The Train at Platform 1

The Friends of Honiton Station Newsletter 60 - March 2025

Welcome to the March newsletter. Celebrations for Railway 200, the 200th anniversary of the start of passenger railways in 1825, are now well under way. We spent some time at our recent Coffee and Conversation session in January talking about how we can get involved in these celebrations. And we met with Richard from the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership at the end of January to start fleshing out our plans. Look out the announcements of some exciting projects in the weeks to come. Meanwhile, read on for all the latest rail news, including the monthly Engineering Report.

Colas Class 37s 37057 and 37610 top and tail the Network Rail New Measurement Train on February 6th. A pair of "Tractors" replaced the usual HST Power Cars. Is this a case of Back to the Future…? Photograph by Dave Tozer.

Further Honiton Engineering Work Completed on Time

During the weekend of February 15th and 16th, Network Rail carried out a number of works in the Honiton area, which required the line to be shut between Axminster and Exeter. Rail Replacement buses operated throughout the weekend.

We are grateful to the Project Manager, Chris Bailey, who shared with us details of the work completed. It is very useful to be able to let people know the reasons why the line has to be closed and their journeys disrupted.

Network Rail reports that the work was part of their track renewal follow up, following works in and around Honiton Tunnel in November 2024.

Several teams carried out the following tasks:

- Clearance of waste/rubbish from Honiton station into engineering train;
- Removal of spoil at tunnel portal to engineering train;
- Removal of 126x 30ft track panels from site;
- Snagging and close out works to track and drainage (so that the project can hand this site back to the maintenance teams);
- Embankment stabilisation works on the Axminster side of Honiton Tunnel;
- Drainage surveys between Axminster and Honiton;
- Honiton Tunnel Structures Examination.

As you can see below , the work involved clearing up material left beside the track at Honiton Station after the Autumn blockade, which had raised some questions – so close to the line was it.

And a train-load of track at the station on February 15th, showed that at least some of the piles of track left beside the line outside Honiton Tunnel after it was lifted during the same work, had finally been collected.

And finally, there had been a speed restriction between Axminster and Honiton over the previous two weeks, due to a minor landslip, which had been temporarily blocked awaiting repair. As Chris' notes make clear, work to stabilise this was also done during the weekend line closure.

Sadly, there has still been no further progress in a repair to the fence on platform 2 which was blown down during one of December's storms. Ben, our Station Manager, continues to press Network Rail urgently on this matter.

Apologies for the late notice given last month for the additional line closure on February 15th and 16th, which we learned about only a few days before.

The line between Yeovil Junction and Gillingham was closed between February 22nd and 28th for planned work.

While the railway was closed, Network Rail's team of engineers worked to stabilise the cuttings either end of Gillingham Tunnel. Network Rail and Volker Fitzpatrick teams, working as part of Southern Renewals Enterprise, had previously been on the site within 200m of the tunnel and this latest work helped further stabilise the embankment. The slope stabilisation design includes soil nailing which reduces the risk of further landslips.

During this line closure, engineers also completed a range of other work, including:

- Improving drainage in the Gillingham area to reduce the likelihood of flooding on the tracks;
- Repairing rail defects and replacing ballast through level crossings in the Sherborne area;
- General maintenance between Gillingham and Yeovil Junction, including inspecting railway equipment;
- Repairing line side fences, and cutting back overgrown or diseased trees and hedges that border the railway.

Engineering Report for March and April

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.

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

London Waterloo to Basingstoke stopping services will not run.

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

Buses will also 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.

Sunday 23rd March

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

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

London Waterloo to Exeter services will start from Salisbury.

Additional services will run between London Waterloo and Basingstoke.

Buses will run between Basingstoke and Salisbury.

Saturday 5th and Sunday 6th April, Sunday 13th April

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

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.

Buses will run between Salisbury and Yeovil Junction via Tisbury.

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

Rolling Stock Issues: An Update

We reported last month on the on-going problems we have been experiencing since December with short-formed trains.

These have been caused by issues with maintenance. We are grateful to Andrew Ardley, Regional Development Manager at SWR, for this update on the situation:

"You will have noted that there have been some short formations on West of England services over the past couple of months.

"The primary cause of this has been a bogie supply issue due to problems at our supplier in South Wales. Their site buildings were damaged the storms in November 2024 to such an extent that (in combination with other factors such as asbestos) they will need to be demolished and totally rebuilt.

"This in turn started to affect unit availability towards the end of 2024, primarily due to what are known as C4 exams becoming due. This has affected a number of Train Operating Companies, not just SWR.

"Other contributory factors in late 2024 / early 2025 included a fault with the lathe at Wimbledon which reduced its capacity to turn wheels and a driver shortage to move units to the lathe due to winter sickness bugs.

"I am pleased to advise that matters are now much improved with availability back to normal as of early February. The SWR fleet team has worked hard to come up with a work around for the bogies which maintains safety but gives greater flexibility as to which parts need to be changed or serviced. In parallel, the bogie supplier in South Wales has now secured a new temporary site and expects to start outputting bogies again within the next four weeks."

Our thanks go to everyone at SWR who worked so hard to try and get this national issue sorted out satisfactorily.

However, we are not fully out of the woods yet. With units heading for their C4 exams this year, and then C6 improvements which will see refurbishments and updates of the units to ensure they last for perhaps 10 more years, until a decision is made as to how to replace them, short formations may yet be with us for some time.

Inflation-Busting Rail Fare Increase Takes Effect

March 2nd sees the annual rise in rail fares, with this year's increase being by an average of 4.6%. This compares with the December Consumer Prices Index (CPI) inflation rate of 2.5%.

Fares covered by this announcement include season tickets, off-peak return tickets and tickets for travel in and around major cities.

The Treasury said the 4.6% increase to regulated rail fares in 2025 was calculated by adding one percentage point to July's Retail Prices Index (RPI) measure of inflation (usually higher than the CPI measure now routinely used for calculating pay, pension and National Savings increases, and most index-linking). They added that it was "the lowest absolute increase in three years."

At the same time, and for the first time in a number of years, the cost of Railcards is also going up, by £5 to £35 for most cards. However, the Government made clear that there would be no increase in the cost of the Disabled Persons Railcard.

While Railcards continue to offer great value – and we continue to recommend that everyone who travels by rail should use one if possible – campaigners from the Campaign for Better Transport said that the rise in fares and the cost of Railcards was *"kick in the teeth"* for people who rely on public transport, particularly those on low incomes.

They said: *"To tackle air pollution, congestion and climate change, we need to make public transport the attractive, affordable choice."*

The Government's own estimates say that Railcards save users *"up to £158"* annually. Whatever the true figure, passengers who travel locally are advised to buy a Devon and Cornwall Railcard, and those who travel more widely are advised to see if they are eligible for a National Railcard of one kind or another.

For older travellers, the Senior Card remains great value, and provided you say you are travelling to St Thomas (even if you are not!), can even be used to travel into Exeter before 9 a.m.

Fares from Honiton to Exeter return will now be:

	Without Railcard	With Railcard	
Anytime Return	£9.70	£6.45	Before 9 a.m.
Off-peak Return	£9.60	£6.35	From 9 a.m.
Evening out Return	£6.35	£4.35	After 12 Noon

Previous fares were:

Anytime Return	£9.30	£6.15
Off-peak Return	£9.20	£6.10
Evening out Return	£6.30	£4.15

Railway 200: Art Lovers Join in the Celebration

Art lovers across the world are being invited to choose their favourite UK railway-themed artworks, as part of this year's celebration of 200 years of the modern railway.

In a unique partnership between art education charity Art UK and the Railway 200 campaign, people have until midnight on Friday 11 April to pick their top three artworks from a longlist of 200, which has been compiled by Art UK and its museum partners. The artworks have been chosen from 94 public collections across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and include works dating from the 1830s to the 21st century.

Artists in the Railway 200 Gallery include renowned railway painters such as Terence Cuneo and Norman Wilkinson, alongside famous names such as Lucien Pissarro and J. M. W. Turner.

The subjects include many themes linked to railways, from Anthony Stones' sculpture of a Victorian Railway Navvy to William Powell Frith's oil painting The Railway Station and illustrator Clara Vulliamy's work depicting the official naming of a train.

Arts Minister Sir Chris Bryant MP said:

"From the first puff of smoke from a locomotive the railway and its stations have captured the imagination of artists. Through this wonderful array of artworks, Art UK has shown the true cultural and historical significance of the rail industry. I encourage everyone to vote for their favourite pieces and I hope these celebrations will help more people to be inspired by our beloved railways."

Alan Hyde from Railway 200 said:

"The railway has shaped our cultural landscape and long inspired artists down the ages, and it continues to be a source of inspiration. We hope that, in rail's bicentenary year, more people will appreciate the cultural contribution of the railway and travel by train to enjoy at first hand the amazing work of talented artists who have enriched our lives. We're delighted to team up with Art UK to showcase the best of railway-inspired art and engage with a wide range of art and rail lovers."

Andrew Ellis, Chief Executive of Art UK, said:

"We are thrilled to be giving the public the chance to vote for their favourite railway artwork. The long list of artworks shows the wide range of artists who have been inspired by train travel and gives an insight into the wonderful richness of the UK's collections of publicly owned art. There are 132 named artists and 94 collections represented in The Railway 200 Gallery and we hope that people from across the world will enjoy exploring these artworks and voting for their favourites."

The 20 most popular artworks chosen by the public will be announced on World Art Day on 15th April and will form an online exhibition on the Art UK website until 31st December. Art lovers will then be able to vote again for an outright winner from the top 20. The world's favourite UK railway art will be announced on th June, the birthday of rail pioneer George Stephenson.

Anyone can register to vote for their three favourite artworks by visiting railway200.artuk.org

SERUG Holds Important Discussion Meeting for Members

Our sister organisation, the Salisbury to Exeter Rail Users Group (SERUG), is holding a special meeting on Wednesday 2nd April at Yeovil Railway Centre between 4 p.m. and 6 p.m.

The meeting is an opportunity for all those interested to help SERUG formulate its Vision Document on the future of the line.

The intention is that those attending the meeting work in groups to discuss three main areas:

- Great British Railways (GBR) - see below
- Rolling Stock plans
- Future investment, Timetables (including. Devon Metro)

The meeting is open to paid up members of SERUG only.

It is only £8 a year to become a member. It is well worth doing.

Railways Bill Consultation Now Open

The Government opened a consultation on Tuesday February 18th on their new Railways Bill, describing it as a "once in a generation" opportunity to create a unified, simpler railway that puts passengers first.

The announcement from the Department of Transport said:

"We are seeking views on new policies to be included in the forthcoming Railways Bill, which will enable the establishment of Great British Railways (GBR). GBR will be a single directing mind that will run our rail infrastructure and passenger services in the public interest.

"The overall aim of these proposed reforms is to provide a railway that works better for both passengers and taxpayers across Great Britain."

A key element of the proposed bill is the creation of Great British Railways (GBR), a body tasked with bringing track and train together, delivering reliable services for passengers, and catalysing growth across the country.

The Department for Transport (DfT) is now seeking views on its proposed reforms, which also include:

- The establishment of a new passenger watchdog;
- Reform of fares and online retail of tickets;
- A new statutory role for devolved leaders in governing, managing, planning and developing the rail network;
- Streamlining processes and reducing regulatory burdens to empower GBR to to deliver the best service for railway users;
- Ensuring the private sector continues to play a key role, including a statutory duty for GBR to promote rail freight.

Commenting on the announcement, Community Rail Network, of which we are a member, said:

"We welcome this consultation around the Railways Bill, which represents another important step towards creating a rail network that is more tuned into the needs and aspirations of our communities and is central to a more sustainable transport future.

"We will be scrutinising the bill to ensure it delivers on its commitments to put passengers and community needs at the heart of rail decision-making, and will be encouraging our members to respond with their own valuable insights from across the community rail movement.

"At Community Rail Network, we are engaged in active dialogue with partners in government and the rail industry, to support the development of a more community-focused railway that delivers maximum social, environmental and economic value, now and for generations to come."

The consultation closes on April 15th. Community Rail Network will be responding to the consultation in due course.

The consultation consists of seven chapters:

Chapter 1 – Provides an overview of the new landscape for the rail sector under GBR, including how the organisation will be established and how its objectives will be set and delivered;
Chapter 2 – Sets out how a new passenger watchdog will be created to ensure GBR factors the passenger into every decision;

Chapter 3 – Describes how the access framework will change under GBR, to maximise the benefits of public ownership and operation;

Chapter 4 – Summarises the changes the government are proposing to the financial framework to reflect an integrated, publicly owned railway;

Chapter 5 – Sets out GBR's proposed role in setting fares;

Chapter 6 – Explains how GBR will collaborate with devolved governments and Mayoral Strategic Authorities from the outset and be held to account by a statutory duty to do so;

Chapter 7 – Contains a proposal to address an existing legislative power gap in relation to train driver licensing and certification, which will enable the government to make amendments to the regime in the future.

GWR Celebrates Valentines Day With Giant Love Hearts

The region's most iconic tourist attractions - including Plymouth's iconic Smeaton's Tower - woke up to their own Valentine's Day surprise, in the shape of giant six-foot Love Heart sweets.

A super-sized version of the classic confectionary, famed worldwide for their cheeky romantic messages, was hand-delivered to destinations across Wales and the South West. In an apparent reference to its lighthouse legacy, the sweet's message declared: "You Shine!"

The tasty tokens of love were accompanied by a mysterious letter expressing admiration for what they – and their owners and staff – do for the region.

Addressed "To the South West on Valentine's Day" the accompanying letter declares love for the region's stunning landscapes and the valuable social and economic role the tourism industry plays.

"We just can't keep it in any longer," it gushed. "*We love you. Truly, madly, deeply… How could we not? You are breathtakingly beautiful. Your rolling hills, golden beaches, wild moors, and ancient towns and cities stir hearts and minds.*

"It's not just your beauty that has us smitten – it's what you do. You are the beating heart of tourism and leisure, where visitors come to escape and explore the extraordinary. You create jobs, fuel local businesses and unite communities – you make this region irresistible."

The secret admirer was none other than train operator Great Western Railway, who released an open love letter to the tourism industry across Wales and the South West on its social media channels.

Great Western Railway's Sales and Marketing Director, Amanda Burns, said:

"We know just how much work and effort is put in by our tourism partners that we wanted to share our love for them and reaffirm our promise to keep connecting people to their wonders. Let's celebrate what makes this region extraordinary, and let's ensure its future shines as brightly as its past."

Working with iconic sweet maker Swizzels for this grand gesture, GWR said that it hoped that this gesture underscores its love for the region and the joy of connecting people to its treasures.

Four iconic locations received an oversized Love Hearts sweet, each featuring a custom message:

- Smeaton's Tower, Plymouth: You Shine
- SS Great Britain, Bristol: Steamy!
- Cardiff Castle: For Keeps
- Oxford Castle & Prison: Heart Stealer

Sarah-Louise Heslop, Head of Marketing for Swizzels, said:

"We are excited to see visitors to the British landmarks sharing photos with the iconic Love Hearts and their fun messages. Love Hearts have been made in the UK for over 70 years and they remain the perfect way to 'Share the Love'."

Plymouth City Council's Marketing and Development Manager, Abigail Netcott, said:

"What a delightful surprise to discover this giant Love Heart at the foot of our iconic Smeaton's Tower this morning!

"It's a wonderful reminder of how Plymouth captures hearts, from our historic waterfront to our world-class cultural attractions like The Box.

"GWR plays such a vital role in connecting visitors to Britain's Ocean City - they're not just providing train services, they're delivering people to unforgettable experiences.

"We look forward to continuing our partnership with GWR to ensure even more visitors can discover what makes our city truly extraordinary."

Photographs: Smeaton's Tower in Plymouth and Brunel's S.S. Great Britain in Bristol. Credit: GWR

Train Companies Celebrate at Annual Awards Ceremony

A scheme designed to transform train services in the West of England was a winner at the Rail Business Awards, the industry's most recognised awards scheme. The awards were presented on February 20th. MetroWest, spearheaded by the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority in partnership with Great Western Railway (GWR) and Network Rail, won the Regional Initiative of the Year category.

In the past 18 months the project has seen the opening of two new stations – Portway Park & Ride and Ashley Down – increased frequency of services for Bath, Bristol, Gloucester and Westbury, delivered enhancements to existing stations and worked on plans for more stations and new lines.

At the same ceremony, the award for Accessibility & Integrated Transport Excellence was presented to South Western Railway. Unfortunately, they did not issue any press about the award (except for a single post on a business-oriented social media platform) to let the world know about its success. Perhaps they should take a leaf out of the book of GWR, who placed a news story prominently on their website, or Greater Anglia (GA), who won the award for Marketing and Communications Excellence for their promotional campaign for the Stansted Express.

The judges' citation for its Stansted Express marketing campaign said:

"(GA) needed to create a memorable creative campaign that would raise awareness and increase usage of the Stansted Express, that would stand out in the airport and beyond. The judges felt this was a really well planned and executed communications campaign with impressive results."

SWR was also Highly Commended in the Wellbeing in Rail category. It was shortlisted for several other awards at this prestigious annual ceremony.

Greater Anglia was named Train Operator of the Year. It is the third time in six years that the company has received the accolade, having won the award in 2020 and 2021, then taking the runners up spot in 2022, 2023 and 2024, before regaining the award in 2025.

The judges said:

"Greater Anglia has consistently delivered a robust and reliable service for its users over the past year. While the judges felt the operator had been dealt a strong hand thanks to recent investment in an all-new fleet, the company has played it well, reflected in its partnership with Network Rail that has delivered industry-leading punctuality. Many congratulations!"

It also follows on from Greater Anglia being named Passenger Operator of the Year award at the National Rail Awards last September.

Greater Anglia has been the most punctual operator in the UK since April 2023 with annual performance at 94.1% using both the long-standing public performance measure (PPM - which measures arrival at destination within 5 minutes) and the more demanding "Time to 3" metric (which measures arrivals of every train at every station it serves).

Its best performing routes are even achieving annual performance of between 95.0% and 98.3% on the PPM measure, figures the West of England Line can only dream about. Of course, you could argue that its routes make achieving these figures more straightforward to achieve, than on a commuter-oriented railway such as SWR or a line with older rolling stock like ours.

Rail Safety Highlighted by Trespass Conviction on SWR Network

A man has been sentenced to 18 months in prison, after trespassing on one of the country's busiest railway lines and causing hundreds of South Western Railway services to be delayed or cancelled.

On Monday 19 August 2024, a 41 year old man trespassed onto the South West Main Line at New Malden in South West London. The line connects London Waterloo, one of Britain's busiest stations, with destinations in Dorset, Hampshire, Somerset, Surrey and Wiltshire.

While being pursued by police, he ran across four live tracks where, on average, trains pass every two minutes. When running to hide in bushes by the tracks, one train driver was forced to make an emergency stop at 75 miles per hour.

To keep the suspect and pursuing police officers safe, Network Rail turned off power to the 750-volt electric rails which powers trains. Four trains were stranded outside of stations as services in the area came to a halt, causing widespread disruption across most of the SWR network.

Power was restored at 4.30 pm. However the knock-on impact of trains and crew being out of position, meant that services were severely delayed for the rest of the day. With so many cancellations and late running services, London Waterloo became overcrowded, forcing station colleagues to put additional safety measures in place.

To avoid further congestion in central London, all services on SWR's suburban lines, from places including Chessington, Guildford and Hampton Court, were forced to end their journeys at Clapham Junction. Disruption then continued into the following day, with four early morning services cancelled.

In total, 921 train services were impacted, with 358 completely cancelled and parts of 81 other services cancelled. 13,178 minutes of delays were accumulated: the equivalent of nine days. These delays cost Network Rail, and the taxpayer, an estimated £1.2 million.

Whilst he was able to evade Police on the day, a swift investigation led by the Metropolitan Police, assisted by partners from BTP and Network Rail, led to the man's identification and arrest several days later (We have chosen not to name him in this piece).

At Kingston Crown Court on Tuesday 4th February, he was jailed for eight months for intentionally or recklessly causing a public nuisance through the act of trespassing onto the railway, and ten months for dangerous driving, with the two sentences to run consecutively.

Tom Desmond, Operations Director for Network Rail, said:

"This prosecution demonstrates that there are severe consequences for those who trespass on the railway. Ensuring the safety of everyone involved in these difficult events is our top priority, including the safety of those who respond to such incidents. Additionally, the impact on the railway network from these events and our ability to serve our customers cannot be underestimated with the associated widespread disruption and multiple stranded trains.

"This individual was very lucky to escape unharmed, with the risk of both trains travelling through the area at nearly 100mph as well as the threat of the third rail, which carries enough voltage to kill – instantly."

Dan O'Riordan, Head of Security and Safety Assurance for South Western Railway, said:

"Trespassing anywhere on the railway is extremely dangerous. This individual was very fortunate to escape unharmed, with the risk of trains travelling through the area at nearly 100mph as well as the threat of the third rail, which carries enough voltage to kill – instantly. We hope that the sentence passed by the court serves as a warning to others."

Detective Sergeant Tim Deans, from the Metropolitan Police, said:

"(This man) caused widespread disruption across south-west London and beyond. The Met's investigation and the sentence handed to him demonstrates we will take action when people deliberately cause misery to others through criminal and anti-social behaviour."

Network Rail is urging people to stay off the tracks and not put themselves and others at risk. The latest safety figures show that there were more than 19,300 trespass incidents on the rail network in the 2023/24 financial year – that's one every half an hour.

Trespass was one of the biggest causes of delay in 2023/4, accounting for 108,168 minutes of delays to rail passenger and freight services – the equivalent of just over 1800 hours, 75 days or 225 working days. This was a 15% increase in the number of delays minutes caused by trespass in the previous year.

Rob Wainwright, Head of Level Crossings and Public Safety for Network Rail, explained:

"Trespass can have a devastating impact, not just to the trespasser who puts themselves at risk of serious life-changing, if not fatal, injuries, but also on their loved ones – their friends and family.

"Every year we see people taking risks – often unintentionally – because they don't fully understand the dangers that are present in a rail setting. Sometimes that ends tragically. We are once again asking parents to ensure that they and their children know all about rail safety so they can behave responsibly when they are in a rail setting. Help us to get everyone to where they want to be safely and on time."

Rail Safety Week 2025 takes place from June 16th to 22nd. Rail Safety Week is an industry wide and industry led initiative focusing on rail safety for all. Whether your career lies within the rail industry, or whether you use the railways to get from A to B – safety affects us all.

With incidents of trespass on the railway on the increase, this successful prosecution has been welcomed across the industry. Network Rail have publicised this case widely, and others involving reckless behaviour around the railway (including at level crossings), in order to raise awareness of the dangers of such actions around the railway.

Coffee and Conversation

The next Coffee and Conversation session for members will be at 11 a.m. on Monday April 14th at The Beehive Café in Honiton.

I hope that as many members as possible will be able to join us for some lively chat and a chance for mull over all the latest railway news, including updated plans to mark Railway 200 in the area.