
The Train at Platform 1

The Friends of Honiton Station Newsletter 36 - March 2023

Welcome to our March newsletter. As our cover photograph from Vernon Whitlock reminds us, this month sees the return of GWR services to Honiton, while engineering work is carried out in the Taunton area. This will mean that the regular SWR service will be re-timed during that week. This is also the month when rail fares rise again, never a welcome development, as we continue to work hard to persuade potential new passengers of the many benefits of rail travel. This month we also report on the announcement from the DfT on the future of Great British Railways.



Further Rail Strikes to Hit Passengers This Month

Passengers are bracing themselves for yet more strikes over the coming weeks, following the announcement by RMT leaders of further strike dates in March and April. RMT members will strike on 16th, 18th March, as well as 30th March and 1st April which is, of course, the start of Easter school holidays for many.

In response, the employers group the Rail Delivery Group (RDG) was reported as saying:

“This latest round of strikes is totally unjustified and will be an inconvenience to our customers, and cost our people more money at a time they can least afford it.”

They claimed that that the RMT had initially agreed that the industry needed “modernisation” to fund any pay rises, but had now “renege on that position.”

The RMT’s General Secretary Mick Lynch said:

“Rail employers are not being given a fresh mandate by the government to offer our members a new deal on pay, conditions and job security,” RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch said. He added that there would now be “sustained and targeted” industrial action over the next few months.

Network Rail's chief negotiator Tim Shoveller said:

“Thousands of employees are telling us they want the improved offer that we have tabled, an offer worth at least 9% over two years - rising to over 14% for the lowest paid, provides job security with no compulsory redundancies and 75% discounted rail travel. But instead of offering members a democratic vote with a referendum, the RMT leadership is hiding behind a sham consultation.”

While this battle of words goes on, it is the long-suffering passengers, and staff repeatedly asked to give up days of pay in the midst of a cost of living crisis, who are suffering. Until this dispute is settled, which eventually it must, the rail industry cannot begin its journey back to recovery after the worst of the pandemic.

For that to happen, the government needs to consider whether the “best and final” offer it authorised recently is actually that. And the union needs to consider what, if anything, is being gained by the latest round of strikes when, to the outsider at least, all that seems to be happening is that the union leadership of all the present major disputes are hanging on, not wanting to be the first to settle, in case they accept a pay rise that is then beaten by someone else. With the headline rate of inflation starting to fall, if slowly, and set to fall further, and despite TSSA members accepting the latest offer, the game of brinkmanship seems set to go on. Who will blink first?

SWR Services Return to Normal After Hook Landslip

Network Rail (NR) and SWR announced that from Friday February 24th all lines would re-open following the landslip at Hook in Hampshire on January 14th.

NR reported that their engineers had been steadily building a 60-metre retaining wall, made up of one hundred 12-metre long ‘sheet piles’ which are driven into the ground to stabilise the embankment and protect the railway from future landslips. As well as using 9,000 tonnes of stone in the repairs, they have been re-grading the steepness of the embankment slope to reduce the risk of material falling.

Following the landslip, it was only possible to run one train every 90 minutes between Basingstoke and Woking. A short time later, Network Rail took the unusual step of reconfiguring the track layout onto a stable section of the embankment to enable six trains an hour to run through the area.

Although this has provided an improved train service over the past few weeks whilst the embankment repairs continued, it means engineers needed to close the railway again once the embankment was repaired to reinstate the track layout to its original position. This meant two weeks of overnight closures, and changes to late evening services, leading up to February 24th when SWR reinstated its full regular timetable.

Christian Neill, SWR's Service Delivery Director, said:

"We're sorry for the disruption this will cause as Network Rail engineers complete the restoration of the South West Main Line following the landslip at Hook in January.

"Only a limited rail replacement bus service will operate after 2200 and a small number of other service alterations will be made, so it's vital that customers check their journeys before travelling, travel earlier if they can, and allow extra time to complete their journeys too. Our customers have been very patient over the last month and we're very grateful for that."

Mark Killick, Network Rail's Wessex Route Director, said:

"We'd like to thank customers and residents living alongside the railway for their patience while we've carried out this major repair. Fixing the landslip at Hook has been an incredibly tough and complicated job. I'm so sorry our customers will have to endure more disruption before we can reopen all four lines. Unfortunately, there is no perfect solution, but this approach is the least disruptive to our customers overall.

"We've taken the difficult decision to carry out the track layout work over multiple nights because I recognise how important it is to provide a direct service to and from London and the south west, particularly as the Portsmouth Direct Line will be closed from the 11 to 19 of February as part of a multi-million-pound upgrade that has been planned for more than two years."

Ticket Machine Chaos

Passengers at Honiton were unable to use the ticket machine for at least two weeks week last month. A notice informed passengers that those wishing to collect tickets ordered online would have to do so from the ticket office.

All passengers were told that when the ticket office was closed, they should buy their tickets at their destination, and that guards had been informed of the problem. Unfortunately, this failure of the ticket machine coincided with a week when staff shortages meant that the office was due to be closed after 12.15, leaving passengers unable to purchase a ticket before travelling. Hopefully, guards and staff at other stations were ready...

Rail Fares To Rise: Don't Forget Your Railcard

With rail fares rising by up to 5.9% this month, it has never been more important to remind passengers of the advantages of having and using a railcard.

The rise in regulated fares means that the cost of a daily return to Exeter from Honiton is now close to £9. However, by using a railcard, passengers travelling after Noon can still keep the price down to little more than £4 return (the exact figures were still not officially announced as the newsletter went to press), or around £6 between 9 a.m. and Noon.

Anyone who lives locally can still buy a Devon and Cornwall Railcard, giving a third off rail fares in the two counties for just £12 a year. Or an age-related card, such as a Senior Card gives the same discount nationwide for only £30 a year.

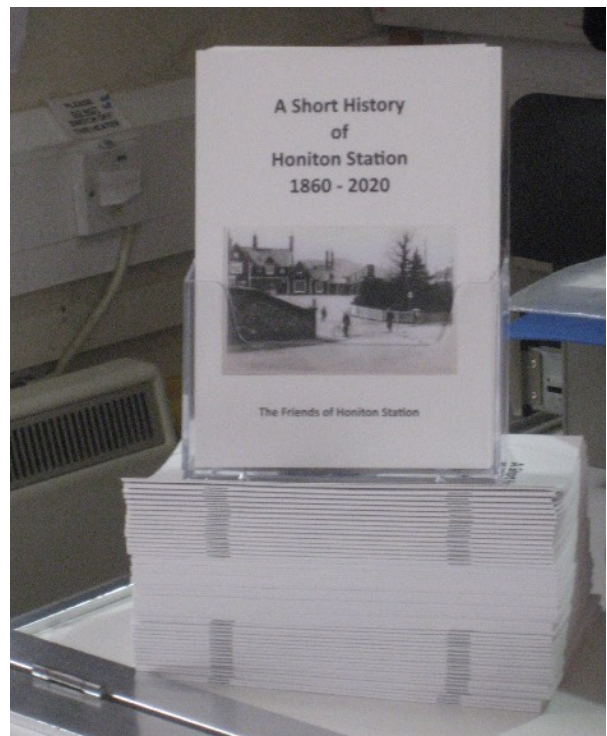
History Booklets Project Reaches Final 1000 Milestone

In the next few days, the latest phase of the project launched in 2020 to mark the 160th anniversary of the opening of the line through Honiton will come to an end. Since the first booklets were given out at Allhallows Museum in October 2020, an amazing 1000 have been given out.

Written by the Chairman, designed and funded by Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership, the booklets have been distributed free at Allhallows Museum and, since restrictions were lifted on third-party publications following the pandemic, from the station waiting room.

The project has been a resounding success, not only celebrating the anniversary, but raising the profile of The Friends of Honiton Station in the community.

The project will now live on through our website. It is now possible to read the booklet online at friendsofhonitonstation.org.uk/history.



SWR Contract Renewed for Two More Years

The Transport Secretary has announced that South Western Railway's National Rail Contract has been extended by two years.

After a period of Emergency Measures during the pandemic, the DfT granted a new SWR National Rail Contract to start from March 2021 and run until May this year. This will now continue until May 2025.

The terms of the contract mean that revenue is collected and costs are paid by the DfT, which gives the operator a performance fee, and FirstGroup said that 'current contractual arrangements' will continue.

First's CEO Graham Sutherland said:

"We welcome the contract extension for South Western Railway, which enables us to build on the achievements of the first two years of the contract and continue improving the customer offering."

"We are committed to working closely with government and our partners to deliver a successful railway network that provides vital connections for customers and communities along the SWR route."

Secretary of State Signals The Way Ahead for Railways

At the beginning of February, the Secretary of State for Transport made a key speech, setting out some of the Government's plans for rail, including the future of the plan to introduce Great British Railways.

Community Rail Network sent its members a briefing of the main points from the speech, which is reprinted below.

The Transport Secretary Mark Harper has outlined the government's plans to modernise the rail industry, vowing to instil a 'customer first culture' and to deliver rail reform, including the establishment of Great British Railways (GBR).

Giving this year's George Bradshaw Address, Mr Harper acknowledged frustrations within the rail industry, and among passengers, but said his priority was to move 'from the words to action' to achieve fundamental reform and deliver the government's Plan for Rail.

He said the whole government were 'pressing go on rail reform': to put customers first; to realise the benefits of GBR; and to help enhance the role of the private sector. He also stated the need to create a customer-focused and joined-up railway flexible enough to build back from the pandemic.

Mr Harper committed to the establishment of GBR, saying: "The industry has long called for a guiding mind to coordinate the network so GBR will be responsible for track and train, as well as revenue and cost."

He also stated that:

- The winner of the GBR HQ competition will be revealed before Easter;
- The government will respond to the consultation on GBR's legislative powers by the summer;
- The GBR Transition Team are developing the guiding long-term strategy for rail (which was informed by a consultation that Community Rail Network and some community rail partnerships/groups fed into), which is set to be published later this year to provide strategic direction to the sector.

Mr Harper said GBR would be 'wholeheartedly customer-focused', and would serve as the single point of accountability for the performance of the railway. It was described as an arm's length body ensuring a balanced approach to both infrastructure and operations, with five regional GBR divisions working with rail industry partners and operators and regional bodies such as the Greater Manchester and the West Midlands Combined Authorities.

While Mr Harper emphasised the importance of government not getting involved in the operational decision-making of running the railways, he did acknowledge that government oversight was needed, 'especially to support those passenger services that don't turn a profit, yet still play an important economic and social role.'

Mr Harper emphasised the need for a customer first culture within the industry, highlighting the need for reliable services, comfortable journeys, and accessible stations.

He stated that the main passenger concern was around ticketing, and confirmed that:

- Pay-As-You-Go ticketing will be extended, with 52 stations across the south-east set to be completed this year including on Chiltern, London Northwestern, and C2C services;
- LNER's single leg pricing trial will be extended to other parts of the LNER network from the spring, with the results then considered before potentially extending this more widely;
- Reforms will mean that flexible single fares were always half the cost of the equivalent return, giving passengers more flexibility and better value;
- For the freight sector, Mr Harper outlined the creation of a dedicated Strategic Freight Unit tasked with realising rail freight's untapped potential for green growth.

Mr Harper said he wanted the private sector to 'play its most important role in our railways yet,' to reinvigorate the sector, drive innovation, and attract more customers to the railway. He said this would be done in partnership with GBR, which will help to set appropriate commercial conditions.

He said that the current National Rail Contracts, put in place to steer the industry through the pandemic, will be phased out and replaced by new Passenger Service Contracts, that will balance performance incentives with simple, commercially driven targets.

Mr Harper also outlined plans to:

- Expand commercial opportunities around land and property near stations;
- Support more open access services where it benefits passengers and taxpayers, making best use of spare capacity on the network;
- Open up railway data and systems, whilst lowering barriers to entry for the industry.

March and April Engineering Report

Saturday 18th and Sunday 19th March

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

Saturday

London Waterloo to Exeter St. David's services will start from Basingstoke.

Buses will run between Woking and Basingstoke.

Sunday

London Waterloo to Exeter St. David's services will start from Andover and will call additionally at Grateley. Buses will run between Woking, Guildford, Basingstoke and Andover.

Passengers from London Waterloo and Clapham Junction should travel on services to Guildford to connect with the bus service.

Monday 20th to Thursday 23rd March

Due to engineering work taking place in the Taunton area, Great Western Railway services will be diverted via Honiton.

As a result, South Western Railway services between London Waterloo, Salisbury and Exeter will be revised.

Passengers will need to check train times before travelling.

Saturday 25th and Sunday 26th March

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

Saturday

London Waterloo to Exeter St. David's services will start from Basingstoke.

Buses will run between:

Woking, Guildford and Basingstoke;
Guildford and Basingstoke via Farnborough;
Woking, and Guildford.



Network Rail Track Testing at Honiton on February 20th

Sunday

London Waterloo to Exeter St David's services will start from Basingstoke. Buses will run between Woking, Guildford and Basingstoke.

Passengers from London Waterloo and Clapham Junction should travel on services to Guildford to connect with the bus service.

Saturday April 1st and Sunday 2nd

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

A revised service will run between London Waterloo and Andover. Buses will run between Andover and Salisbury.

London Waterloo to Exeter St. David's services will start from Salisbury.

Is AI The Answer To The Future of Train Information?

Britain's busiest station, London Waterloo, is trialling Artificial Intelligence that provides train information through British Sign Language (BSL).

Travellers who are deaf or have hearing loss often struggle to hear station announcements and communicate with staff, which can make it harder to plan and carry out journeys.

The new Artificial Intelligence technology being trialled by South Western Railway (SWR) translates live journey information into BSL, which is displayed through a friendly figure on digital totem screens, making it more inclusive.

The project, in partnership with Waterloo Station and Inform Media by LB Foster, will provide accessible travel information to deaf customers who use BSL, displaying information in their first language, giving them more confidence on their journeys.

The cutting-edge technology will be evaluated across a six-month trial period, with a view to rolling it out across the rest of the SWR network. The trial is just one of a number of innovations being considered by SWR as it strives to improve customer experience and provide better journeys.

Peter Williams, SWR's Customer and Commercial Director said:

"We are excited to launch the trial of this innovative technology, which has the potential to transform accessibility at Britain's busiest station. We will watch this trial with great interest and if all goes well, we hope we can roll it out across our network."

Huw Merriman, Rail Minister, said:

"Everyone should be able to travel on our railways with confidence and ease and trials like this are essential in making that a reality. Accessibility is a top priority for this Government, and new technologies and projects like this will make a real difference for passengers."

Emma Boswell, who is a member of SWR's Inclusivity and Accessibility Forum and a BSL user, added:

"This is a breakthrough for the Deaf and Deafblind communities, making travel more accessible and enjoyable with BSL announcements on totems around SWR stations."

Teri Devine, Director for Inclusion at deaf and hearing loss charity RNID, said:

"Public transport can present many barriers for deaf people and people with hearing loss, with live information such as platform changes often communicated over a speaker system. We are excited by this new initiative at London Waterloo station to make travelling by train more accessible to deaf people who use BSL, and we hope this trial will encourage the public to be more deaf-aware during their journeys."

We at Honiton have already been in touch with SWR and our industry partners about the possible introduction of an information totem here (although without the BSL feature). It would make an excellent contribution to the provision of passenger information at the station. As you would imagine, the main stumbling block is the cost... Watch this space.

Small Talk Saves Lives: A Special Feature

As regular readers of this newsletter will know, we have frequently highlighted the importance of initiatives to support mental health and wellbeing, particularly on and around the railway. And we have drawn attention several times to the importance of the Samaritans' Small Talk Saves Lives campaign.

In the midst of a highly-challenging time for many people, as the cost of living crisis continues to bite, I make no apology for returning to this subject once again, by including an update shared by SWR, GWR and Network Rail's media teams recently. Please read it.

The rail industry has joined Samaritans to remind people that we all have the potential to be lifesavers by striking up a conversation.

The campaign aims to empower the public to trust their instincts and start a conversation if they think someone needs help.

As part of the launch, a new film reassures the public that a little small talk like 'where can I get a coffee?' can be all it takes to interrupt someone's suicidal thoughts and help set them on a path to recovery. Check out GWR's website for the link to the YouTube video.

Samaritans is working in partnership with Network Rail, British Transport Police and the wider rail industry to promote Small Talk Saves Lives, with volunteers heading to stations across the network to highlighting the power of talking and providing myth-busting leaflets.

For instance, South Western Railway (SWR) has joined Samaritans to remind the public that we all have the potential to be lifesavers by simply striking up a conversation, as part of Samaritans' latest Small Talk Saves Lives campaign.

SWR colleagues at Southampton Central and Woking stations will be wearing hi-vis tabards bearing the Small Talk Saves Lives logo.

This is down to the efforts of Jason, one of SWR's drivers, who has worked with Samaritans and SWR after being inspired to help from his own experience.

After being bereaved by suicide and knowing rail staff who have also been impacted, Jason wanted to encourage passengers and staff to talk and know they're not alone, so no one has to face what his family have been through.



Jason has had his own journey with his mental health and when he was feeling at his lowest, he reached out to Samaritans online web chat for help. SWR is happy to support Jason's initiative having worked with Samaritans since 2010.

This new campaign comes after new research from Samaritans revealed that only 50% of UK adults said they would feel confident approaching and speaking to someone they don't know if they were concerned about them in public. The survey also suggested that we're more comfortable behind a screen as a nation, as people would much prefer chatting to someone they don't know on the phone (33%) or by email (18%), compared to face-to-face (9%).

Of those who said they wouldn't feel confident approaching someone they don't know, the top reasons holding them back were 'worrying the person wouldn't welcome their approach' (44%) and 'worrying they'd make things worse' (29%), whilst a quarter said 'not knowing what to say' was also a concern.

Jane Lupson, SWR's Safety and Security Director said:

"South Western Railway is really proud to once again be working in partnership with Samaritans on this important campaign to highlight the power of small talk. We've worked with Samaritans since 2010 to encourage life-saving conversations with both our staff and the public. It's so important we continue look out for one another, as we all have the power to start a conversation, which could save a life."

Julie Bentley, Samaritans CEO, said:

"It's normal to feel anxious about starting a conversation with someone you don't know in person, but at Samaritans we know first-hand how life-changing that conversation could be.

"Suicidal thoughts are often temporary and there's no evidence to suggest that you will make the situation worse – it's about trusting your instincts, starting a conversation, and showing you care.

"We know it's been a really challenging time for people's mental health over the last few years, so we hope the Small Talk Saves Lives campaign builds that confidence and reminds the public of the difference they can make. Let's continue to look out for one another – it could save a life."

Ruth Busby, People and Transformation Director (Regional) for Great Western Railway said:

"We're really proud to be working in partnership with Samaritans again to help raise awareness of the power of small talk. We've worked with Samaritans since 2010 to encourage life-saving conversations with both our staff and the public. It's so important we continue to look out for one another, as we all have the simple skills which could save a life."

GWR Train Managers – mother and daughter Carol and Kim Hellyer – are helping to front the campaign, sharing their experiences about how they intervened to save lives. Kim Hellyer said:

"As a train manager, my main role is the safety of the train. I'm always moving through the train checking if everyone is OK.

"I was at work, and I saw a young woman who looked really upset. I asked her if she had a ticket, but she ignored me. So I asked her where she was travelling to. She told me she was going away because she wanted to end her life. I knew I had to keep talking to her and keep her with me, so she was safe. I asked her name and we talked about her job. She told me it wasn't the first time that week that she'd tried to do this.

"When we reached the next station, I needed to open and close the doors to let customers on and off the train. At that point I called control. They arranged for the British Transport Police to come. I continued to chat to her and didn't leave her side.

"I feel so strongly about encouraging other train crews to learn and do Samaritans' 'Managing Suicidal Contacts' training. I want to raise awareness for others who need support too."

Kim's mother, Carol Hellyer, said:

"I've worked on the railway for 23 years. I've been with GWR as a Train Manager for my entire career. We do an introduction to suicide prevention as part of our GWR safety training. So I know to look out for certain behaviours. The main message I remember is 'if you're not sure, go and ask anyway', which is exactly what came to mind when it happened to me, and I saw someone I thought needed help."



"It was early in the morning, and I was driving to work. The strange thing is that I chose to go a different route to work. I caught something out the corner of my eye, who looked like a person who was going to take their life."

"I said, 'please talk to me for a bit'. I told them I was going to come closer so I didn't have to talk so loudly but that I wouldn't touch them. I just kept asking them if that was alright."

"Whilst we waited for the police to arrive, I kept talking and asked them if they'd come and sit with me. After about 45 minutes, they did. I just kept asking questions, trying to distract them."

"About six weeks later, I met with the person I had helped. There were so many reasons I shouldn't have been there that day. I feel so proud and happy they're okay."

For more information and tips, visit [samaritans.org/smalltalksaveslives](https://www.samaritans.org/smalltalksaveslives)

SWR Supports Travel with Confidence Project

South Western Railway (SWR) has joined with Hampshire County Council (HCC) to support 'Travel with Confidence' - a project to help those travelling with non-visible disabilities.

The project, which is organised by Hampshire Community Rail Partnership (CRP), aims to provide information and training on how to enjoy travelling by public transport for people who have non-visible disabilities such as autism, anxiety or phobias which can make travelling by bus or train a difficult experience.

The first phase of the project, funded by HCC Adult Services, was completed by the CRP with the publication of a booklet of resources called 'Help is at Hand' after extensive consultation with local disability groups. This booklet is a wonderful resource which can be shared with groups and organisations supporting people with non-visible disabilities.

The project's second phase is now underway, supported by SWR. This sees Hampshire CRP and other groups working with Winchester Go LD, a local charity, to teach people with non-visible disabilities how to travel with confidence. They will also be helping learning disability groups with individual travel planning resources followed by visits to stations and rail journeys together.

Winchester Go LD are also producing video resources which teach important skills such as boarding trains safely and how to seek help at stations. SWR has previously supported with a 'try the train' trip, where community ambassadors help reassure and educate those who have not travelled by train before, or those who have limited experience on the railway, to help them see that it can be an accessible mode of transport that everyone can feel comfortable using.

This project also encourages greater independent travel in the longer term.

Paula Aldridge, SWR's Community Rail Manager said:

"SWR is always looking for ways to improve access to railway travel and so we were delighted to support Hampshire CRP's project.

"We want all our customers to feel confident and comfortable on our services and we hope these resources and the work that Winchester Go LD are doing will make their future journeys on public transport easier."

And finally... A Message from the Chairman

A huge thank you to all our members and supporters –

- For all your hard work to support the railway and its station staff;
- For all your patience during what is still a very difficult period for the railway, following a series of disruptions, delays and strikes, which has sorely tested people's loyalty to our railway;
- For all that you have done and continue to do to promote the railway and the importance of public transport as a means of sustainable travel;

- For all that you do for our group, whether it be in organising our community noticeboard, looking after our finances, running our website, working with local community partners, planning new activities for our station, supporting our newsletters, or in any other way.

In many ways, we owe our modern idea of a predictable, universal and standardised time to our railways, as the growing Victorian rail network both required and facilitated a standard “Railway Time.” The railway now marks both its present and its potential future in that same inexorable time.

We rely on arriving at the station to catch our train, and expect it to arrive. We judge the success or otherwise our train service by its ability to keep to its timetable and to arrive on time. We expect that the websites we use and the station indicator boards we watch to tell us not only what time our train is due, but when it is actually likely to arrive and to reach its destination.

But more than that, time marks out the tortuous process of change on our railway. Sadly, all too often, projects are not marked in terms of years, but in five-year Control Periods, or even in decades, as it took for the now-completed Okehampton re-opening finally to come to pass, or as it took for the Axminster Loop to be built in the early 2000s.

Now we wait, and hope for our turn, as the years go on, and as we all continue to work to try and achieve the line improvements between Honiton and Exeter that are so desperately needed. We are all going to need to re-double our efforts in this very difficult economic and political climate, if we are going to see further progress on this project any time soon. It is going to take a huge effort on everyone’s part to see this work to the starting point, let alone to the finish line.

But if we all continue to work, and continue to believe, then surely in the end the time will be right, the arguments will be made and accepted, and it will finally be our time. And then East Devon will finally get the improved railway it so badly needs, and its passengers so fully deserve.

Thank you for all that you continue to do. I am truly grateful.



New Measurement train passes Pinhoe on February 12th (Photograph by Dave Tozer)