

# **The Friends of Honiton Station – Autumn Review 2021**

## **A) Introduction**

The last twelve months have continued to be dominated by the impact of the pandemic on all aspects of everyone's lives. The work of this group has been no exception. However, despite lockdowns, the impossibility of face-to-face group meetings for so long, and the necessary restrictions placed on the group's activity at the station by South Western Railway, the group has been able to continue to operate, and even to raise its profile with the community and with industry partners.

The enthusiasm of members and supporters, the encouragement and experience of SWR, the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership (DCRP) and the Community Rail Network have all been crucial in allowing this to happen.

## **B) Review of 2020-2021**

The group's lockdown projects focused on raising our profile, communicating with members and the wider community, and on planning how best to celebrate and promote travel by rail when the time came to do so.

The historical display and booklet celebrating 160 years of rail travel in Honiton were a great success. DCRP produced an outstanding display of old photographs, based on material provided by The Friends of Honiton Station, using a range of sources including the local museum.

The booklet could not be given out at the station as originally planned, due to pandemic restrictions imposed by SWR. However, the town library and especially the local museum were delighted to stock the booklets and have given out a steady stream throughout the last 12 months, and continue to do so. The latter has promoted them online, and have received requests from former residents of the town living elsewhere to send them copies.

The Friends' monthly newsletter 'The Train at Platform One' has enjoyed the enthusiastic support of members and supporters, who have provided reminiscences of their early experiences of rail travel, photographs both recent and historical, and articles of interest to readers. The newsletter has kept members in touch, given them a sense of togetherness during a difficult time, as well as keeping everyone informed about the latest rail news.

The newsletter is available to read online through our website. The creation of the site by one of our members has helped raise the profile of the group, allowed us to reach out to the community and to offer a service to local people, giving them access to timetable information, news about service alterations, and links to websites of community interest.

It also allows us to promote our work, and to seek additional volunteers. Although not heavily used, the email function of the site has allowed members of the community to contact us, and led to some useful additional sources of information and support.

Since lockdown restrictions were eased, and society began to open up, we have made a concerted effort to use local press contacts to promote the station and rail travel. Regular articles appear in the local community magazine and local paper, written by the Chairman, that provide positive rail news and support for moves to encourage passengers to return to travelling by train.

Recent articles have promoted SWR's Rewards scheme, Assisted Boarding Points and their 'Try the Train' sessions.

The Friends have taken part in consultations organised by SWR, such as that on the December 2022 timetable. Whenever such consultations take place, the Friends are now included by SWR as one of their stakeholder groups. We always involve members in these consultations, although in the last 12 months this has had to be exclusively through email requests. We have continued to keep in close contact with the Regional Development Manager for SWR, whose interest and support the group greatly appreciates.

The group has continued to take every opportunity to promote the CMSP plan for improvements to the line, which will eventually make possible the much-awaited Devon Metro service on the East Devon Line. We continue to work closely with our colleagues at the Salisbury to Exeter Rail Users Group (SERUG).

The opinion of the Chairman has been sought on several occasions on other rail-related matters, including the Community Rail Network's consultation on improving communications with members, and the project by Window Seater to produce an app for passengers on GWR to provide an enhanced information about their journey to passengers as they travel.

There has been no further progress on the gardening project. We have spoken with the local gardening club to see if they would be interested in getting involved, so far with no success. We continue to seek a way forward on this project.

In the meanwhile, we are grateful to the "friendly ghosts" who did some pruning and tending of the planters recently, to make them look attractive for the summer. We don't know who they were (although we do not think they were 100 miles away from our excellent station staff!), but we were very grateful for their support.

We were delighted to be visited before the pandemic by Geoff Marshall and Vicki Pipe, as part of the Jurassic Coast promotion project. The videos that were produced for the website as part of this project focused primarily on the coastal towns, but we were delighted that Honiton Museum and its lace collection feature in one of the videos.

We look forward to the official launch event for this excellent material, as part of continuing work to promote rail travel in the local area. We have held initial discussions with DCRP about how the stations along the East Devon Line might be promoted in the future using history and heritage.

The community noticeboard was installed on the platform just before the first lockdown. However, for much of the last 18 months, including at the present time, we have been unable to make use of the board, due to SWR's restriction on Station Adoption Groups.

We are grateful to DCRP for the decorative backing poster for use with this board, and look forward at some future date to being allowed to return to using this board to promote community events, activities and groups in the local area. We also look forward to the East Devon Line poster boards promoted by DCRP being installed at the station in due course.

We were delighted to hear that SWR plan to repaint sections of the station before March 2022. We look forward in due course to hearing when the planned e-bikes project will be completed. We will continue to take relevant opportunities to press for improvements to the station, including new platform seating.

## **C) Autumn 2020 Priorities as set out in Community Rail Network Annual Member Survey**

In October 2020, we set out the following tentative priorities for 2020-2021:

- 1) Developing further community links
- 2) Increasing number of volunteers and improving communication with volunteers
- 3) Re-starting the gardening project
- 4) Promoting art and history through the station
- 5) Promoting local tourism
- 6) Seeking service improvements on the East Devon Line
- 7) Rebuilding our projects following the first lockdown

## **D) Review of Autumn 2020 Priorities and Targets for 2021-2022**

While many of these priorities have been negatively affected by the restrictions imposed on everyone by the pandemic, we have been able to move things steadily forward in many areas. We are disappointed that there has been no substantive progress on the gardening project.

The group has continued to grow steadily, to improve its communication and outreach, and to plan for the future when more regular face-to-face activity will be possible again.

We believe that the group has an important role to play in liaising between the rail company and the local community, and in promoting a rail-led recovery. And we believe that the group is in a strong position to work with local partners to promote rail tourism in the area.

Therefore, we see our priorities for the year ahead as:

- 1) To continue to develop links with the local community, focusing on the Town Council, and groups such as Honiton Health Matters which are promoting a community committed to health and well-being, including mental health:
- 2) To continue to work on attracting new members and supporters, with a priority on seeking a co-ordinator for the gardening project;
- 3) To work with others, including DCRP and the Community Rail Network to plan and develop a project to promote the area, including Honiton, through the arts, history and heritage;
- 4) To continue to work closely with South Western Railway, to ensure that the local passenger voice is heard, to ensure that SWR is able to get its message across through the local press and other means of communication, and to press for service improvements and enhancements;
- 5) To work with SWR's Community Rail Manager, with Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership and the Community Rail Network to explore ways of enhancing the station, developing its role in the local community and promoting the vital place of rail travel in the recovery.
- 6) To maintain the group's profile in the local area, through the newsletter, website, local press and other means.

## **E) Conclusion**

Much has been achieved in the last year, considering the situation we have all found ourselves in. But there is much to do in the next twelve months. The key in the next year is partnership.

The group will need more than ever to work closely with its key partners: SWR, DCRP and the Community Rail Network, as well as building new relationships with groups such as the Town Council.

There will be a vital role for line-based developments, such as the East Devon Line Stakeholder Forum which will bring local groups, councils, industry partners and others together, to seek ways to work collaboratively to promote and develop the line.

The Friends will also continue to do all it can to work with local groups being established in communities such as Feniton and Whimple.

The last year has been incredibly challenging for the rail industry, with passenger numbers falling to numbers unseen for over a century. There remain serious threats to the recovery of our railways, but local groups such as ours can play an important role in supporting moves to rebuild our vital railway.

The East Devon Line potentially has a great future, with a clear plan for how Devon Metro can be delivered in the medium term. With the future need to de-carbonise our economy, our railways will become ever more important. And with leisure travel likely in the short-term to rebound more quickly than commuting, areas such as ours with an excellent tourism offer and access to a major shopping city, will have a key role to play in the recovery.