The Train at Platform 1

The Friends of Honiton Station Newsletter 58 - January 2025

Happy New Year! Welcome to the first newsletter of 2025. With the passing of the relevant legislation, it promises to be all change on the railways this year, with franchises, beginning with SWR, passing into public ownership. What this means in practice, I guess we will find out as the year unfolds. On a positive note - a very positive note indeed - the new year also brings the start of 12 months of national celebrations for the 200th anniversary of the start of passenger railways, which officially began with the opening of the Stockton and Darlington Railway in 1825.

A snowy day in Honiton, February 2009. Photograph by Dave Withey

New Artwork Installed in Time for Christmas

The latest part of our long-term project to make the station a centre for art has now been completed. Huge thanks to everyone who supported and encouraged this part of the project, including Jenny Brown, our friends at the Thelma Hulbert Gallery, Richard Sercombe from Nettl who installed the vinyl of the artwork, and our partners at SWR and DCRP.

We have been working with SWR and local artist Cat Easeman to produce an installation based around the disused ticket booth of Platform 1. In a project funded by Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership (DCRP) and supported by SWR, the booth was first painted by a team from SWR's carriage painting depot in Bournemouth to look like the side of a Class 159 unit, complete with company logo and Quiet Zone notice. The latter was a small joke on our part, as this area is usually one where people gather before trains arrive to talk on their mobile phones…

Cat Easeman was given the brief to develop a piece of art that imagined what you would see if you looked through the window of a train carriage at the smiling passengers inside, through the train and out of the opposite window looking out over Honiton. She has done a fantastic job.

The image even includes a reference to the famous Honiton Hippo, which features so prominently in another image by Cat in the mural on the footbridge.

Local Rail Ale Trail Shortlisted for Community Rail Award

We were delighted to hear just before Christmas that the Rail Ale Trail, launched at The Vine in Honiton last Summer, has been short-listed for a Community Rail Award. The nominated project, "Rail Ale Trails – a new era!" was created by Devon And Cornwall Rail Partnership, Blackmore Vale Line CRP, SWR and GWR.

The project has been shortlisted in the Tourism and Leisure Award category, which is sponsored by TransPennine Express

The Community Rail Awards, organised by Community Rail Network and headline partnered by Lumo, will take place on 13th March in Newcastle.

Highly respected throughout the industry, these prestigious Awards are all about celebrating the passion, commitment, innovation, and best practice in community rail, recognising the volunteers, groups and partnerships doing wonderful work on behalf of their communities and railways. They give community rail the chance to shine, showcasing the array of work happening across Britain, and showing influencers and decision makers what community rail achieves. This year's awards will also form part of the celebrations for Railway 200.

The Salisbury to Exeter Rail Ale Trail includes 19 pubs along the railway that links the two cities, all of them within easy reach of the stations in the towns and villages it serves.

One of the pubs included is the Vine Inn and Tearoom in Honiton, a short walk from Honiton Station. Details of the Rail Ale Trail can be found, with all the others, at railaletrail.com where there is also a special Stamp Sheet to print out.

At each participating pub, 'Trailers' can collect a stamp when buying a drink by showing their stamp sheet and train ticket. Once they have collected ten stamps, 'Trailers' can claim a free special Rail Ale Trail t-shirt by sending the stamped sheet and rail ticket to the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership. One of the stamps can be for having a meal at the pub.

Richard Burningham, Manager of the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership said:

"The Salisbury to Exeter Rail Ale Trail is all about encouraging people to explore the places served by the line and to visit local pubs, thereby helping the local economy."

Paula Aldridge, Community Rail Manager for South Western Railway said:

"We're delighted to be involved with such an imaginative way to explore the railway network in a beautiful part of the country while supporting some of the small and independent businesses which are the lifeblood of their local communities."

Summary of New Year Services

Wednesday January 1st (New Year's Day)

A Sunday service will operate.

Buses replace trains between Woking and Farnborough, and between Woking and Aldershot.

There will be no service between Brockenhurst and Lymington Pier.

There will be no SWR service to Westbury

Thursday January 2nd

Amended Saturday service.

Buses replace trains between Woking and Farnborough, and between Woking and Aldershot.

There will be no service between Brockenhurst and Lymington Pier.

There will be no SWR service to Westbury.

Friday January 3rd

Amended Saturday service.

Buses replace trains between:

- Woking and Farnborough
- Woking and Aldershot

There will be no service between Brockenhurst and Lymington Pier.

There will be no SWR service to Westbury.

Saturday January 4th

A Saturday service will operate.

Buses replace trains between:

- Woking and Basingstoke
- Woking and Aldershot

There will be no SWR service to Westbury

Sunday January 5th

A normal Sunday service will operate, except that…

Buses replace trains between:

- Weybridge and Winchester
- Andover and Weybridge
- Aldershot and Weybridge
- Leatherhead and Dorking

There will be no SWR service to Westbury

Monday January 6th.

Services return to normal.

Engineering Report for January and February

Please note details above of service pattern between January 1st and 5th.

Wednesday 1st until Friday 3rd January 2025

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

Additional services will run between London Waterloo and Woking.

Buses will run between Woking and Basingstoke (non-stop).

Saturday 4th January

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

Buses will run between Woking and Basingstoke (non-stop).

Buses will run between Woking and Basingstoke via Farnborough.

Additional services will run between London Waterloo, Clapham Junction and Woking.

Sunday 5th January

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

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.

Saturday 11th and Sunday 12th January

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

Saturday

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

Buses will run between Woking and Basingstoke (non-stop).

Buses will run between Woking and Basingstoke via Farnborough.

Sunday

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

Buses will run between Woking and Andover via Guildford and Basingstoke.

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

Saturday 18th and Sunday 19th, and Saturday 25th and Sunday 26th January

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

Saturdays

London Waterloo to Exeter St Davids services will be revise., with some Sunday services starting from Basingstoke. See SWR's website for details.

Sunday 2nd and Sunday 9th February

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

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

Saturday 22nd until Friday 28th February

The lines between Gillingham and Yeovil Junction will be closed all days inclusive due to work to stabilising a cutting by the side of the railway, to reduce the risk of landslips affecting trains and passengers in the area.

Saturday, and Monday to Friday

London Waterloo to Exeter St Davids services will be revised. Some services will be diverted between Salisbury and Yeovil Junction via Westbury and some services will terminate at Salisbury.

Additional services will run between Salisbury and Gillingham.

Buses will run between Gillingham and Yeovil Junction.

A revised service will run between Yeovil Junction and Exeter St Davids.

Sunday only

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

Buses will run between Salisbury and Yeovil Junction (non-stop). Buses will run between Salisbury and Yeovil Junction via Tisbury.

A revised service will run between Yeovil Junction and Exeter St Davids

A look back to the Engineering Work at Honiton Tunnel in November. These snowy pictures were shared with us by our friends at Network Rail.

Other Engineering Work: Westbury Station Closed for a Month

Talking of engineering work, passengers in the Westbury area face three more weeks of disruption, as services continue to be suspended until Friday January 24th. The line closed on Christmas Eve, as engineers began major work to replace the track at Westbury South Junction.

The work involves fully replacing the track and ballast stone to update worn components. They will also be fine-tuning signalling in the area and making adjustments to the platform edge stones at the station.

While the work is taking place, further south along the line towards Salisbury, another team will be carrying out strengthening work on Sherrington Viaduct, which runs over the River Wyle. Making the most of the opportunity while Westbury station is out of action, Great Western Railway will also be carrying out minor refurbishments at the station itself.

During this work - which should be completed by the end of January 23rd - no trains will run through or stop at Westbury.

Passengers for Swindon, Chippenham, Bath, Bristol or Cardiff Central will change at Trowbridge;

Passengers for the Somerset, Devon and Cornwall will change at Frome;

Passengers for Berkshire, Reading and London will change at Frome;

Passengers for Yeovil and South Coast will change at Frome.

Rail replacement services will operate from Westbury to Trowbridge, Frome, Dilton Marsh, Warminster and Salisbury.

Clarisse Grother, Senior Programme Manager, for Network Rail said:

"Westbury South junction is a vital piece of infrastructure that allows passenger and freight services to switch between lines on this very busy section of the route.

"Replacing it is a huge job but doing so now will safeguard train operations in this area for years to come. We'd like to thank residents and passenger for their patience while this work is completed this winter."

Jordan Welsby, GWR's Station Manager for Westbury, Wiltshire and Dorset, said:

"This work forms part of an ongoing programme of maintenance, helping to ensure we can continue to provide consistent and reliable services.

"Some trains will use an alternative route not stopping at Westbury with rail replacement services provided for customers between Westbury and Frome, Salisbury, Chippenham or Trowbridge.
"As an alternative, valid rail tickets can also be used to travel on local buses in the area. It's important that customers are aware these alternative travel arrangements will make journey times much longer, so please plan ahead."

In a sign that greater community engagement is becoming a feature of planned engineering work projects, Network Rail and GWR held community drop-in sessions about the work during November and December, with the latest on Monday 2nd December at Westbury Community Project, and on Thursday 12th December at Westbury Station itself.

Enjoy a Cuppa This Brew Monday

Monday January 20th is Brew Monday. Once again Samaritans is reminding everyone to reach out for a cuppa and a catch-up with the people you care about.

Why 'Brew Monday'? As a spokesperson for Samaritans says:

"We know there's no such thing as 'Blue Monday'. We've said it before and we'll say it again – feeling low isn't just something that happens on Mondays or a random day in January.
So we say out with the blue and in with the brew!

"There's always time for a cuppa and a catch-up. It doesn't matter if it's a Monday morning or Saturday night, or if you're drinking green tea, black coffee or orange juice. If you're sharing a cuppa and listening, you're doing it right!"

This year, look out for events across the railway. In the past, GWR staff have held events for staff at several stations, and volunteers from GWR and Samaritans have greeted passengers with a friendly smile and a free tea bag!

If you see a Brew Monday event at a local station, do say hello and report back so that we can report on what took place in our next newsletter.

Network Rail Staff Raise Money for Homeless Charity at Christmas

This month's heart-warming story has, rather inevitably, a Christmas feel to it. In the run up to the big day, Network Rail staff volunteers were on hand at London Waterloo to help shoppers wrap their presents, and by doing so raising vital funds for housing and homeless charity Shelter.

'Wrapland' saw volunteer helpers assisting passengers with wrapping their Christmas presents at no cost, while encouraging donations to support the vital work of Shelter.

Shelter believes home is everything, and they support the millions of people that are being affected by the housing emergency. New research from the charity shows at least 354,000 people in England, including 161,500 children, spend Christmas without a home.

As homelessness continues to soar, Shelter's frontline services are doing all they can to support thousands of people facing homelessness this winter – from providing expert advice to families stuck in unsafe and unsuitable temporary accommodation, to giving emergency help to people at risk of having to sleep rough.

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

"I would like to thank the volunteers, who have kindly given up their time to wrap presents in aid of Shelter. I hope that passengers can benefit from the wrapping services that are being provided and are able to donate generously.

"Shelter is a fantastic charity and the work they do is vital to ensure that people have a roof over their head."

Andy Harris, Director of Income Generation at Shelter, said:

"It is unimaginable that so many families will spend the festive season homeless, or trapped in overcrowded, damp temporary accommodation owing to sky-high private rents and a severe shortage of genuinely affordable social homes.

"At Shelter, we're doing everything we can to support families facing homelessness this winter, but we couldn't do this vital work without the support of our partners like Network Rail. With their help, we are able to provide the advice, support, and practical help families need to find and keep a safe place to call home this winter, and campaign for lasting change. By getting your presents wrapped at Waterloo Station this Christmas and by making a donation, you can help towards Network Rail and Shelter's shared mission."

The 'Wrapland' initiative previously raised £2,000 in December 2023, adding to Network Rail's impressive fundraising feats for Shelter. Their pop-up charity shops, including at London Victoria, have raised over £48,000 for the charity while giving rail passengers more affordable options for their holiday shopping. Network Rail has also donated space for Shelter's 'Walk for Home' fundraiser, helping them to raise more than £200,000.

It's Time to Read Between The Lines

By the time you read this, the latest issue of Between The Lines, SWR's Community Rail newsletter (Issue 8) should be available. The quickest way to download a copy is to go to the News tab of our website and click on the link.

In her introduction to the newsletter, Paula Aldridge, SWR's Community Rail Manager writes:

"Welcome to our latest edition of Between the Lines. We have all been extremely busy over the second half of the year with a variety of projects and, as 2024 draws to an end, and we are looking forward to celebrating Railway 200 throughout the whole of next year.

"We have taken time in this edition of the newsletter to reflect on the past few months which have included adding to our many works of art across the network, and of course our annual Community Rail Conference highlighting our award-winning individuals, CRPs and adopters."

One of the artworks included in SWR's newsletter is our new ticket office art installation, featuring an original art work by Cat Easeman and painting work by SWR's Fleet Team from Bournemouth.

Also in SWR's newsletter, Jenni Jones from Community Rail Network takes time out to reflect on her first six months working with community rail partnerships, station friends and station adoption groups across the South and Midlands of England.

As well as providing general advice and support to members, Jenni is especially passionate about promoting integrated sustainable transport, social inclusion and community empowerment.

In Between The Lines, Jenni writes:

"The last 6 months has been a whirlwind of station visits, conferences, meetings and calls. Being a newbie in the rail industry isn't for the faint-hearted – the acronyms alone are enough to fry your brain! – but when they told me Community Rail is like a family, they weren't kidding. I've met so many warm, devoted, resourceful and creative people on my travels, and I'm completely hooked.

"The highlights are really too many to mention, but let's start by heading west. A trip on the Blackmore Vale line is a true joy, the home of the wonderful Stations In Bloom competition.

"And then there's Honiton! From holidays to hippos, the station features a stunning array of community art, signposting travellers to local charities and brightening the dreariest of days. Thanks to Martin and team, who are always willing to share their knowledge with others."

Commenting on all the work going on across the region, Jenni added:

"Looking forward, there's plenty more to come. Next year promises a year of celebration with community rail at the heart, championed by Paula and the SWR team.

In a final rallying cry, Jenny said:

"So thanks everyone for the warm welcome and contagious energy you all bring. Roll on 2025!"

Huge thanks go to Jenni for the impact she is already making. And thank you also for the very kind words about what we are doing here at Honiton.

And thanks to Paula, Richard Burningham at DCRP, colleagues at Network Rail, and so many others for all the fantastic work they are doing to support us and all the station adoption groups across the network.

Rail Nationalisation: A Members' Briefing

We have received many enquiries about the recent announcement that South Western Railway is to be nationalised, as part of the overall process of creating Great British Railways.

For the record, the Transport Secretary announced on December 4th what she described as *"plans to overhaul the rail network and put passengers first."*

Heidi Alexander MP revealed in her announcement that SWR's services would be the first to transfer into public ownership in 2025. This will be followed later in the year by two further operators: c2c and Greater Anglia.

The Transport Secretary said that:

"The transition to a publicly owned railway will improve reliability and support the government's number one priority of boosting economic growth by encouraging more people to use the railway.

"It will also clamp down on unacceptable levels of delays, cancellations and waste seen under decades of failing franchise contracts and will save up to £150 million a year in fees alone by ensuring every penny is spent on services rather than private shareholders, all while coming at no additional cost to the taxpayer.

"Today's announcement will see services across a wide area of southern England and East Anglia come back into public control by autumn 2025 and delivers on manifesto commitment to bring contracts with existing operators into public ownership as they expire without costing taxpayers a penny in compensation.

"This government is fixing the foundations and delivering change with reform and investment to deliver growth and rebuild Britain. By bringing train operating companies into public ownership the government will turn the page on decades of delays, fragmentation and failure."

The Transport Secretary announced that publicly run services will be managed by DfT Operator Limited – previously known as DfT Operator of Last Resort Holdings Limited (DOHL) – whose functions will eventually be integrated into Great British Railways (GBR).

The Operator of Last Resort has already been running services under the LNER franchise on the East Coast Main Line.

A spokesperson for the Department for Transport said:

"DfT Operator Limited will continue to focus on transforming Britain's railways into a more reliable, affordable and accessible system. The government's first priority is ensuring the transition process is thorough and delivers the best outcomes for passengers. Allowing several months lead-in to each transfer will ensure there will be no adverse impact on passengers during this time, who will still be able to purchase their tickets as before, with railway staff assisting as usual."

SWR's 5,000 employees will all transfer to the government's own train operating company, retaining their existing terms and conditions. The DfT expects that the transfer of all passenger services operated under contract will be completed over the next three years.

They say that ending payments to private sector operators will save £150m a year. However, as total public spending on the railway in the UK in 2023-24 was £26.8 billion, according to government statistics, this reduction in costs is clearly not the main reason for nationalisation.

In the new year, the government will be setting out plans for how Shadow GBR will be delivering on its initial priorities, including how it will be moving the network towards greater financial sustainability and delivering for passengers.

In conclusion, Transport Secretary, Heidi Alexander, said:

"For too long, the British public has had to put up with rail services that simply don't work. A complex system of private train operators has too often failed its users. Starting with journeys on South Western Railway, we're switching tracks by bringing services back under public control to create a reliable rail network that puts customers first. Our broken railways are finally on the fast track to repairing and rebuilding a system that the British public can trust and be proud of again."

Chairman's Comment

It remains to be seen what such fine words actually mean in practice. We expect, after all, that the new manager, DfT Operator Limited, will be working with the existing management of SWR in delivering their plans.

The DfT has for several years been calling the shots in what Train Operating Companies have been allowed to do, with the fare income from running services having gone straight to them, and the TOCs receiving a management fee from them for running the agreed service.

In practical terms, what TOCs have been able to deliver has been a matter for the DfT for some time. Discussions have long been taking place between the DFT and SWR over what the transition will mean.

Still, nationalisation means that there will be greater public attention given to, and scrutiny of, the success of the railways, and to delivering better levels of service, reliability and resilience.

This may well concentrate minds, as it will no longer be possible to blame private companies if things do not work on the railway. The Government is once again on the clock, and its neck is therefore on the block, when it comes to delivering an effective public railway.

Good luck with that!

Railway 200 Starts With a Grand New Year Whistle-Up

January 1st saw the beginning of Railway 200, a very special year of celebration for the 200th anniversary of the modern railway.

Railway 200 events were due to begin (bad weather permitting) with a celebratory cacophony of train locomotive whistles and horns at midday on New Year's Day, spearheaded by the Heritage Railway Association (HRA), involving more than 50 heritage railways in the UK and abroad blowing the whistles of nearly 200 vintage steam and diesel locomotives to herald the start of the year-long celebration.

Train engine horns at mainline stations also joined in to welcome the anniversary year. At the other end of the scale, train modellers Hornby set a variety of model trains to toot and whistle on their track layouts. There was also a special appearance on social media from everyone's favourite blue engine, Thomas the Tank Engine.

Railway 200 is a year-long celebration of 200 years of the modern railway. It will explore how rail has shaped national life and encourage more people to consider a career in the railway.

The anniversary commemorates the launch of the Stockton and Darlington Railway (S&DR) in 1825, a journey that changed the world forever. In tribute, at the adjoining Locomotion museum in Shildon, County Durham, the whistle of the North Eastern Railway's locomotive 910 will be sounded once more.

Community rail groups were due to take part in the Whistle-Up too. Everyone was invited to join in by recording themselves, family and friends blowing whistles, sounding horns or ringing bells at noon on New Year's Day and posting on social media, using #Railway200 and #WhistleUp200.

Welcoming the start of Railway 200, Rail Minister Lord Hendy said:

"The world changed forever in 1825 with the birth of the modern railway in Britain, and rolled out across the globe. Railway 200's celebrations are a unique opportunity to honour a ground-breaking moment in our history while looking boldly towards the future.

Photograph: Science Museum and Network Rail

"The Whistle-Up event marks the start of a year that will showcase how the railway continues to transform lives, connect communities, and create growth, jobs, housing and tourism.

"This milestone reminds us of the integral role rail plays in a sustainable future and is our chance to present the railway as a forward thinking, digital industry with vibrant and diverse career paths for a new generation. Together, let us celebrate this extraordinary British achievement and inspire a shared vision for the next century of railway progress."

Old Oak Common Station: MPs Raise Serious Concerns for South West

Members may have read the article in the Midweek Herald recently, which referred to comments made by Exmouth and Exeter East MP, David Reed (Conservative), about the impact of construction of Old Oak Common Station on passengers to and from the South West. He had questioned the Prime Minister about this issue on November 27th.

It is rapidly becoming clear that passengers across large parts of the network are going to be affected for a very long time by disruption connected with the building of this new interchange and HS2 station. The opening of this station will also have a small permanent effect on journey times - as yet fully to be quantified - on the Great Western Main Line.

MPs discussed this very important matter in a Westminster Hall debate on Tuesday December 17th, secured by Max Wilkinson MP, Liberal Democrat Member for Cheltenham. Members can read the report in Hansard of the debate at: hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2024-12-17/debates/F685DA6C-84A2-468D-94F2-8585E67A42BE/OldOakCommonStation

Opening the debate, Mr. Wilkinson said:

"We all know that opinions on High Speed 2 are many and varied—whether or not that line is a good thing is not up for debate today—but nobody would have expected that the development of a high-speed rail line heading from the north to London and back again would have a negative impact on trains heading west. Something about that statement seems entirely illogical.

"Unfortunately for people in the west and Wales, it is indeed the case that there will be widespread disruption to trains between London Paddington and the west and south Wales for the next six years, and after that six-year period is over, every train between the west and south Wales and London will be slower.

"The reason for the delays and slower services is the new Old Oak Common station, which is being built to serve HS2. At this point, it is important to state that today's debate, and indeed the wider public discussion, cannot be about whether HS2 happens at all or whether Old Oak Common station is built. HS2 is happening, and anyone who has travelled on the Great Western line recently will know that Old Oak Common is being built. But there are three points that we must all take up on behalf of our constituents.

"The first is how the impact of construction work at Old Oak Common can be mitigated. The second is how Old Oak Common can become a useful station for our regions. The third is how the Government can use their power to mitigate the long-term impact of slower trains heading to and from the west and south Wales, by improving services in other ways.

"First, I will deal with the construction phase. Most people who are aware of the new station will know it as the place where the previous Government had intended to terminate HS2. That was before the new Government decided to bring back the suggestion that HS2 will end at Euston. But it is much more complicated than that. Old Oak Common is being built on the Great Western line, as I mentioned, and consequently a decision has been taken that all trains using the line will eventually stop at Old Oak Common.

"That decision makes sense to those in charge of big transport infrastructure, but it will not necessarily make sense to the people we serve in the west and south Wales. Rail industry experts tell us that it will add between four and seven minutes to each journey in the long run.

Members will, I am sure, share everyone's concern at the revelation by Mr. Wilkinson that:

"During the period of disruption while construction takes place, we will endure 29 days of disruption in this current operational year—that disruption has already begun—30 days of disruption in 2025-26, 41 days of disruption in 2026-27, including 14 days when no trains run at all, 34 days of disruption in 2027-28, including 11 days when no trains run at all, and 47 days of disruption in 2028-29, including 18 days when no trains run at all. The disruption for the following year is not yet known.

Photograph: Network Rail

"The number of constituencies that will be impacted by the work is absolutely huge. Starting from furthest away, it will be every constituency in Cornwall and Devon, most of Somerset, Bristol, parts of Herefordshire and Worcestershire, south Wales, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Berkshire and Oxfordshire. That is a lot of people whose journeys will be slower for a long time, and a lot of people who will have to make alternative arrangements when trains are cancelled."

Our local MP, Richard Foord (Lib Dem, Honiton and Sidmouth) spoke in the debate, saying, among other things:

"Since 2019, the proportion of rail journeys taken across the country has fallen by 6%, but in Devon, it has increased by 9%.

"Time and again, however, we have seen the west country miss out on rail investment, which has been concentrated in other parts of the country—in the Midlands, the North of England and, of course, London. The South West is left grappling with an underfunded and unreliable rail network.

"The construction of Old Oak Common will exacerbate some of those challenges. Over the next decade, passengers travelling on mainline inter-city services serving the south-west will face severe disruption. Planned works will reduce the number of available seats on trains that are already crowded and have slow journey times. We will see a fall in the number of direct services to London Paddington.

"Last month, the Government pointed to a £30-million mitigation package. That is woefully inadequate. Compare it with the £6.5-billion cost of Old Oak Common —by contrast, £30 million is a pittance. Worryingly, that £30 million has already been committed to operational adjustments such as depot changes and electrification in London, with little or no regard for the south-west."

In an intervention addressed to the Under-Secretary of State at the DfT, Lilian Greenwood, who spoke for the Government in the debate, David Reed MP asked:

"The key theme set out by hon. Members from across Wales and the south-west is that we are all being kept in the dark. What will the Minister do to engage with MPs from across the region and tell us what plans for mitigation are being put in place in our constituencies for the planned works at Old Oak Common?"

The Under Secretary replied to the debate, saying:

"I know that my colleague the Rail Minister has met with many hon. Members to listen to their concerns, and that he is committed to finding the best possible solution that minimises disruption to services to constituencies in Wales and the west. He will continue to engage with hon. Members on this issue.

"A number of Members asked whether Great Western Railway services will stop at Old Oak Common and raised concerns about the impact on journey times. There will be a small but permanent journey time impact for all services passing through Old Oak Common without stopping. I recognise that that is a disbenefit to hon. Members' constituents, and the Rail Minister has asked what more can be done to get that down from the estimated 90 seconds.

"The hon. Member for Cheltenham asked about increasing running through the station from 60 mph to 80 mph, and Network Rail has already begun to develop proposals. They were discussed at the last Old Oak Common programme board, which the Rail Minister attended.

"If some or all services are to stop at Old Oak Common — as I said, no decision has been made yet on future timetables; that is some way off— it will, of course, add further to journey times. Four to seven minutes added to journey times has been suggested. That would slow down those services but would allow for potential interchange with the Elizabeth Line and access to parts of London via the Elizabeth line and the London Overground. The London Overground does not connect directly, but work has begun on Old Oak Common connectivity and a range of options are under consideration, from improved walking routes through to more material interventions.

"Various periods of blockade were discussed. The programme is currently under review, but there will be periods of disruption, as the hon. Member for Cheltenham set out, and those are likely to of the duration that he described or longer. As has been noted, there will be diversions to Euston when the blockades are in place, which will allow services to continue directly into central London for the many constituencies represented here today when the line between Ealing Broadway and Paddington is closed. That will add perhaps 15 to 20 minutes on to journey times."

This is clearly an issue that - unlike trains on the affected days - is going to run and run.

Another snowy day in Honiton. Photograph by Vernon Whitlock

Coffee and Conversation

Our next Coffee and Conversation session for members will be held at The Beehive in Honiton at 11 a.m. on Monday January 27th. I hope to welcome as many members as possible to this regular event.

No doubt we will be offering our opinions on all the latest news from the railways, including preparations for the Government taking over the SWR franchise at the end of May as it is nationalised (see briefing document above), and the growing concern about the impact of Old Oak Common Station construction on GWR services over the next decade (also see above).

We will also talk about some of our plans for continuing work at the station in 2025 and about how the railways locally can celebrate Railway 200, the year-long anniversary of the opening of the first regular passenger railway service in the world, between Stockton and Darlington.

Is this a record? I counted at least 10 different photographers' work in this issue of the newsletter. Thanks to all involved.

Here's wishing station staff, our members, supporters and industry partners a very happy New Year. A huge thank you to everyone who works so hard to support our local station.