown project.



(Photograph: Community Noticeboard Before Lockdown)

Suddenly, we had the chance to create a free booklet to share with the community. Once the station re-opens, and the local museum is up and running again, locals and visitors alike will be able to pick up a copy of the full-colour booklet, which has been funded by the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership.

Writing the booklet in lockdown posed some obvious problems. Thankfully, I had been able to inspect the museum's archive and select some material, in the week before the lockdown started. The curator scanned and sent me numerous photographs and Victorian posters, for me to study at home. These included details of the original public meeting called to campaign for a railway line through Honiton.



(Photograph: Honiton Station in 1907)

Members of the Friends and other station adoption groups rallied round, as I tried to put the booklet together. One found me information on several key dates and early locomotive names. Another shared extracts from a rare book he had, that contained information I needed.

A local author's book on the town provided vital anecdotes and details. He also provided one of the more unusual pictures, of the day in 1911 when the railway was used to bring a fire engine all the way from Exeter, to fight a massive fire at the local church.

The CRP helped out not just with funding, but provided expert support when the layout I had created proved to have the balance between image and text size wrong. There is a reason I was an English teacher not a graphic designer.

Photograph: Building of the railway in 1860



The problem was quickly sorted, and within a week, we had 500 copies of a beautifully printed booklet. Unfortunately, they are still sitting in my study, waiting for the day when we can start to share them with the community.

I said that I had received two pieces of great advice. The second was that we should find ways to keep in touch with members, both to support them during a stressful time, but also to keep them informed and involved in the work going on in the background to support the railway.

The result was what became **“The Train at Platform 1”**, our monthly newsletter. At first, I was just sending random emails to members as and when there was news to tell, or information to pass on. It soon became apparent that I could make this more effective, attractive, and hopefully something people would look forward to receiving, if it was turned into a colour publication.

The first issue was basically a simple news sheet, enlivened with some photographs. Bit by bit, this has grown into a 16 page colour newsletter, put together using Apple Pages, and then saved as a pdf file before being sent to members. At present, it is dispatched at the start of each month, although I anticipate it eventually being published every couple of months, in common with many of the other local rail users' groups.

We have covered a wide range of stories. Great sources for content are the Community Rail Network's weekly mailing, the Media Centre on South Western Railway and Network Rail's websites, and whisper it quietly, even the rail union RMT's website. The invective in their stories is certainly a contrast to the positive stories you will read from the train operating company.



Stories from elsewhere can often highlight local issues, and news stories closer to home can provide an interesting read for members. For instance, we recently featured the trial of emissions reduction technology on the exhaust from a train on our line.

We have explained some of the steps SWR have been taking to support safe travel in these difficult times. And we have included some examples of what other station adoption groups have been doing.

(Photograph: Planter at Lake Station IOW)

Recently I have begun to include a guest star in each issue, someone who members of our group have heard about but, due to lockdown, have not been able to meet. Guests have set a quiz, or told us a little about themselves. They have shared something of what they do in their spare time, even what football team they support. It is all about personalising these key people, so that they are not just *“the one who gave us the money”* or *“the one who said we can’t do that.”*

The first guest presenter was our own Andy Harrowell, who seemed genuinely surprised that the editor could unearth such details as the roles he had played on the amateur stage.

As a direct result of the newsletter project, two important developments soon occurred. First, I was asked to write an update on the railways, to provide the latest travel advice, and to explain what the Friends are planning in the future, for our community magazine Honiton and Village News.

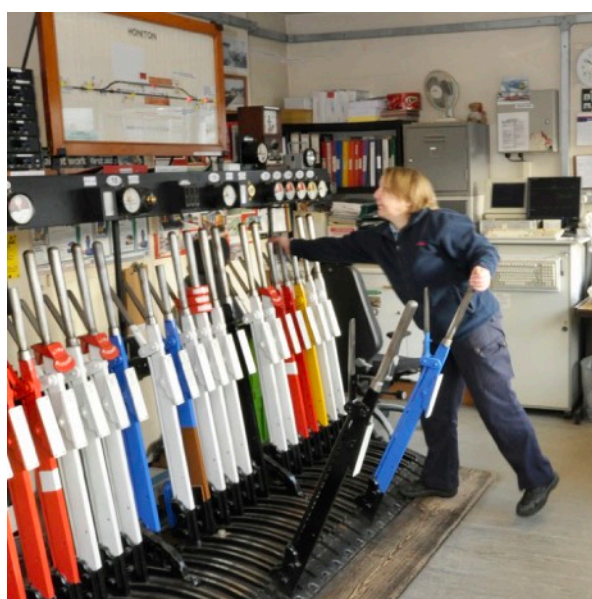
As a consequence of writing that article, one of our members put us in touch with a potential new supporter, who has a keen interest in railways. And, most importantly, he is also a web designer. Within a few days, an online poll of our members was set up, and following a unanimous vote, we decided that it was time the Friends had their own website.

This quickly became our third lockdown project. Pages of content were soon written, and a member provided a selection of photographs, including several taken in the old signal box before it was knocked down in 2012.

We decided what our key priorities for the site were. We wanted to tell people about our campaigns and key projects, and to give visitors to the site a chance to link to key train information such as departure boards.

And we wanted to provide links not just to the timetable, but to organisations and groups supporting the railway, and just as importantly, supporting the community at large.

As a result of doing this, we were quickly able to sign up our local Honiton Health Matters team to mount an exhibition in the display area in the waiting room at some point in the future.



(Photograph: Inside Honiton Signal Box, 2011)

Incredibly, with a huge effort on everyone’s part, the new website was live in just two weeks. One of the strangest parts of the project was that, for obvious reasons, I could not meet the designer in person at any point.

Somehow, we also managed to build the site without even speaking on the phone. Everything was done online. There were endless emails, and the designer uploaded parts of the site as soon as they were ready, for me to comment on.

You can check out our site at friendsofhonitonstation.org.uk. The site also includes the latest copy of our newsletter for you to read on screen, or to download.

Our experience of lockdown has been one of huge contrasts. Like everyone, this has been a troubling, scary and stressful time. But it has also been a great opportunity to re-evaluate what is important to us as a group, and to improve the ways in which we communicate with members and the wider community.

We hope that the changes we have made, and the three publications we have put in place, will build our support, encourage new members, and raise our profile, both in the town and in the world of community rail.