The Train at Platform 1

The Friends of Honiton Station Newsletter 59 - February 2025

Welcome to the February newsletter. Last month saw the official start of Railway 200, the national year of celebrations for the 200th anniversary of the start of passenger railways in 1825. We look forward to playing our small part in this massively significant birthday. As the picture below suggests, our Chairman was out and about on a cold and very wet January 1st to help “whistle up” the start of the year’s events. In this month’s newsletter, you can read the latest news on some of the events being organised for this special year. Stay tuned for further details in the weeks ahead.

The guard whistles off the 11.55 to Basingstoke on January 1st. (Photo taken with permission)

Railway 200 Has Begun: Take a Whistle Stop Tour of Planned Events

January 1st saw the start of a year of celebration for the 200th anniversary of passenger railways. The day was unfortunately cold and wet, with strong winds threatening the cancellation of some events at heritage railways across the UK. Despite this, the year began with a global Whistle-Up of 200 locomotives blowing whistles and horns across the UK and as far away as New Zealand, Australia, South America, the USA, South Africa and Sierra Leone, spanning five continents.

Closer to home, SWR arranged for automated announcements at its stations to signal the beginning of the anniversary at noon, as well as posting a notice on information screens.

At Honiton, the Chairman was on hand to welcome the 11.55 departure to Basingstoke, as the guard blew his whistle to make his own small contribution to the launch. The guard kindly allowed himself to be photographed to mark the occasion.

Emma Robertson, Programme Manager for Railway 200, said:

"Coming down the tracks this year is a bumper programme of exciting initiatives and shared storytelling for everyone to get involved with and enjoy.

"Railway 200 represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity for the railway, its people and communities to shout long, loud and proud about rail's many achievements and plans for a more sustainable future.

"It will cover the past, present and future of the railway. As well as showcasing rail's pioneering pedigree, it will excite and invite more people to consider a career in the railway."

SWR and Community Rail Partnerships are presently working with station adoption groups and others to plan how the anniversary will be celebrated across its stations, including Honiton. Look out for further announcements in the weeks ahead.

Nationally, more than 100 activities and events are currently shown on a searchable interactive map, which is being regularly updated. The list can be found at: https://railway200.co.uk/search-for-activities-and-events/

In addition to train naming ceremonies, public talks, heritage trails and open days, forthcoming Railway 200 highlights include:

- An anniversary-related mega rail sale, offering discounted tickets for great days out;
- The launch of a Railway 200 merchandise range early this year, developed in partnership with the National Railway Museum (NRM);
- A nine-month international festival across Durham and Tees Valley, from March to November. S&DR200 (www.sdr200.co.uk) will present free, large-scale outdoor spectacles, events, exhibitions and new art commissions at world class venues;
- A four-carriage touring exhibition train called 'Inspiration', curated by the NRM, which will criss-cross Britain for a year from this summer, promoting rail innovation and careers;
- The Greatest Gathering, a three-day family festival in August at train builder Alstom's historic works in Derby, the new home of the railway, displaying the largest temporary assembly of trains and rail exhibits in a generation;
- The National Railway Museum's 50th birthday celebrations, including the summer re-opening of its refurbished Station Hall, home to the Royal carriages;
- Railway 200-related activity, including a summer festival, at the Locomotion museum in Shildon, on the route of the original Stockton and Darlington Railway;
- An international competition to choose the world's favourite UK rail art, hosted online by Art UK;

- A Railway 200-themed Community Rail Week in May, organised by the Community Rail Network;

- A rail festival in Sussex from June to August, organised by the Bluebell Railway, which aims to attract more than 80,000 people, including 18,000 schoolchildren learning about STEM-related careers in the railway;

- From July to September, the Keighley and Worth Valley Railway near Bradford (UK City of Culture 2025) will host the Olivier award-winning theatre production of The Railway Children. Staged in the location where the classic film was shot, the immersive production includes a steam train ride for the audience;

- A Railway 200 badge for Scouts and Guides across the world, devised by Girlguiding North East;

- Commemorative events at: the National Trust cottage in Wylam, Northumberland, where rail pioneer George Stephenson was born; Holy Trinity Church, Chesterfield, where he is buried; and Stephenson College, Durham University, where he is honoured.

In addition, as part of Railway 200's Great Rail Tales project, people are invited to share their rail stories. These could be about moments of particular significance in their lives, such as a chance encounter that led to a lasting relationship, an awe-inspiring journey, an act of kindness or a funny or remarkable experience.

During rail's bicentenary, Railway 200 aims to raise £200,000 for a unique charity partnership of Alzheimer's Research UK, Railway Children, Transport Benevolent Fund, Rail Benefit Fund and the Railway Mission, who will be working together to protect rail memories for the future.

A quick scan of the latest list of events planned in this part of the country reveals:

From Friday, 2nd May to Monday, 5th May, 2025, **The West Somerset Railway** will celebrate Railway 200 by holding a large Gala event known as the Spring Steam Spectacular.

This event promises to be a spectacle, with at least eight full-sized steam engines in action, including several visiting locomotives from all over the country. Next year's event will be themed around the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the modern railways, by hosting a variety of different steam locomotives, ranging from engines built in the 1800s right through to those built in the 2000s. Attendees can expect a very busy timetable in operation, with a variety of services including Demonstration Goods, Express, Local and other types.

The Swanage Railway is a major heritage railway and tourist attraction in Dorset and the South West attracting 200.000 passengers each year.

In May 2025 the railway celebrates the 140th anniversary of its opening and we plan a number of activities in that month building up to the anniversary date on the 20th May. This will include a special gala and re-enactments of the opening day as well as involvement of local schools.

During the year we would also want to link ourselves to the bicentenary as an exemplar heritage railway representing "railways to the seaside" and plan events round this theme.
Have you ever wanted to drive a train?

During the 200th anniversary year why not join the Plym Valley Railway on 27 July for a day of learning about what it takes to drive a train.

Under the careful supervision of our crews take to the rails and enjoy an introduction to driving. We will be offering the chance to see how the role of a driver has developed from locomotive hauled operations to Diesel Multiple Units similar to those that run on the mainline to date!

We hope to inspire the next generation of drivers and demonstrate the skills that are required of a train driver.

On Sunday, 20th April and Monday, 21st April, 2025, **Yeovil Railway Centre** will celebrate Railway 200 by holding an Easter weekend event.

Passengers will travel on the Peckett 0-4-0 'Pectin' riding along the 1/3rd mile of the ex-Great Western Railway Clifton Maybank branch. Our coach is accessible via ramp for standard size Wheelchair.

Gate opens at 10.30am and trains depart at 11.00am, 11.20am, 11.40am 12.00noon, 12.20pm then 1.50pm, 2.10pm, 2.50pm, 3.10pm and 3.30pm. Turntable demonstrations at 12.40pm and 2.30pm.

Pre-booking will not be necessary for this event – please pay at the gate.

Other planned attractions include the Easter Bunny and Easter Egg Hunt, Model Railway, Miniature Railway and exhibits and displays (including the Chard Signalling Panel).

To celebrating Railway 200, the **Friends of the Railway Studies Library** will be hosting a talk by David McVeigh on November 18th at Newton Abbot Library on the history of the Stockton and Darlington Railway

Dartmouth Town Council is planning a series of events including showcasing of the Newcomen engine to illustrate the journey from the past to what the railway is today. This will be a touring exhibition experience beginning in Dartmouth and crossing the river to the heritage railway in Kingswear.

Railway Staff Recognised in New Year Honours

Four Network Rail employees were recognised for their outstanding contributions in HM The King's New Year Honours list announced at the end of December.

In keeping with our theme of highlighting heart-warming stories, one of these is Kathleen O'Malley, Project Manager in Network Rail's Southern Region (which includes the West of England Line) who was awarded a British Empire Medal (BEM) for her outstanding work in creating the Routes Out of Homelessness charter for the railway.

Kathleen's efforts in promoting support and outreach services to homeless individuals in Birmingham, Manchester and London have already helped more than 300 people secure temporary or permanent accommodation.

A spokesperson for Network Rail said:

"Kathleen has become a beacon of positive change, inspiring stakeholders across the country to unite behind a shared goal of ending homelessness. With a strong background working on the frontline of the railway, Kathleen understands the challenges both in delivering rail services and supporting the street homeless community. By listening to colleagues, partners, and people with lived experience of homelessness, she has turned frustration and fear into a powerful, collective force for change."

Janet Trowse, who worked as a leader in Human Resources for over seven years, also received an MBE. Janet was instrumental in making an impactful legacy around menopause awareness.

In 2017, recognising a gap in support, Janet spearheaded the Menopause Awareness Project at Network Rail, creating a UK-wide network of allies and ambassadors, reaching 150,000 employees across the rail industry.

Also honoured was Peter Gibbons, Network Rail's Chief Security Officer, who received an MBE for his exceptional leadership in delivering the UK's £10m aid programme to Ukrainian Railways.

Lastly, we should also mention that Andrew Haines, Chief Executive of Network Rail, has received a Knighthood in the Honours list. With his railway career beginning as a holiday job in the left luggage office at Victoria Station, he has become a once-in-a-generation transport leader addressing challenges head on whilst maintaining a focus on safety and delivering the best possible services for the public.

Andrew was previously one of the youngest leaders in rail at South West Trains, where Network Rail said that he transformed its declining performance by delivering class leading passenger experience and a significant improvement in punctuality.

Since 2018 he has led Network Rail, an organisation of more than 40,000 people, through an immensely challenging period; navigating the impact of Covid, the businesses response to the death and funeral of HM Queen Elizabeth and the coronation of King Charles III.

Network Rail said of Andrew:

"He has turned Network Rail's performance on major projects and infrastructure delivery around, driving a new focus on cost-control and efficiency, such as the £10bn TransPennine Route Upgrade and outperforming its regulatory efficiency targets. The company has achieved best-ever levels of safety under his leadership.

"Andrew describes Network Rail as Britain's biggest neighbour and he has a sharp appreciation of the wider role of the railway in the community, forging relationships with the Samaritans to tackle suicides on the railway, with Shelter and other charities to tackle rough sleeping at stations and leading the railway's work to establish the Windrush national memorial at Waterloo.

"Recently, Andrew has been a co-instigator and sponsor of a new social mobility network across the rail sector reflecting his passion to create opportunities for everyone who strives to succeed and make a difference."

Lord Peter Hendy, Rail Minister said:

"Having worked closely with Andrew for many years, I know first-hand how warranted this award is. Andrew is the most outstanding railway manager of his generation, having transformed every organisation he's led and is laying the foundations of the future integrated railway."

Commenting on the award, Andrew Haines said:

"I am incredibly honoured to receive this award. It's not every day a boy from a comprehensive school in Merthyr Tydfil, or indeed anyone from the railway is recognised in this way, so it is immensely humbling. It's a tribute to the work of the many thousands of people in the rail sector.

"We are all proud members of a railway industry that strives to deliver the best for passengers, freight users and the communities that we serve, every day. I know that there is still so much more we can do to deliver a better service for today's passengers and knowing that many thousands of my colleagues share my commitment to doing our best makes my job an absolute privilege.

"I am very proud to accept this honour in recognition of what we are achieving together and our commitment to doing better."

Engineering Report for February and March

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.

Great Western Railway trains between Taunton and Weston-super-Mare will be affected by essential maintenance at the beginning of February.

Monday 3rd to Friday 7th February

Network Rail is to carry out structural renewal work on the line between from Taunton and Weston-super-Mare. Replacement buses will operate instead.

Trains will continue to run between Taunton and London Paddington, and Taunton and the South West. Some trains will operate between Taunton and Bristol Temple Meads by using an alternative route, extending journey times by up to an hour.

Adam Hopkins, GWR's Station Manager for the Taunton area, said:

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

"GWR trains will still run between London Paddington and Taunton or Weston-super-Mare, while CrossCountry trains will run between Bristol Temple Meads and Taunton via a diversionary route. Rail replacement services will be provided for those stations between Taunton and Weston-super-Mare."

Network Rail Programme Manager Scott Pillinger said:

“We have essential maintenance and repair work taking place on multiple bridges over this five-day period, ranging from strengthening works to full replacement.

“Alongside this there will be drainage work and some track work, all of which is vital to ensure the continued safe and reliable running of the railway.

“Working over a solid week is the most efficient way to get this work completed and minimise disruption overall but I'd like to thank passengers and residents for their patience while this work is carried out."

Sunday February 9th:

Level crossing renewal work will affect GWR services between Exeter and Exmouth.

Replacement buses are planned between Exeter St Davids and Exmouth.

Saturday 22nd until Friday 28th February

The lines between Gillingham and Yeovil Junction will be closed all days inclusive due to work stabilising the cuttings at both ends of Gillingham Tunnel.

This work seeks to reduce the risk of landslips affecting trains 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, with a direct train from Exeter to Waterloo only every two hours.

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.

Sunday 2nd March

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 8th and Sunday 9th March

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 8th to Friday 14th March

Essential maintenance work will affect trains running via Crediton.

Replacement buses are planned between:

- Exeter St Davids and Barnstaple
- Exeter St Davids and Okehampton

These replacement buses will not stop at Yeoford – instead separate services are planned between Crediton and Yeoford.

Sunday 23rd March

Some lines in the Salisbury area will be closed all day due to maintenance work.

London Waterloo to Exeter services will start from Salisbury.

Buses will run between Basingstoke and Salisbury.

New Friends of Honiton Station Website Launched

January saw the launch of our revamped website. Huge thanks go to Charles, our wonderful Webmaster, who has spent a great deal of time and trouble migrating the site to new software. He has taken the opportunity to make changes and improvements to the appearance and content of the site. We are so lucky to enjoy the support and skills of such a talented person.

I hope you enjoy exploring the new site, where you will find an expanded Gallery feature, as well as the updated archive of our newsletter which is now in fully-searchable annual editions, going right back to the first issue in 2020.

I feel very fortunate to work with so many committed and hard-working people, who give so much to make The Friends of Honiton Station a success.

For instance, I am grateful to Jenny for the passion she brings to the development of the station as an art hub and a place for beautiful sustainable planting.

Paul does fantastic work with our community noticeboard, keeping it right up to date with news of the latest events and activities that support our community. He is also incredibly pro-active, visiting local good causes, community groups and charities to invite them to promote what they do through our community board.

Massive thanks go to Richard for his calm efficiency and skill as our Treasurer. What he does to support both our group and our colleagues at Feniton Station is so important. His skilful work behind the scenes does so much to make the work we do possible.

Dave T provides me with a weekly update on the reliability or otherwise of the train service locally, which allows me to have really informed discussions with the train company. He also regularly submits photos for the newsletter.

Dave W also provides photos, and regularly offers his skilled services when we need to take photos for the press to publicise or celebrate our activities. Thanks also go to Vernon for his photos, and to David B who has provided some of his reminiscences of the railway, both locally and about excursions further field.

I am grateful to Nick who each month posts a link to our newsletter on local Facebook community pages, further spreading the word about what we do. Thanks also go to Steve and Caroline for their unwavering support for so many years, and to John for sharing his knowledge and experience of working in the rail industry.

The Friends of Honiton Station would also like to thank the many local community groups who are part of our Adopt a Pot scheme, supporting our planters, and by doing so signposting local people to the wonderful work their groups do in our community.

To these, and to everyone else who supports The Friends of Honiton Station in any way, I send my grateful thanks. Remember that members are always welcome to send in photos – whether recent or historical – which illustrate the railway through Honiton.

You can also send in ideas for articles for the newsletter, or indeed write a piece for a future issue.

Local MP Calls for Action on Accessible Stations

Local MP Richard Foord recently signed an Early Day Motion calling for action to improve the accessibility of railway stations for people with disabilities. The motion was sponsored by Adam Dance, Liberal Democrat MP for Yeovil.

Despite some positive publicity last year, there continues to be no immediate prospect of Access for All funding going ahead at Yeovil Junction, which many consider a high priority for action.

Disabled passengers have great difficulty accessing the station, as the primary access is via a footbridge. Passengers using wheelchairs have to wait for a member of staff to gain permission from the signaller to shut the line, so that the passenger can be wheeled across the track.

The motion, launched on November 27th states:

"That this House is gravely concerned by the challenges disabled people face in getting support at railway stations, particularly in rural constituencies such as Yeovil;

"Expresses alarm at the absence of available assistance staff in stations such as Yeovil Pen Mill; notes with concern that only one in four train stations have step free access, that only 2% have level boarding, that at 67% of stations the platforms are too narrow for wheelchairs to turn, and that around 40% of rail stations have no tactile paving which is a vital safety feature for blind and visually impaired people;

"Strongly believes that these people should have the same access to railway stations as able-bodied passengers and should not be at risk of accidents;

"Acknowledges that many find the booking systems for requesting support staff difficult to access and use;

"Also notes that inaccessible stations and a lack of support staff also pose challenges for parents with buggies and the elderly;

"And calls on the government to improve accessibility and support for disabled people on our railways, such as by improving the Access for All programme to deliver more projects, more rapidly, and by holding operators like Great Western Railway to account."

The motion has been signed by 34 members, including Richard Foord. Of the signatories, 28 were from the Lib Dems. Also signing were three Independents, one Labour member, a DUP member and a Green MP. No Conservative members have signed the motion so far.

In Other News…

GWR is warning passengers to aware of Facebook posts seeming to offer an Annual Travel Card for the ridiculous price of £3 a year. They warn that this is, of course, a scam.

They ask passengers to avoid engaging with these kinds of posts, never to give out personal information to sites they do not know and trust and, where appropriate to use social media platforms' own reporting procedures to report such suspicious posts.

Passengers trying to return to East Devon from Exeter faced the sudden closure of Central Station on January 9th.

A gas leak in a building in Queen Street, near to the station, led to emergency services declaring a 100m exclusion zone, which meant that the station had to be evacuated and trains stopped from running through the station.

Dan Lawrence, Wales & West Utilities operations manager for Exeter, said:

"On arrival, we found that individuals who had been inside the property had damaged a gas pipe causing it to leak."

Trains were cancelled for several hours until the building was made safe.

One of the results of the storms before Christmas was damage to the fence at Honiton Station. Two panels were blown down on Platform 2 and minor damage caused to the end of one panel on Platform 1.

When the damage occurred, Keith and Aaron were quickly on site to make the area safe, and to remove the affected panels. Soon afterwards, temporary metal panels were installed as a safety measure. This was particularly important as the area affected is at the top of a steep grass bank.

We await information as to when the permanent repair will be carried out.

Delays to services on Monday 6th January were caused by power supply problems between Basingstoke and Hook.

Network Rail engineers identified issues at two electrical substations, which have been caused by flooding due to heavy rainfall. Network Rail made it clear, despite initial rumours, that the fault was unrelated to the two-week closure over the festive period in the Woking area where they replaced track between Brookwood and Pirbright Junction (see below).

Network Rail Completes Christmas and New Year Work on Time

Network Rail is thanking passengers following the completion of its festive railway upgrades across its Wessex route.

Over the holiday period, Network Rail's teams of engineers missed the festivities and worked tirelessly to complete a wide range of critical railway upgrades across Network Rail's Wessex route, which serves the towns and communities in part or all of the counties of Surrey, Berkshire, Hampshire, Dorset, Devon, Somerset and Wiltshire.

In the Woking area, engineers completed a two-week programme of upgrades on the South West Main Line at Brookwood, between Farnborough and Woking, including:

- Installing new switches and crossings – moveable sections of track and the equipment that guide trains from one track to another – at Pirbright Junction, where the line to Aldershot leaves the South West Main Line towards Basingstoke.

- Laying 3,000 metres of new conductor (third) rail, which powers the trains
- Installing over 100 new track panels (fixed sections of rails and sleepers) totalling approximately 2,000 metres of track

- Installing approximately 2,800 new sleepers and 9,450 tonnes of ballast (the stones that support the track)

- Laying over 5,000 metres of new electrification cabling

- Upgrading a number of track circuits and installing new heating equipment to help prevent the points – the equipment that allows trains to switch tracks – from freezing during the cold, winter months.

- Engineers also carried out work to strengthen embankments in the area, reducing the chance of landslips while maintenance teams will be carrying out tamping – the compacting of the stones that support the tracks – between Hook and Farnborough.

Further south in Dorset, a two-week closure of the line between Brockenhurst and Lymington Pier enabled engineers to complete vital improvements to the branch line.

Following the installation of new track on the line in late October, the bridge across the Lymington River between Lymington Town and Pier stations has been strengthened. Engineers also refurbished and repaired heavily corroded critical steel elements of Lymington Viaduct, carried out from pontoons and underslung scaffold. The wheel timbers, which support the track across the viaduct, have also been replaced.

During this time, the track that runs across Lymington Town Level Crossing was replaced while improvement works at Brockenhurst Level Crossing were completed as well as tamping – the compacting of ballast (the stones that support the track) - across the junctions at Brockenhurst station.

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

"I'd firstly like to thank any passengers and local residents who may have been disturbed by our engineering work over the festive period for their patience and understanding.

"The work our teams have completed over the past couple of weeks is critical for the continued safe and reliable running of the railway and I'd like to pay tribute to the many men and women who have worked so tirelessly and forgone spending festive time with family and friends to complete this work.

A South Western Railway spokesperson added:

"The Christmas and New Year period saw a huge amount of engineering work carried out across our network, such as on the busy South West Main Line through Brookwood and on the Lymington branch line that is so important to its local communities.

"We're very grateful to our customers for their patience, particularly those whose journeys were longer or involved rail replacement bus services. The maintenance and improvements that our colleagues at Network Rail have completed will ensure that our services can run safely and reliably for many years to come."

New Risk of Short-formed Trains Due to Bogie Maintenance Problem

Just before Christmas there were a number of short-formed trains operating on our line, including cases where services were reduced to a single 2-carriage train. This pattern began again in the middle of January, with one service on January 17th cut from six to two carriages, a number in the following days cut from six to five or three, and one service taken by the Chairman on the 18th being cut to four carriages. These short-formed trains are set to continue in the near future.

Members should be aware that there is a serious and ongoing issue affecting the periodic maintenance of the bogies on Class 159 units. The company that carries out the planned maintenance of units in behalf of SWR and other train operators suffered storm damage to its works just before Christmas.

This has meant that work at the site has ceased, while repairs are undertaken, made more challenging by the risk of asbestos being found at the site.

SWR is presently considering its options to deal with this situation. These include extending the maintenance schedules for these units to delay further units having to be taken out of service, or operating for a further extended period with a number of short-formed trains, whether on a planned or an ad hoc basis. Other possibilities include cancelling some services elsewhere on the network.

We have been briefed about this issue by SWR (for which we are grateful) as has our sister group SERUG, and have been asked for our opinion about the various options under consideration. This has been much appreciated by us. We will update members when we have more information.

Report Highlights Need to Investment in Transport to the South West

Our colleagues at the Salisbury to Exeter Rail Users Group (SERUG) recently sent out a very useful briefing about transport to the South West of England. It was in response to another report being published, offering potential ways forward, following the announcement that the Government has cancelled the Stonehenge Tunnel road project.

They say:

"You may have seen the recent report from Greengauge21 on the how best to improve transport into the Southwest, following the Labour government's cancellation of the Stonehenge road tunnel (A303) and upgrade of the A358. The West of England Line was highlighted as being crucial to any alternative solutions, but currently totally inadequate and in need of considerable investment. SERUG contributed to this report and also featured in the BBC coverage (both written and television).

"Overall, we think it's an excellent report, pulling together key points of Network Rail's Strategic Report (CMSP) in 2020, plus the Sub-national Transport Bodies (STBs) reports from Western Gateway and Peninsular Transport.

"There is a suggestion that double track throughout from Axminster to Exeter should be considered - something not formally proposed before - which will prove difficult given the obstacles of an M5 overbridge and housing developments close to the railway at Feniton."

The report says that the railway linking London and the South West of England is *"sorely in need of investment"* to offset the cancellation of major road projects. The new study recommends improving the parallel West of England railway line through Salisbury, *"in the absence of a plan based on road widening."*

The report has been written by transport consultants Greengauge 21, and has been produced on behalf of campaign groups who opposed the Stonehenge Tunnel.

Members will not be surprised to note that the report says of The West of England Line: *"It is a railway that fails the most basic tests of meeting passenger needs of service reliability and the ability to get a seat."* It adds that *"peak services are usually overcrowded."*

The report also supports South Western Railway's plan (see December newsletter) which called for the existing diesel trains to be replaced with existing electric trains would be adapted to use battery power for parts of the route. They would recharge on 80km of new electric "islands" drawing power from sections of third rail.

Speaking to the BBC, Chris Todd of Transport Action Network which commissioned the work, said:

"This report shows a forgotten region, where transport policy and investment have been left in the sidings, undermining the ability to cope with increasing population and extreme weather events."

The study favours the reinstatement of double track between Axminster and Exeter, to support a long-planned-for Devon Metro services.

SERUG has made a formal response to this new report. Its response has been written by Bruce Duncan (Chairman) and Nick Hurrell (Secretary). It is written in full below, with their permission.

This Greengauge21 report (GG21) contains 7 conclusions/recommendations. All of which SERUG supports. The points made are well reasoned, although SERUG majors on the rail input.

Its conclusions are key for the South West region, and its connectivity to the rest of the UK.
It is a validation of previous work, undertaken by all stakeholders, and which is continuing by Network Rail's (NR) work to achieve a positive value for money conclusion to achieve funding from DfT/HM Treasury, based on the conclusions in the NR CMSP report in 2020. All the solutions make good sense and can be delivered, the CMSP only requires funding.

The current WOE daily service as the GG21 report states, is a failing railway, with life expired rolling stock, lack of ability to get a seat and poor service reliability. The track is 75% single, so trains can only pass at the few sections of double track.

As an example of performance – there has been only ONE DAY since 1st Sept 2024 where the 90% "On Time to 3" target has been achieved with the full service operating (ie excluding the days when services started at Basingstoke/Salisbury, etc). In summary, the average on-time daily performance was just 57% (vs the 90% target). Performance is notably worse in the afternoons - circa 35% on-time, proving that the timetable is almost impossible to recover, following earlier delays.

The present rolling stock is diesel and life expired. A strategic decision is required to determine a new fleet, with its power supply – 3rd rail and discontinuous electrification? DfT are already working with SWR but the final decision must be made within 12 months. That decision will affect rolling stock supply and contracts, power with track and signalling specifications, land use and depot decisions, all of which could result in wasted capital and time.
There are many serious issues which may block those decisions. The ORR refusing 3rd rail in-fill use or even dis-continuous electrification, is plainly absurd. Excuses are easy to find for doing nothing.

Other investment required and acknowledged, and so planned for CP8, is the re-signalling at Exeter and Salisbury along with track formation improvements at those stations. This cost is not part of the new investment structure, but is essential to maintain safety for passengers. It should be counted outside the cost of items 2 and 4 in the Conclusion, but would have a changed specification, to include pure new investment issues, eg Whimple/Honiton and Tisbury doubling as in the CMSP.

There are many elements to a WOE line investment strategy, all are inter-related and cover at least a 10/15 year cycle – the line requires a strategic plan – a Vision. Nothing in any previous reports and actions is different from GG21 conclusions. It requires leadership from Government and funding to deliver a long term agreed working strategy - the Vision.

GG21 implementation if phased correctly, will enable a railway capable of achieving exactly what their report says – especially at Conclusions 2 and 4 in the Report, with possibly 6 subject to loading gauge agreement, if it is not W12.

The previous Government's lack of leadership with transport generally, resulted in Labour's removal of the A303 Stonehenge improvements at around £2bn. With the A358 a total of £2.5bn results in evidence that road investment costs a huge amount of taxation funds. The works on GG21 conclusions 2 and 4 may be concluded at circa 10% of those road costs, excluding the new train fleet, and look therefore excellent value for money. Capital expenditure is a balance sheet item and will last for many years – it is not a one-off cost but a long-term asset.

It should be noted that the Podimore A303 improvements just completed (November 2024 after 3 years of work) cost £155m for just 3 miles of road – and did not include an essential grade separated junction at the west end of the works. That equates to £51.6m per mile (Source DfT).

Delivery of funds for rail investment however, is bound by the intransigence of trying to provide a value for money process (to achieve a now apparently dropped Rail Network Enhancement Pipeline) set of specifications, which does not suit rail investment. Doing nothing is not an option.

Improvements/investment can all be delivered spread over a number of financial years. This is long term. New rolling stock may be delivered in 10 years-time (2035) but decisions have to be made now within a Government which may not be in power outside that time scale. Re-signalling for safety has to be done before this (CP8 is 2029 to 2034), doubling the track at Tisbury (Wilts) and Whimple/Honiton, could also be done before but specification responds to power supply for new rolling stock.

The GG21 report cannot resolve those issues but can link Western Gateway and Peninsula Transport's agreed aims as cross regional investment, along with Devon, Somerset, Dorset and Wiltshire County Councils support, SWR and most importantly, Network Rail, and all stakeholders.

This should not be just another Report. Transport investment in the South West is critical to growth and economic well-being. Rail provides an answer at an affordable cost, spread over a number of years – but as GG21 states in the 7 key areas in Conclusions "We identify measures to reduce car independence and additional pressures on the road network, covering the area between the M3 to the east and M5 to the west". We concur totally.

Discounted Train Tickets in Annual January Sale

South Western Railway joined train operators throughout England and Wales last month to make taking that special trip easier and cheaper. SWR had 100,000 tickets for sale to more than 80 destinations on its network, while GWR had 150,000 tickets on offer.

For a limited period, rail companies offered tickets at up to half price on some of its most popular routes to and from London. The Great British Rail Sale ran from Tuesday 14th January until Monday 20th January, with customers able to claim up to 50% off selected Advance and Off-Peak rail tickets.

In addition, SWR customers were able to turn their trip into a treat by claiming an SWR Reward, which could include a discount on attractions like the London Eye OR ZSL London Zoo, or a discounted lunch at restaurants including Gordon Ramsay's Street Burger.

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

"Once again, South Western Railway is delighted to be part of the Great British Rail Sale and to give our customers a chance to visit many of the outstanding destinations we serve, at a great discount. Whether it's for a short break away or to visit family and friends, we look forward to welcoming customers old and new aboard our services as part of this great initiative."

Sale tickets were available for journeys taking place between Friday 17th January and Monday 31st March.

Rail Industry Supports Brew Monday in Support for Mental Health

Great Western Railway and Network Rail joined forces with Samaritans once again last month to encourage customers and colleagues to reach out for a cuppa and a catch-up on Brew Monday.

To 'tea-up' a picture or two and catch the attention of passers-by, GWR carried a giant 6.5ft teacup across its network, stopping off at key locations to have a chat and raise awareness of this vitally important issue.

Samaritans volunteers at Bath Spa Station on Monday January 20th: Photo GWR

Samaritans has long campaigned to dispel the idea that the third Monday of January is particularly difficult, as it could discourage people from seeking life-changing help.

The suicide prevention charity's listening volunteers are consistently busy every day of the year, responding to a call for help every 10 seconds.

The annual event encourages friends and family to stay connected by having a cuppa and a catch-up, and this year was no different.

GWR and Network Rail staff could be found joining Samaritans volunteers inside a giant cup to help celebrate and raise awareness at Bristol Temple Meads, Bath Spa, Swindon, Reading and London Paddington.

Samaritans' volunteers also handed out teabags and chatted to passengers about the power of connecting over a cuppa, at a number of other GWR managed stations, including Exeter Central and Exeter St Davids.

Other stations involved this year were Dawlish, Exmouth, Tiverton Parkway, Gloucester and Cheltenham.

GWR HR Director Ashley Bray said:

"We're really proud to support Samaritans' Brew Monday campaign again this year and spread this important message to our passengers and staff. We're trying to make it as visible as we possibly can.

"Samaritans has worked in partnership with Network Rail and the wider rail industry for 15 years to encourage the public and our staff to recognise the power of human connection – and ultimately start a conversation which could save a life."

Head of Samaritans' Rail Programme, Olivia Cayley, said:

"There's no right or wrong way to check in on those you care about – it doesn't matter if it's over the phone, in person, with tea or without – the important thing is to check in and connect with those you care about. We know first-hand what a difference those moments of human connection can make to those who are struggling."

Here is Ken's story. He is a Mobile Operations Manager for Network Rail in Wales. Within weeks of attending the Managing Suicidal Contacts course, Ken contacted Samaritans to let the team know how he had put his training into action.

"I was travelling to London and I became aware of a lady on the seat in front who was becoming more and more unsettled by phone calls and text messages she was making and receiving. I started to keep an eye on her, and by the time we got to Reading I could see that she was crying."

"As the train left the station, I leant forward and just said, "Are you ok, you seem to have the weight of the world on your shoulders". She looked at me and said, "No, not at all," with a "please help" look in her eyes.

"I held her hand while she tried to speak about things but she was too upset so I comforted her and tried to make small talk.

"As we neared our final stop in London she kept on repeating, "Please don't let me go down to the Underground." I kept telling her that I wouldn't.

"I told her we would stay on the train when everyone got off, and when the passengers started leaving, I asked one of them to alert the conductor, and when he arrived we decided to call the Police, who called an ambulance. I stayed with her to comfort her for another hour or so waiting for the ambulance.

"She was a very nice lady who just had some bad situations all arriving on a bad day. Afterwards, she sent me a message thanking me for everything I had done, and added that she probably wouldn't be here if I hadn't bothered to ask if everything was OK."

Since launching in 2017, the Samaritans' campaign Small Talk Saves Lives has successfully raised awareness within railway stations and other public settings about the need for small talk and starting conversations if you think someone might need help.

Obviously, the priority is that you want you to feel safe if you approach a stranger who looks like they're struggling to cope. If you are at a train station, you could always ask a member of staff for their opinion, or to approach the person with you.

Samaritans say that nearly half of British adults avoid engaging with someone they don't know to avoid small talk – whilst more than one in five (22%) are worried they would say the wrong thing when engaging with someone. They want to let people know it's normal to feel anxious about starting a conversation and making small talk.

You might worry about saying the wrong thing – but having the confidence to act if you feel safe to do so could help save a life.

A little small talk and a simple question like "Do you know where I can get a coffee?" can be all it takes to interrupt someone's suicidal thoughts, and could help set them on the path to recovery.

Trust your instincts. If someone looks out of place, is acting strangely or you just feel like something isn't quite right – if it's safe for you to do, try and start a conversation.

<u>Here are some tips on how to get the conversation started, if you feel it is safe enough to do so:</u>

- Approach with 'open' and calm body language, for example with your arms unfolded, smile and make eye contact.
- Introduce yourself and ask their name.
- Ask if they are OK, or if they need help.
- Make a small comment, for example about the weather.
- Ask a question like "what time is it?" or "where can I get a coffee?"