The Train at Platform 1

The Friends of Honiton Station Newsletter 71 - February 2026

Welcome to the February newsletter. Sadly, we have to begin this month with the news of yet another set of line closures, including emergency engineering work near Axminster following storm damage to a bank beside the railway, and days of reduced timetables due to a signalling fault near Tisbury. It was a great relief that the work at Axminster could be carried out so quickly, minimising the inevitable disruption to passengers. This month, we also mark the success at Honiton of Brew Monday, the Samaritans' January campaign on positive mental health.

Normally, our cover photo features a train. This month, the above felt somehow appropriate!

More Train Travel Frustrations for Honiton Passengers

Engineers were called on at short notice to carry out emergency works near Axminster over the weekend of Saturday 17th and Sunday 18th of January to stabilise the railway following a landslip.

To allow these repairs to take place safely, buses replaced trains between Crewkerne and Exeter throughout the weekend.

One bus ran between Crewkerne and Exeter, calling at Honiton and both Exeter Central and Exeter St Davids, while a further bus caledl at all intermediate stations between Crewkerne and Exeter St Davids.

Following recent torrential rain, engineers spotted movement in the ground beneath the track and immediately implemented a speed restriction of 5mph for the safety of passing trains. Engineers continued to monitor the embankment and, following closer inspection, decided that where the embankment meets a water channel linked to the River Axe, the ground had softened and started to give way.

In a 52-hour line closure, a permanent fix was instigated across a 20-metre stretch of track so trains could run at normal speeds again. Engineers built a retaining wall using large interlocking rocks, known as rock armour, at the base of the embankment. This will act as a protective barrier, holding the slope in place and stopping the earth from moving any further.

The weekend closure also gave engineers time to rebuild the embankment that supports the track, replacing and compacting the ballast that holds the rails in position and realigning the track to make sure it is safe and level.

These works are essential, they say, to restore the strength and stability of the railway and prevent further movement.

The repair required 1,600 tonnes of stone to be transported from Poole to Axminster. Moving the material by rail, rather than road, reduced carbon emissions by 88%, with rail freight around eight times cleaner than using lorries and able to carry significantly larger volumes in a single journey.

Speaking on behalf of Network Rail and South Western Railway, Tom Desmond, Operations Director, said:

“We’re really sorry for the disruption this weekend and the short notice of this closure. We know closing the line between Crewkerne and Exeter is going to be frustrating for passengers, and it’s not a decision we’ve taken lightly.

“Safety has to come first, and after heavy rain from Storm Goretti, and the River Axe relief channel next to the railway, we need to step in quickly to make sure trains can run safely.

Once the repair was completed, passengers will have noticed that the line reopened with the 5mph speed limit still in place. It had to remain in place for a week to allow Network Rail teams to monitor the site before returning to line speed, providing the land remained stable.

Photographs by Network Rail

One particular irritation of the work was that Journey Planner was unable to show the precise detail of the hourly bus service until 24 hours before the closure started.

Passengers also queried why it was not possible to run trains between Honiton and Exeter, as the work was taking place well away from the area, and the rear car park at Honiton Station was not being used as an access point for equipment being taken to the works site (although the line blockade signs were placed on the track in front of the platforms at the station).

These issues were addressed by Andrew Ardley, Regional Development Manager for SWR, who said:

"We did look into the possibility of a Honiton – Exeter shuttle rail service. Unfortunately this wasn't possible from an SWR point of view given the very limited timescale to rebuild the crew diagrams.

"We also discussed options with our friends at GWR. They were unable to help due to only having a very limited pool of high speed drivers that currently sign the route – this group of drivers is already heavily committed at weekends.

"In addition, the movements of the engineering trains for the works meant that Honiton station was unavailable for a shuttle train service on this occasion.

"We will however look at options as to how this could be achieved in future as the railway moves towards integration and rolling stock training programmes progress."

As regards, the problem with Journey Planner, Andrew added:

"Station calls west of Crewkerne were removed from online journey planners on Monday.

"Industry system restrictions mean that the bus replacement services cannot be loaded into journey planners until 24 hours before (which is different for long term planned engineering works). We have therefore included a bus timetable on our website in the interim.

"As a result, online journey planners will currently show no results for stations west of Crewkerne. This is obviously not ideal but which is why we're keen to make customers aware of the need to go to SWR's website to view the detailed information."

This work represented the first of three weekends without trains in the Honiton area in the first three months of the year. The next two are for planned work, taking place the weekends of February 14th and 15th, and March 7th and 8th. A further line closure is planned affecting the Crewkerne area for a week at Easter weekend. Details will follow in the next newsletter.

Then, as the month ended, came news first that the line was closed for some hours due to flooding on Tuesday January 27th, and that from Wednesday until the end of Saturday, a reduced, two-hourly timetable was back in operation, due to a signalling fault between Tisbury and Salisbury, which meant that only a limited number of trains could operate.

For once, there was limited information from SWR about the nature and results of this problem. The company is making great efforts to improve its communication with stakeholders; on this occasion, it fell somewhat short.

Engineering Report for February and March

Saturday 7th and Sunday 8th February

The lines in the Salisbury area will be closed all weekend due to maintenance work.

Great Western Railway services will be affected by this work. Please see their publicity for more details.

London Waterloo to Exeter services will be revised and will terminate at Salisbury.

A revised service will run between Gillingham and Exeter.

Buses will run between Andover and Gillingham (non-stop).

Buses will run between Salisbury, Tisbury and Gillingham.

Saturday 14th and Sunday 15th February

The lines between Honiton and Exeter St Davids will be closed all weekend due to maintenance work.

London Waterloo to Exeter St Davids services will terminate at Honiton.

Buses will run between Honiton and Exeter St Davids.

Saturday 7th and Sunday 8th March

The lines between Yeovil Junction and Exeter St Davids will be closed all weekend due to maintenance work.

London Waterloo to Exeter St Davids services will terminate at Yeovil Junction.

Buses will run between Yeovil Junction and Exeter St Davids. Buses will run between Honiton and Exeter St Davids.

Saturday 14th and Sunday 15th March

The lines in the Woking area will be closed all weekend due to maintenance work.

Saturday

London Waterloo to Exeter St Davids services will start from Basingstoke.

London Waterloo to Salisbury stopping services will start from Reading.

Buses will run between Woking, Guildford and Basingstoke.

Sunday

London Waterloo to Exeter St Davids services will start from Andover and will call additionally at Grateley.

Buses will run between Woking, Guildford and Basingstoke

Saturday 21st and Sunday 22nd March, and Saturday 28th and Sunday 29th March

The lines in the Wimbledon area will be closed all weekend due to maintenance work.

Saturday

London Waterloo to Exeter St Davids services will be revised.

London Waterloo to Salisbury stopping services will start from Basingstoke.

Sunday

London Waterloo to Exeter St Davids services will be revised with some services starting from Basingstoke.

Most late afternoon and evening London Waterloo to Salisbury stopping services will start from Basingstoke.

Looking Further Ahead…

It has been confirmed that planned engineering work will affect our line over Easter - between Friday 3th and Friday 10th April, for work on the Crewkerne Tunnel Cutting earthworks and drainage works at Wayford Cutting. Details of the replacement service have yet to be confirmed.

There is due to be a further planned closure of the line in the Honiton area, between Monday 26th October and Sunday 1st November, for work between Axminster and Honiton and for earthworks at Honiton Tunnel Cutting and track works at Seaton.

Honiton Volunteers Mark Brew Monday and Support Samaritans

On January 19th Members of The Friends of Honiton Station took part in a national event run by Samaritans to encourage everyone to reach out to friends and colleagues who might be going through a difficult time.

As part of the event known as Brew Monday, volunteers from the Friends, supported by South Western Railway station staff, spoke with passengers, gave out information on starting a conversation about mental health and, to help the conversation along, gave out free Samaritans-branded tea bags.

The volunteers had a number of very positive conversations with a number of passengers during the morning.

Launching this annual national event, a spokesperson for Samaritans said:

“Today’s the day. The day you put the kettle on. The day small talk turns into big talk. The day you break open the biscuits and the taboos. The day you remind everyone how good human connection feels. How easy it is. And what a difference it can make.”

Samaritans encourage everyone, whatever the day, to reach out to someone, to show them that they are valued and that someone cares. A simple message can mean a lot to someone who is going through a difficult time.

Just reaching out and asking someone how they are can give them the opportunity to open up about how they are feeling.

Paula Aldridge, South Western Railway's Community Rail Manager, said:

“Brew Monday is an important campaign to remind people what a difference human connection can make, which the rail industry has been supporting since 2010.

“This year, we're continuing to spread the message to our customers and colleagues of the value of a cuppa and a catch-up.”

Events also took place on the GWR network, including at Weston-Super-Mare and Cheltenham, and across the rail industry.

Martin Long, Chairman of The Friends of Honiton Station said:

"Encouraging the community to support one another, and signposting local organisations that can offer help and support, is central to everything we do.

"For instance, each of the planters at the station represents a local community group, and has contact information nearby on how to access their services.

"Taking part in Brew Monday is another important way in which we can help connect the station to the community, and the community to the station."

Following the event, this story appeared in the Midweek Herald, including the above photograph featuring Martin, Paul and Justin Palmer from the station staff. The photograph was taken by another member of the station staff, Stacey Retter, who helped with the event by making regular public address announcements to passengers highlighting the event and what it meant.

Our thanks go to everyone who took part in or supported this event in any way.

The event at Honiton was also covered in the fortnightly newsletter from Community Rail Network which is sent to all Community Rail Partnerships and Station Adoption Groups across the country, and appears on their website.

SERUG Holds Its AGM: Seeks Key Updates on Future from SWR

Our colleagues at the Salisbury to Exeter Rail Users Group held their Annual General Meeting at Yeovil Railway Centre on Wednesday January 21st. In attendance were approximately 60 members, visitors and railway industry guests, including Peter Williams, Customer and Performance Director at South Western Railway, who was the main speaker.

In advance of the meeting, Tony Reese (Treasurer and Membership Secretary) presented an outline report, in which he noted that SERUG's total funds on January 13th were £3282.22, made up of £2941.50 in the Lloyds Bank account and £340.72 in the PayPal account.

In addition, Tony noted that SERUG presently has 111 members.

In his introduction to the meeting, Bruce Duncan (Chairman) welcomed members with the observation that while in some ways it was "all change", the one constant on the railways at the moment is that there is no money! SWR is continuing to provide a service, but not always with the financial resources at its disposal to do all that they would like to be able to do.

SERUG therefore has an important role to play in lobbying government, to support the railway company in trying to achieve its goals, especially at a time when government is demanding companies do more but with less money.

Bruce thanked SERUG members for continuing to provide feedback on their travelling experiences. Issues continue to include the lack of a trolley service, passenger information when things go wrong and the problems caused by short-formed trains.

Bruce reported that there would be no change in the make up of the Committee in the coming year, and that it was planned to hold another Members Meeting in the Spring.

In reporting on SERUG's activity in 2025, Bruce noted that much attention was paid to the impact of Soil Moisture Deficit (SMD), and the timetable changes this caused. He reported that SERUG will be meeting with the team from Southampton University studying SMD, to gain greater insight into the issue, its causes and possible mitigations.

Bruce reiterated the importance of SERUG working with all the MPS along the line. He reported on contacts made in 2025 with each of them. These links will need to continue and to develop further in 2026.

Nick Hurrell (Secretary) reported on performance along the line. Passenger numbers showed a 9.4% increase over the year. He noted that there were now an additional 800 000 passengers per annum over the figure recorded 20 years ago, before the full hourly service was introduced following the opening of the Axminster loop.

In 2025, on-time performance on the line was 81%. While this is still below target, it is clear that SWR is trying hard to improve this. An average of 76% of trains are fully formed. It is still the case that performance deteriorates in the afternoon, as delays earlier in the day are hard to make up due to the single track.

In his talk to members, Peter Williams commented on the positive relationship SWR and SERUG had built up over time, with SERUG providing positive challenge, but working closely whenever possible.

While budget constraints continue to be an issue, Peter said that progress would focus on a number of key targets. These are:

- Integrating track and train, the biggest change facing the industry over the next few years;
- Timetable transformation;
- West of England Line performance;
- Diesel fleet performance, maintenance and refurbishment;
- Station improvements;
- West of England Line modernisation plan.

Peter noted that SWR was the first train operating company to enter the process of re-nationalisation (except for those previously placed in the franchise of last resort). The process brings SWR and Network Rail Wessex together, integrating track and train, under a single Executive Group and management structure, with the overarching aim to improve performance.

The key roles in this new structure are:

- Chief Operating Officer, who will now also have responsibility for the signalling and maintenance functions formerly under Network Rail's control;
- Chief Engineering and Technology Officer, who will be responsible for the fleet and maintenance;
- Chief Customer and Commercial Officer, which will include stations. Peter will be handing on this role to a new appointment shortly;

- Planning and Performance Director, who will bring the SWR and NR teams together, to improve the customer experience;
- People and Transformation Director;
- Finance Director;
- Health, Safety and Security Director;
- Strategy and Business Development Director; responsible for longer term strategic planning;
- Chief of Staff.

The team will be led by the Managing Director, Lawrence Bowman, who many will already have met, as he is keen to get out and about along the line and to meet stakeholders.

Peter outlined plans for the timetable re-cast being undertaken. This is the first full refresh since 2004 (although a previous review was begun but not implemented in 2018). A cross-function team has been formed to take the process forward, with a planned implementation date of December 2027. It is a complex process, which will involve full engagement with stakeholders. The plan produced must be achievable with available resources, trains etc.

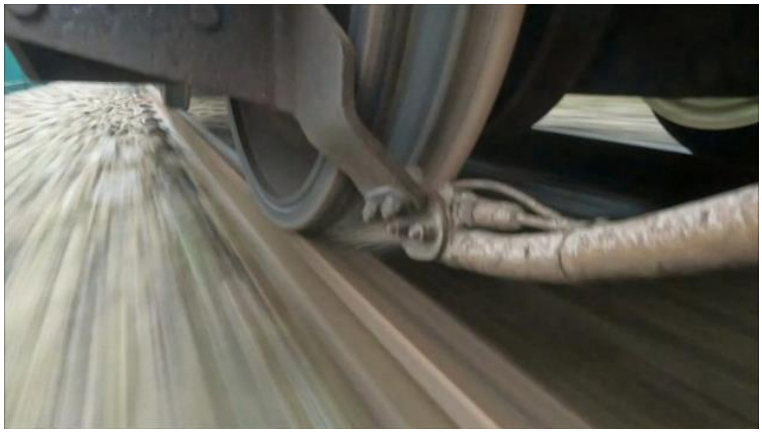
Peter stressed that the right balance needs to be struck between:

- Enhanced connectivity in our communities;
- Improved journey times for customers;
- Better train performance on the network;
- Increased economic value.

Early ideas are already starting to emerge, and engagement with stakeholders will take place throughout 2026.

Peter accepted that performance challenges continue, mainly due to the single track and the increasing problems caused by geology, principally SMD, but including landslips such as the recent event at Axminster.

An analysis of delays showed the impact of fleet issues and train faults, including wheel set problems, SMD, trespass incidents and fatalities, storm damage, signalling faults and bridge strikes by vehicles.



Much of the problem with wheel sets originated with wheel slide damage in low wheel adhesion conditions in the Autumn. Wheels needed re-profiling after developing flat spots. There were also issues with wheel set gearboxes.

At times, up to 8 units were out of service at any one time, as units awaited work. It was also hard to obtain replacement wheel sets. SWR has now increased the number of spares held.

It is hoped to return to “full fleet resilience” in February.

Peter noted that SMD could still be a major issue in 2027, as saturation levels in January are still below those at the same time last year. If there is a dry Spring/Summer, further timetable disruption is possible.

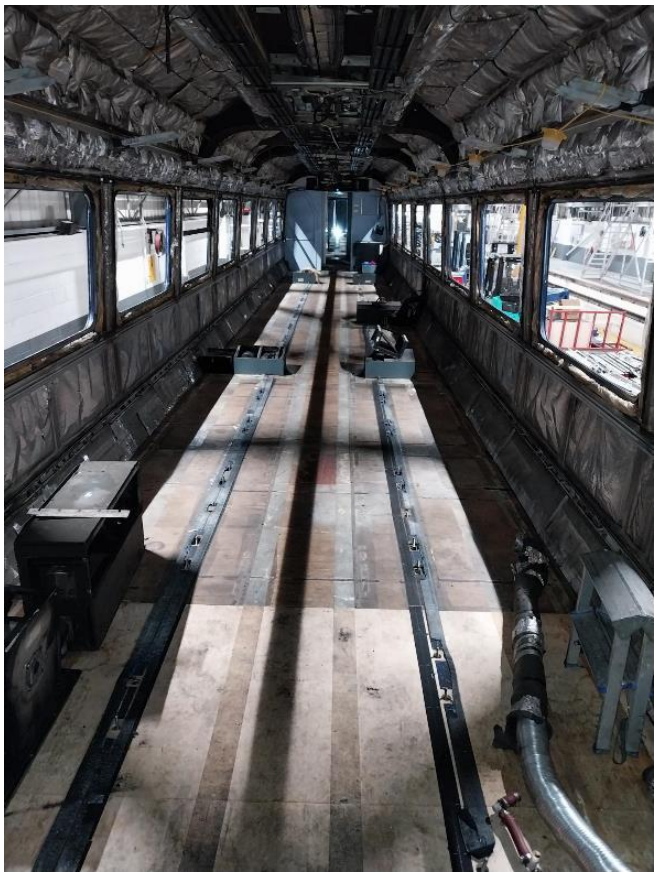
Peter reported that the team are attempting to bear down on “sub-threshold” delays, i.e. those below three minutes, which although small of themselves can build up.

Peter noted with satisfaction how quickly the recent works at Axminster has been organised at just two weeks’ notice and successfully undertaken, due to wide-ranging co-operation, including with landowners.

Looking forward, he reported that further planned works are to be undertaken on the West of England line in 2026, with work at Easter between Friday 3rd and Friday 10th April at Crewkerne Tunnel Cutting Earthworks and drainage works at Wayford Cutting; and between Monday 26th October and Sunday 1st November between Axminster and Honiton and for earthworks at Honiton Tunnel Cutting and track works at Seaton.

Key targets for the West of England Line in the immediate future come under these headings:

- Fleet;
- Infrastructure;
- Management and Control;
- Reducing Sub-threshold Delays;
- Creating a Modernisation Plan for the line.



C6 exams for the Class 159 fleet are now under way, and it will take about four years to complete the £16 programme of mechanical and interior refurbishment. Work includes exterior repainting, door overhauls, toilet overhauls, body shell condition checks and an overhaul of cab and control equipment.

One unit expected to be out of service at any one time, but this shouldn’t affect fleet availability subject to faults etc.

The first unit entered the programme on 29th December. This will take longer, in order to check designs, condition of bodywork, test new equipment etc. Subsequent units will be quicker.

The first unit is expected to be back in traffic in April and all units are expected to be through the programme by 2029.

USB-C power points will be installed, seat and table updates made and an upgraded Passenger Information System installed.

This work is intended to take the fleet to its planned renewal/replacement in the mid 2030s.

Peter commented on the promotional tickets SWR offered to thank passengers for their patience during the Autumn, when the full timetable was finally re-introduced. He also commented on plans for station improvements this year, which include station painting at Honiton and canopy painting at Axminster and Gillingham, plus waiting room improvements at the latter station.

He gave also an update on improving accessibility to stations.

Feniton will get new ramped access to the platform, and the Yeovil Junction Scheme to install lifts and new bridge has been progressed to detail design stage by DfT (one of only 31 nationally, of which 8 are on the SWR network). Somerset Council is to contribute match funding.

Peter introduced his new colleague Olly Rodgers, who is taking forward the West of England Line Modernisation Plan. Olly reported that the drivers for change on the line include aging rolling stock, past performance levels, demand growth and new housing along the line. Options include fleet replacement and track re-instatement projects, all of which have to be considered through a full economic appraisal.

Olly said that the strategy will provide funders with options for the direction of travel for the West of England Line over the next 30 years. It will help set priorities and define ambitions for funding. It will also set the direction of travel for a range of projects across the route, including fleet procurement, as well as existing work on the proposed “Devon Metro” scheme. Olly said that initial output from this project will be available in a couple of months, and will feed into planning for the timetable re-cast.

There followed a wide-ranging Question and Answer session with members, involving Peter and Olly, as well as Andrew Ardley (Regional Development manager) and Tim Mears from the Customer and Performance team.

Some of the key points included:

The timetable re-cast will take account of scalability, so that they can take account of infrastructure changes as and when they come about, but its initial assumptions will be those which are deliverable in 2027.

All issues and changes needed to the line are inter-related, as there are “lots of moving parts”. Issues of trains, signalling, loops etc are all connected.

There is no scope in any review to increase staffing, e.g. to address the lack of Sunday staffing at Axminster.

Issues at Honiton, with the lack of a shuttle service to Exeter when the line to the east is closed, will be further examined, but there are a number of constraints.

The Up platform at Pinhoe is slightly too short to open all doors when trains are formed of six carriages. This means that only the front three carriages are able to open their doors on eastbound trains. There is no budget to extend the platform although, in common with all East Devon stations, this issue has been looked at as part of a wider review. Future trains may have ASDO, which allows doors to open as required, rather than only blocks of three carriages as at present.

The air conditioning system on the Class 159 units is still a problem. The system regularly struggles to cope. Only minor improvements are possible.

Extending GWR services from Exeter Central to Pinhoe is not presently deemed possible, as only some GWR crew have route approval for that section of line.

Discussion also took place about the option being considered for Devon Metro to terminate services from Axminster in the bay platform at Exeter Central, rather than run on to St. David's.

Signallers on this line have some discretion as part of the Regulating Policy, when it comes to deciding whether to hold Down trains at Honiton. This approach, rather than having a fixed policy, is due to the wide range of variables affecting this and other decisions.

In conclusion, Peter re-iterated two key points from the meeting:

That SWR is ambitious for the future of the line, even allowing for the insistence of the DfT on managing costs;

That stakeholders such as SERUG continue to have a key role in supporting SWR in making its case to the DfT.

Bruce thanked colleagues from SWR and all who attended the meeting, and wished everyone a safe journey home.

Note: A copy of the slides from Peter's presentation to the meeting is available on SERUG's website. Photographs in this piece are courtesy of SWR/Network Rail.

Storms Ingrid and Chandra

Significant damage was caused to two sections of sea wall at Dawlish during Storm Ingrid, overnight on January 23rd.

Services between Exeter and Newton Abbot were suspended in advance of the arrival of the storm, and Network Rail staff were quickly on site to access the damage. The full impact of this on the railway line was assessed.

A limited service operated on Sunday 25th, with buses replacing local services, but some long-distance services were able to run. Network Rail engineers undertook a further inspection on January 26th. Normal services were able to resume on Monday 26th.

In addition, GWR reported on that the ongoing impact of the storm meant that lines between Par and Newquay and between Liskeard and Looe were closed over the weekend due to flooding, with the line to Looe remaining closed into the new week.

Storm Chandra soon followed, with extremely heavy rain falling across East Devon on Monday night. As a result, many roads were flooded around Honiton and Ottery St Mary, schools and shops were closed, as staff were unable to get to work.

The railway line between Honiton and Exeter was closed for several hours on Tuesday morning (27th), with services cancelled completely or terminated at Honiton until lunch time, when conditions began to improve.

A number of speed restrictions were imposed, including a 40 miles per hour limit between Honiton and Axminster and 20 mph limit between Axminster and Crewkerne, causing further delays.

Just as services were finally beginning to get back to some semblance of normal, Wednesday 28th began with a signalling problem between Salisbury and Tisbury, causing a number of services to be cancelled west of Salisbury.

This disruption - and the resultant two-hourly service - continued for the rest of the week, much to the frustration of passengers.

Don't Forget…

Work is now well under way at Exeter St. Davids to replace the passenger lifts. Passengers requiring assistance should ask a member of the station staff. The work is scheduled to continue until April.

Erratum

Apologies for the error in last month's report on the ORR passenger figures for April 2024 - March 2025. The correct section relating to most used stations in the South West should have read:

"In our region, the top five stations continue to be Bristol Temple Meads (10.9 million), Bath Spa (6.5m), Swindon (3.2m), Exeter Central (3.0m) and Exeter St Davids (2.9m)."