The Train at Platform 1

The Friends of Honiton Station Newsletter 62 - May 2025

Welcome to the May newsletter, as the industry continues to mark Railway 200, the national celebration of the anniversary of the founding of the Stockton and Darlington Railway in 1825. As a group, we are working with our colleagues, including other local groups and our industry partners, to find appropriate and exciting ways to mark Railway 200 here in Honiton. Read on for the latest news on this and other rail news, including our regular and ever-popular feature on forthcoming Engineering Work. We are delighted to hear that so many readers find this latter feature useful.

975025 Caroline, once the Southern Region General Manager's Saloon, and now an inspection saloon, seen here on April 8th at Pinhoe, hauled by a Class 37. Photograph by Dave Tozer

New and Exciting Local Railway 200 Promotion Launched

Everyone is invited to take part and win prizes in an exciting and innovative Railway 200 celebration called **'Postcards From First Class Destinations',** created by the Blackmore Vale Community Rail Partnership.'

Visit any of the participating stations (including Honiton), station cafes, Rail Ale Trail pubs, and other venues on the Salisbury to Exeter line. Pick up your FREE limited-edition Railway 200 Postcards, including several showing views of Honiton.

Collect 8 different postcards, from different locations to win a FREE first-class Railway 200 Water Bottle. (Proof required in the form of a rail ticket and an image of all eight postcards collected).

Collect 6 selfies from Friends and Families across the globe. Post your postcards to six different recipients around the world in exchange for a selfie holding the postcard with a view of the new destination in the background. Collect six selfies from non-UK destinations and send them to us to claim your FREE exclusive RUCKSACK made especially to celebrate Railway 200. (Proof required in the form of 6 selfie images collected).

Collect 20 different postcards from any of the participating Salisbury to Exeter line stations, station cafes, pubs, museums, and libraries to claim your FREE exclusive RUCKSACK made specially to celebrate Railway 200. (proof needed in the form of an image showing all 20 postcards collected).

Stations and locations may have up to six or more postcards found at six different locations at that destination and collected by visiting the various places involved in the scheme such as stations, station cafés, Rail Ale Trail pubs, museums, libraries, local cafes etc.

Offer valid while stocks last. Please allow 28 days for delivery and keep a copy of your claim. One application per person.

A full list of participating stations and venues, including Honiton Station, Thelma Hulbert Gallery and Allhallows Museum, can be found on the Blackmore Vale CRP website.

MPs Call for Key Changes to Get Transport Working for Disabled People

A new Transport Committee report, entitled Access Denied, uncovers the harsh daily reality experienced by disabled people when using transport services, and calls for an overhaul of the regulatory system that should ensure they are supported and protected from discrimination.

From accounts of wheelchair users left on planes for hours, to taxi drivers refusing lifts to people because they have an assistance dog, and street clutter causing obstructions, MPs received shocking evidence of widespread failure by providers, across all transport modes, to uphold the rights of people with access needs.

The cross-party Committee's report also finds that progress with addressing disparities between disabled and non-disabled people's access to services has in some cases gone into reverse since the Covid pandemic, despite policy aspirations to close the gap.

In evidence heard by the previous Committee, before the 2024 General Election, people with access needs – including non-visible disabilities such as autism, dementia, severe anxiety and learning disabilities – told the Committee that the stresses caused by poor reliability and a lack of assistance discourage them from trying to travel at all.

A survey conducted by the Committee, which received 825 responses, found that 67% of disabled people, or those who assist them, encounter problems using transport either "always" or "most of the time". Just 1.7% said they never experienced challenges when travelling.

A further 50.8% said that at least one a month they would decide against making a journey because they expected to face difficulties whilst travelling.

Transport Committee Chair Ruth Cadbury said:

"It should be a source of national embarrassment that our country's transport services effectively treat disabled people as second class citizens, denying them access to jobs, leisure, support networks and essential services – denying them their rights.

"This inquiry worked on the premise that people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their condition or difference, and that services should be designed to enable disabled people to travel independently, not reliant on others. After all, services that work for disabled people also work better for everyone.

"And yet, those who have been let down and want redress or compensation face a spaghetti junction of complaints processes that either fob them off or lead them on a road to nowhere. Even when complaints are resolved, lessons aren't learnt, changes aren't put in place, and it's tempting to think that the small and occasional penalties for failure are accepted by providers as a mere cost of doing business.

"Failures must go from being an everyday occurrence to vanishingly rare. In its reforms to transport services over this Parliament, the Government must ensure people with access needs no longer go unseen, unheard and unacknowledged. This should be underpinned with a new inclusive transport strategy, backed by long-term funding.

"As a Committee, we would like to thank the many charities, experts, campaigners – including disabled people who have lived with inadequate services – for giving evidence to this Committee and its predecessor before the general election. We look forward to working constructively with the Government and tracking its progress over the coming years."

The report recommends that across the transport system, accessibility for disabled people must be recognised as a human right rather than a 'nice to have'. Failures should be seen as discrimination, not merely as a customer service issue. A change of mindset is needed at all levels among providers, regulators and enforcers.

Disabled people who experience inadequate services shoulder too great a burden when making complaints, seeking redress or taking legal action against transport providers big or small. This comes at the expense of their own time, energy and cost.

The Committee heard that even successful complaints rarely lead to lasting change. A unified, user-friendly complaints service should be established within 12 months to cover all transport modes.

The landscape of regulations, legal duties and enforcement bodies is far too fragmented and complex. The law should work in theory but reality is very different. A review of all relevant legislation and the powers and resources of enforcement bodies is needed so that no transport mode is left uncovered. This review should assess whether a single enforcement body would be more effective at asserting disabled people's rights. Until then, the Transport Secretary should direct all existing enforcement bodies to take a proactive approach to enforcement.

Within 12 months the Government must produce new, long-term, fully costed inclusive transport strategy to make both radical improvements across the transport network and closes the gap between rights and reality.

As part of the new Inclusive Transport Strategy, the Government must produce a road map with concrete timescales for achieving independent accessibility across the rail network.
This new policy should inform upgrades to rolling stock, station and network enhancements.

MPs heard international comparisons such as Vienna's U-Bahn has a long-term plan to make all of its stations accessible. New York City has a plan to make 95% of its stations accessible by 2055, while the Netherlands aims to improve its entire rail network by 2030.

The new Inclusive Transport Strategy should include steps to make policy and decision-making processes more responsive to accessibility, particularly when decisions are made around staffing levels and staff training.

The strategy should also set out practical measures to embed the principle that every instance of not meeting accessibility obligations constitutes a serious failure, for which service providers will be held accountable. This must include measures to collect comprehensive data on such failures.

SERUG Holds Members' Meeting to Discuss Key Targets for Change

Our colleagues at the Salisbury to Exeter Rail Users Group SERUG) held a successful Members' Meeting at the Yeovil Railway Centre on April 2nd, attended by our Chairman.

The meeting gave those attending an opportunity to discuss with the leadership of SERUG three key issues affecting the railways at the moment.

One discussion group focused on the state of plans for the creation of Great British Railways. The Chairman of SERUG, Bruce Duncan, set out his views on the progress – or otherwise – of these plans, and discussed some of the possible reasons for the sudden resignation announcement of the CEO of Network Rail, Andrew Haines.

The second discussion group explored the option for the replacement of Rolling Stock on our line, including SWR's stated plan to use Desiro units, converted to run on batteries. The plans require extension of the third-rail network, especially to provide "islands" of such track west of Salisbury, to top up batteries. It is still very unclear that the Office of Road and Rail will endorse this proposal.

The last discussion group, led by Nick Hurrell, SERUG Secretary, focused on the need for future investment in the line, to facilitate timetable changes, including Devon Metro, and to make the service more resilient and reliable.

Those attending the meeting were split into three groups of around ten people, who rotated around the three topics - ensuring that everyone had input into each subject, before a final plenary session.

All agreed that it was a useful and productive meeting. It is hoped to hold such Member's Meetings again in the future, in addition to the speaker meeting at the Autumn AGM. Several suggestions were floated for future meetings and events.

For further details of SERUG, and how to join, go to their website.

Engineering Report for May and June

Scheduled work on the West of England Line over the next two months is as follows:

Sunday 4th and Monday 5th May

The lines in the Basingstoke area will be closed all day Sunday and Monday due to maintenance work.

CrossCountry services will be affected by this work on Sunday and Monday, Great Western Railway services will be affected on Sunday only. Please see their publicity for more details.

London Waterloo to Exeter St Davids services will start from Andover and will call additionally at Grateley. Buses will run between Woking and Andover via Basingstoke.

London Waterloo to Basingstoke stopping services will not run. A revised service will run between London Waterloo and Woking.

Sunday 11th May

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

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

London Waterloo to Exeter services will start from Gillingham.

A revised service will run between London Waterloo and Andover. These services will not call at Woking.

Buses will run between Andover and Gillingham via Salisbury.

Saturday 17th May

The lines between Clapham Junction and Barnes will be closed all day due to maintenance work.

Queenstown Road station will be closed all day. Please use other nearby stations.

Due to the diverted services, some services via Wimbledon will be revised.

London Waterloo to Exeter services will depart London Waterloo earlier than normal.

Sunday 25th May

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

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

London Waterloo to Basingstoke stopping services will start from Woking and will run hourly.

At present, there is no Engineering Work planned for the West of England Line in June.

We are grateful to Ben Stephenson, our Station Manager, and to his colleagues, for the prompt and decisive way they responded to the recent graffiti attack on the station, and in getting all the graffiti removed or painted over.

Photograph (right) shows recent work behind Platform 2 to remove a number of trees. One tree has been left (at least for now) because birds are nesting there.

GWR Media Team Does It Again

We have said it before, and we will no doubt say it again, but you simply have to hand it to the media team at GWR. They continually come up with the goods when publicising the railway. And they usually put a smile of people's faces when doing it.

No exception was their April Fool's Day story about a piece of cutting-edge technology, allegedly about to be rolled out across the GWR network.

However, as readers soon worked out, Track Adhesion Cleaning Head Equipment (known of course as TACHE!) isn't being groomed for the tracks after all, and their Intercity Express Trains will continue to run bristle-free.

In their April 1st announcement, Great Western Railway claimed to have unveiled its latest cutting-edge innovation. Fitted to the front and rear of Intercity Express Train 800104, the kit was to be trialled, they said, on a special test run from Swansea to London Paddington.

Sporting a flamboyant walrus design for maximum grooming efficiency, T.A.C.H.E. had apparently been developed to help keep track smooth and spick-and-span. The whisker-wielding wonder was groomed by GWR's Innovation team, led by T.A.C.H.E. Development Manager, Miss Tasha Yode, who said:

"Debris on the track has always been a challenge, but T.A.C.H.E. means we can quite literally brush it all away. From the bristles of Chipping Sodbury to the undergrowth of the Severn Tunnel, we're confident we can Zappa it all! It'll be like giving the track a wet shave in under a minute."

Designed with precision engineering and, of course, a touch of flair, T.A.C.H.E. also boasts, she claimed, eco-friendly benefits, because the collected debris is later recycled into compost for use on station gardens.

Tasha went on to say: *"We believe in going above and beyond to give our passengers the smoothest experience – this time, with the help of a bold moustache. And who knows, if the trial is successful, we may even roll out seasonal T.A.C.H.E. variants. Perhaps a pencil-thin model for the summer or a bushy festive edition for Christmas?"*

To ensure that TACHE performs at peak bristle brilliance even in the harshest conditions, GWR announced(!) the unveiling of its perfect partner for the winter months: Winter Additive – Xtreme. The TACHE WA-x has been specifically formulated to keep the equipment gliding effortlessly across frosty rails, ensuring no bristle is left behind in GWR's desire to deliver for its customers.

If you wondered how GWR would top their earlier story about pancakes at 125 mph, well now you know… Tune in next month to see what they come up with next.

Top 20 Railway Artworks Unveiled on World Art Day

The 20 best-loved railway artworks in the UK were unveiled on April 15th, which apparently is World Art Day (no; me neither!) following a global vote held as part of a celebration of 200 years of the modern railway.

One of the most popular paintings, by Terence Cuneo, is from Russell-Cotes Art Gallery in Bournemouth. Famous works by J.M.W. Turner and Eric Ravilious are included in the final 20, along with six works by renowned railway painter Cuneo (famous for always including a mouse in his paintings) and two by Norman Wilkinson, whose paintings are featured in popular travel posters.

The shortlist includes artworks by 14 artists, including female painters Anna Todd, Ann Emily Carr and Grace Lydia Golden.

Art lovers and rail enthusiasts are now invited to choose an outright winner to be announced on June 9th, the birthday of railway pioneer George Stephenson.

The top 20 artworks were selected by public vote from a longlist of 200 compiled by Art UK, the online home of the nation's art, as part of a partnership with Railway 200, as we reported in a previous issue of this newsletter.

The shortlist is drawn from 11 public collections across England, Scotland and Wales, including the National Railway Museum, Hopetown Darlington and The Postal Museum. The initial vote highlights the breadth of organisations that hold public artworks, ranging from The National Gallery and Aberdeen Art Gallery to Cardiff and Vale University Health Board and Royal Holloway, University of London.

Anyone can register for the final vote to choose the nation's favourite on Art Uk's website. The poll closes at midnight on Sunday, 1st June. Art UK is also hosting online exhibitions of both the shortlisted and longlisted artwork.

Heritage Minister Baroness Twycross said:

"For two centuries, our railways have carried passengers and freight as well as inspiring artistic creativity across Britain. This remarkable collection showcases how deeply trains are woven into our cultural fabric.

"I'm delighted to see such diversity in the shortlist and encourage everyone to celebrate this bicentenary by viewing these wonderful artworks and voting for their favourite."

Andrew Ellis, Chief Executive of Art UK, added:

"There are so many terrific artworks of trains and the railway in the UK national collection and on Art UK. This first public vote has narrowed this down to 20 artworks from which a winner must now be chosen. Given the shortlist, this will be quite a challenge, and I cannot wait to see which one is chosen as the 'world's favourite UK railway artwork!"

The paintings will be displayed in The Railway 200 Gallery in an exhibition on the Art UK website until 31st December.

Secretary of State for Transport Shares Her Vision for Transport

The Secretary of State for Transport, Heidi Alexander MP, talked about her vision for "a transport system that works for everyone", in a speech delivered on April 10th at the National Railway Museum, York.

The attached - extended - piece is the official transcript of her speech. We have included it to reflect something of the present state of play on the railways, and attitudes within the DfT. As ever, we do not endorse as a group the views of any political party, on this or any other issue.

"Good evening, everyone, and welcome to the National Railway Museum in York. I'm tempted to say we're in the country's finest transport museum, but as a Swindon MP and a former Deputy Mayor for Transport in London, I feel I should tread carefully. So welcome to ONE of the VERY BEST transport museums in the country!

"It feels fitting for me to do my first big transport speech here. The history of our transport network — the stories of the men and women who designed it, built it, operated and used it — are woven into the fabric of our communities in 21st century Britain.

"And it's you — the people in THIS room — who are adding to that rich tapestry every day. You keep life moving. You get children to school, commuters to work, and families to their holidays. You move the goods that stock our shelves, fuel our industries, and keep businesses thriving. You don't just connect places — you connect people with the things that they need to get on in life.

"And it's in the spirit of connection that I'd like to tell you a story. I hope you won't be disappointed to learn that I haven't invited you here for a big policy announcement or news headline, but rather to share a little bit about who I am and what I believe. I want to tell you a story about the people and places who have shaped my thinking.

"I grew up in Swindon. A proud railway town on the M4 corridor — a place with much to be proud of. It's also a humble football town — and I can tell you, that as a Swindon Town supporter, I have learnt the lessons of humility all too well.

"By fate and circumstance, that's where my journey began. Outside our semi detached house, I remember my dad's first van parked up — 'Malcolm Alexander Electrical Services'.
I remember the first bike I was given — blue with a basket on the front — a bit like the blue crate I've got on my bike now.

"And I remember learning to drive around the town's infamous Magic Roundabout. And the car factories that punctuate the town's history — Rover, Honda and now, BMW. It's fair to say that in 1980s Swindon, the car was king. It still is. The proliferation of out of town shopping centres, urban expansions and a minimal public transport network shaped the transport destiny of my town.

"Now, I won't pretend that urban planning preoccupied my teenage mind too much.
Back then, I was much more concerned about whether Wham! were going to make it to Number 1. But when I moved away and got my first job, I began to see the bigger picture…
… that a poor transport network will limit choices… that it can block the aspirations of young people. And, most important of all, a good transport network can do precisely the opposite.

“I was the first person in my family to go to university. And like so many, I found work and opportunities in the capital. And so it was, at the age of 29, I walked into Lewisham Town Hall as a newly elected councillor — becoming the cabinet member for regeneration just two years later.

“I loved that job, and I fell in love with transport. Now, I’ll admit it wasn’t the language of highways management that enthralled me: “There’s no such thing as a speed hump Cllr Alexander, only speed tables and speed cushions.”

“But it was the extension of the East London Line, the creation of new brownfield sites around major railway stations, the improvements to walking and cycling links that really got me hooked. I learnt quickly that transport shapes a lot more than roads and railways.

“And equally important, I learnt that it takes a lot of people to shape transport itself. At Lewisham, I saw first-hand how transport investment could make a dramatic difference to people’s lives.

“Take Brockley Railway Station. For years, it was an uninspiring, inaccessible place. Uninviting, a bit run down. Not somewhere you’d instinctively love as you rocked up for your morning commute. But working with local campaigners, we delivered step-free access, a stunning landscaped ramp and better connectivity along the London Overground.

“Today, Brockley is thriving. It’s a place where the old and the new coexist. The Wetherspoons on the corner and fried chicken shops sit side-by-side with bakeries, breweries and a pedestrianised square.

"It was a transport scheme that built a stronger, more connected community. And it was transport that made the difference down the road in Lewisham too. We transformed it — relocating and improving a bus station, moving a roundabout, redesigning the roads, creating land for new homes, new public spaces and new opportunity. And when I say “we”, I mean the hundreds of people from different organisations who made it happen — people like you.

“When a few years later I became the Member of Parliament for Lewisham East, transport was always right at the top of the list of my constituents’ concerns. The longer train station platforms that were worse than useless without the longer trains to stop at them. The toxic air being pumped into homes around the South Circular. And when I later became Deputy Mayor for Transport in London, I had the privilege of working on those concerns more closely than I had ever done before.

“Look, London is big. So yes, naturally, I’m proud of the big stuff: Straining to keep the capital moving through Covid. Working on the Elizabeth line to deliver the jewel in the crown of the UK’s rail network. Sticking to my guns on the Silvertown Tunnel, a new river crossing that enables London’s red double-deckers to go under the Thames to the east of Tower Bridge for the first time.

“But honestly, big doesn’t always mean beautiful. Transport isn’t just about the price tag on the project. It’s about delivering a better everyday experience — buses that come on time, accessible stations, well managed road works.

“I’m just as proud of the smaller projects that made a big difference — many delivered in London by my good friend and then colleague Will Norman — segregated cycle lanes on Jamaica Road and Evelyn St, more secure cycle parking, slower speeds on roads with high KSIs, a direct vision scheme to improve visibility from the cabs of HGVs. These were transport interventions which ultimately delivered better public health, as well as better public realm.

“So when I moved back to Swindon a couple of years ago, I wasn’t just carrying a dream about becoming the MP for my home town. I arrived with baggage — determined to deliver for Swindon in a similar way to London. Not the same solutions — as every place is different, but to give people options and opportunity.

"There isn’t something in the water that makes Swindonians love their cars more than Londoners. Just a reality that public transport is better in London. And I think it’s a failure of imagination, as much as a failure of policy, that young people in Swindon don’t have better options than I had decades ago. Because change is possible.

“Across the country — from Swindon to Shrewsbury, Rotherham to Peterborough — we have underused transport assets. Unloved railway buildings — land surplus to requirements or land that could be made so. Neglected stations, like Brockley. Potential that shouldn’t go to waste, but we know that, too often, it does. And with vision, funding and collaboration, these could become hubs of regeneration, places that don’t just usher people through — but bring people together.

“We talk about delivering “London style” transport to other places. But I think we should talk more about “Swindon style” transport for Swindon, or “York style” transport for York. And I want to support the capability and capacity within councils and combined authorities to deliver regeneration, investment and tangible improvements.

“We have great mayors. We have great local leaders. We have great organisations working nationally and regionally. We have a lot of talent in this room and beyond. So, the question for me, is how do we best harness that?

“Obviously, this is a question that has vexed me particularly since I took a call from the Prime Minister at the tail end of November, asking me to serve as his Transport Secretary. And as someone who has skin in the game as a local MP and a passion to build on the work started by the force of nature, Lou Haigh, I naturally said yes.

“And here I am. Full-circle in some ways, and trying to shape a new path in another. And the task is to build a better decade for transport. Towards a better railway…

“Laying the foundations for reform — establishing Shadow Great British Railways and launching a consultation on the upcoming Railways Bill to unify track and train.

“Towards public ownership… Passing the Passenger Railway Services Act, with the first operators — Southwestern and c2c — moving into public hands in the coming months.

“Towards better buses… Introducing the Bus Services Bill, giving local authorities greater control over routes, timetables, and fares — backed by over £1 billion in investment to improve reliability and frequency.

“Towards better roads… Investing £1.6 billion in local highways, an uplift of £500 million on last year — enough to fill an extra 7 million potholes.

“Towards fairer work… Enshrining greater protections for seafarers in law.

“Towards cleaner skies… Introducing the Sustainable Aviation Fuel mandate and launching a consultation on the revenue certainty mechanism.

"Towards a fossil-free future… Supporting the installation of thousands of new EV charge points— helping to drive record electric car sales, with 31% of new cars sold in December last year being electric.

"And towards a transport system that supports the aspirations of everyone in this country…

"It's why I am so proud to work with the ministerial team at the Department for Transport.
Like me — and like all of us — they've seen the difference that good services make…
…Whether it's the tap-and-go trams and buses in Mike Kane's patch, with fares capped at £2 on Greater Manchester's Bee Network.

"…Or in Simon Lightwood's patch, where the mass transit system will improve integrated travel options in West Yorkshire, improving access to opportunities for people in Leeds and Bradford.

"…Or, in Nottingham, where one of the local bus operators, Nottingham City Transport, has been voted UK operator of the year a record six times, with passenger satisfaction amongst the highest in the country. I hear Lilian Greenwood is a pretty good local MP too …

"And as for Peter Hendy, who is his own walking museum of transport knowledge, he has a phrase that I would like to steal. He talks about transport needing to be "boringly reliable".
And he's right. If public transport options are boringly reliable, then it means day-to-day life is easier for everyone.

"So, by 2035, I want public transport to play a greater role in national life, becoming the easiest, most attractive choice… brilliantly and boringly reliable.

"Enrique Peñalosa, a former mayor of Bogotá, once said: "An advanced city is not one where the poor have to own a car, but one where the rich choose to use public transport." That's a vision I believe in.

"But I can picture the headlines now — so let me counter the column inches before they emerge: there is no such thing as a war on motorists. I drive. I own a car and I love it — a racing green Mini Cooper convertible.

"I walk. I cycle. I take buses, trains, and taxis. And I'll bet most of you do too.

"No serious person is proposing to ask people like my dad, a self-employed electrician, to swap their van for a bus, forcing them to lug all their kit around — I certainly am not.
Through his career, my dad was a professional problem solver, and I hope I'll carry the torch for that family tradition.

"But I'll be focussing on solving the real problems, not wasting time on the invented ones.
Because I'm sure everybody in this room would agree that where you live shouldn't determine what you can achieve. That your hometown, no matter how big or how small, should provide the transport options to meet your aspirations… and that — if transport doesn't nurture young people with the opportunities they deserve, then our entire economy misses out on the talent it needs to grow.

"That's why we're here today. To have the conversations that bring us closer together. I want to harness your talents, your expertise and your drive to solve real problems. Because, no matter where people are travelling to, they should be proud of where they're coming from."

SWR Makes Statement on Guards Role on Arterio Trains

On Thursday 24th April, SWR issued a statement about the delayed roll-out of the new Arterio trains on their network, and the role of Guards on these trains. They said that, for the foreseeable future, they would focus on introducing these new trains on to more lines, whilst retaining the present system of Guards closing the doors, although drivers will open them. They said:

"We are sorry that the Arterio rollout is taking longer than previously expected.

"As has been well documented, as well as introducing a new set of trains, SWR is introducing a new method of work with our drivers responsible for opening and closing the doors (DODC operations). In order to do so, the drivers rely on effective CCTV cameras and in-cab displays down the full length of the 10-car train to make the judgement it is safe to depart.

"Many of the 98 stations the Arterio will serve were built more than 150 years ago, with the Victorian infrastructure creating some specific challenges in guaranteeing a consistently clear image for the driver, under all light conditions.

"While we complete those works at our stations, we've taken the decision to re-phase our training programme in order to bring as many Arterios into customer service as quickly as possible.

"This means we will now begin training our Drivers and Guards to operate the trains with the Driver opening the doors and the Guards closing them (DOGC operations), which will enable us to operate on new routes sooner.

"SWR remains committed to returning to full DODC operations at the earliest viable opportunity.

"With the shorter training programme now underway, the approach will enable an accelerated programme of introduction, with more Arterios to enter service as we approach the summer. We will share further details in due course.

"While the further delay has been frustrating, we now have a way forward that will see increasing numbers of customers enjoying increased capacity and comfort of the Arterios through the rest of 2025 and beyond."

The RMT Union has always been strongly opposed to DODC operation of trains – indeed with industrial action in a number of parts of the country, including on SWR, in recent years hinging mainly, or partly, on this issue. So it remains to be seen how long what SWR calls "the earliest viable opportunity" will take to come about.

Keep up to date with further updates on the Arterio roll-out, and all the latest news from SWR, in our monthly newsletter.

History Corner: A Railway 200 Special Report

History was made on April 26th, as the final steam train was signalled through by Farncombe, Petersfield and Haslemere signal boxes, which are shortly to be decommissioned.

Enthusiasts visiting the stations saw Merchant Navy Class Clan Line No. 35028 hauling the first leg of the Great Britain XVII, a rail tour of the whole country.

Network Rail pointed out that the three signal boxes are nearing 50 years of service and are becoming less reliable and increasingly difficult to maintain. Later this year, the programme of work to upgrade the signalling systems between Farncombe and Petersfield will be completed, and control of signalling will then be transferred from these three signal boxes to the Basingstoke Rail Operating Centre (ROC).

This new digital signalling technology is part of wider upgrades to the railway between London and Portsmouth, and will, say Network Rail, make the railway more reliable and increase the future potential capacity of the line for more and faster train services.

Once control of the signalling has been moved to the ROC, Farncombe, Petersfield and Haslemere signal boxes will be decommissioned. Haslemere Signal Box, which was first opened in 1895, will then re-open as a small museum which will be run by the Haslemere Community Station and Signal Box Trust.

Ashley Hillier, a signaller at Network Rail, who signalled the final steam train through Haslemere, commented: *"It really is an honour to be part of this fantastic piece of history and to get to take part and to cherish that in your memories going forward as I take that into my career. It's fantastic. I'm very very proud."*

Tom McNamee, Network Rail's Wessex Route Infrastructure director, said:

"We have been working for many years to modernise the signalling on the Portsmouth Direct Line and the Farncombe to Petersfield scheme is just one of the areas we have been improving.

"Once this vital work has been completed, we hope to have increased capacity to run more services connecting Hampshire, Surrey and London with reduced journey times. We know that signal boxes across the route are part of the romance of the railway and we are delighted that Haslemere's signal box will be preserved for years to come."

A Merchant Navy Locomotive Preservation Society spokesperson said:

"With Clan Line's strong links to the South Western division of the Southern Region during its operational life under British Railways and under MNLPS ownership, it is the ideal locomotive to mark this milestone.

"The MNLPS is especially delighted that Haslemere signal box will be preserved through the efforts of The Haslemere Community Station and Signal Box Trust. This ensures the history of the route and its signalling legacy will continue to inspire and educate future generations. We're proud and honoured to contribute to this moment in railway history."

We hope to welcome Clan Line to Honiton on Saturday August 16th, when it is due to haul the Atlantic Coast Express. Read future newsletters for further updates and details of timings.

Thanks go to Dave Tozer for this fascinating "before and after" photograph (right) he took at Exeter St Davids before boarding the Midland Pullman for a journey to York.

He reports that the fare to take a trip on this iconic train was £270. Believe it or not, that is just £2 more than the full scheduled fare for the same Exeter to York journey today on CrossCountry!

Bookings have now opened for visits to Inspiration, the new exhibition train which is part of Railway 200. The train launches at the Severn Valley Railway in Worcestershire on 27th June and will then visit 60 locations, showcasing rail's past, present and future in new, fun and engaging ways.

The exhibition train will be visiting London Waterloo station on 18th and 19th July (the weekend of the 165th anniversary of the opening of the line thorough Honiton). Tickets are now available to book for visits to Inspiration between 27th June and 1st October. The train's itinerary for the rest of 2025 and first six months of 2026 will be confirmed later this summer.

Important New Rail Tourism Strategy Launched

Our friends at Community Rail Network have recently launched a new Tourism and Leisure Strategy. Focusing on five key aims, the strategy provides a focus to Community Rail Network's tourism and leisure work over the next three years.

They remind readers of the strategy that: *"Community Rail is a powerful force in driving modal shift and inspiring and enabling rail travel, especially for tourism and leisure, with a proud tradition of drawing on local culture, stories and landscapes to support this."*

Across Britain, 75 community rail partnerships and 1300 station friends groups engage directly with more than 16,000 people per year in grassroots activities to promote rail-based sustainable tourism, on top of the tens of thousands more through their local and regional communications. However, they say, there is more that can be done.

The aim of the new strategy is to give focus to Community Rail Network's ongoing tourism and leisure work until 2027.

It identifies areas of opportunity to maximise and deliver results, while engaging and supporting members and partners to do the same.

Community Rail Network has engaged with our community rail members, rail industry partners and tourism organisations and developed five key aims, which are to:

- Support members to deliver effective, evidence-led tourism and leisure campaigns locally and regionally;
- Provide online platforms for members to bolster their tourism and leisure promotions and extend their reach to wider audiences;
- Encourage the tourism and leisure industry to promote rail as a sustainable and healthy way to travel, drawing on and working with community rail;
- Influence strategy and thinking at a regional level, towards more sustainable, inclusive and healthy travel, drawing on local insights and initiatives, including in community rail ;
- Secure funding for Community Rail Network's tourism and leisure work, to provide a sound financial footing to drive results .

Reacting to the launch of the new document, a spokesperson for Community Rail Network said:

"This strategy enables us to take a longer-term view and consider how community rail can engage communities with rail-based tourism and leisure in the most impactful, beneficial ways, helping to make the shift to more sustainable, inclusive, healthy and economically beneficial forms of travel.

"The framework in this strategy provides a focus for us to work alongside our members and the tourism industry to shape and develop plans and activities that will capitalise on the local knowledge and insights from across community rail. It looks to expand and develop our current tourism and leisure work, introducing new campaigns and initiatives, and enhancing community rail promotions, their reach and impact."

The first section of the Strategy, which focuses on supporting members like us, sets out some of the key ways in the organisation will support its members:

- We recognise the importance of community rail partnerships, station friends volunteers and other community groups in the development and promotion of an area's tourism offer, and specifically their ability to encourage more inclusive, sustainable and locally-beneficial forms of tourism. We will provide members with the opportunities, skills and tools to participate in wider national and regional campaigns working with local partners to promote rail as part of the sustainable tourism offer.

- We will continue to provide ad-hoc tourism and leisure support for our members, working together to drive results on their local projects and initiatives. Our support and development team will continue to work closely with our communications and policy team to identify opportunities and deliver support, providing one to one guidance and assistance tailored to the needs of each member.

- We will work with national tourism organisations including Visit England, Visit Scotland, Visit Wales and national campaign leaders such as Railway 200, Heritage Open Days (England), Open Doors (Wales) and Doors Open (Scotland) to develop opportunities for Community Rail Network and our members to participate in and benefit from.

Further details of Community Rail Network, and their work, can be found on their website. The Friends of Honiton Station is a member of the network, funded by South Western Railway.

Railway Staff Run to Raise Money for Cosy Coats Charity

Huge congratulations to Network Rail's Wessex Route Director, Mark Goodall, and a team of rail industry colleagues, who recently completed the London Landmarks Half Marathon, raising vital funds in aid of charity Cosy Coats, a charity Mark founded five years ago.

The rail industry team consisting of Mark Goodall; Laura Heath, Network Rail's Southern Region Programme Manager; Deborah Pike, Network Rail Performance Process Specialist; Zeb Butt, Network Rail Security Assurance Analyst; Tara Walsh, Network Rail Customer Account Manager, and Eleni Jordan, Commercial and Customer Director at C2C, partnered with a group of teachers. So far, they have raised a combined £8,436 for the Cosy Coats charity.

Mark completed the course in two hours and 15 minutes while Laura broke the sub two-hour mark, crossing the line in one hour and 50 minutes.

After completing the half marathon - and no doubt after catching his breath - Mark commented:

"I'm delighted to have completed the London Landmarks Half Marathon and raised vital funds for Cosy Coats, a charity very dear to my heart. It has been several years since I ran any significant distance and even with my training, it was a very tough challenge.

"However, the thought of a child in need without a warm coat on their back really drove me on and I'm so pleased with the near £8,000 we've already raised which will go such a long way in purchasing new coats that will bring both warmth and self-esteem to those children who most need it.

"I'm so grateful to my Network Rail colleagues and teachers who joined me in tackling this half marathon and kindly ask if anyone is willing to sponsor us, no matter the amount, it would be greatly appreciated."

Cosy Coats works with schools and other organisations to identify children and families in need of new coats. The children identified can choose a coat of choice from high street provider such as Next or Marks & Spencer which ensures they are wearing a coat they are proud of, and something that is new and theirs. Most of the time, the children never find out that a charity purchased their new coat.

Since launching the charity in 2020, Cosy Coats has provided nearly 1,000 coats for children at over 100 schools. Two years ago, Mark opened his first pop-up shop at Birmingham New Street station in the hope of 'selling' the 22 coats he had bought in the space of a week.

The generosity of the public saw to it that he had sold out within just a little over three hours, requiring him to go and purchase some more that evening.

Since then the charity has continued to grow. In 2023 it provided coats for around 400 children. And as we reported previously, last October Mark ran another pop up-shop in Birmingham, again selling all of the coats available.