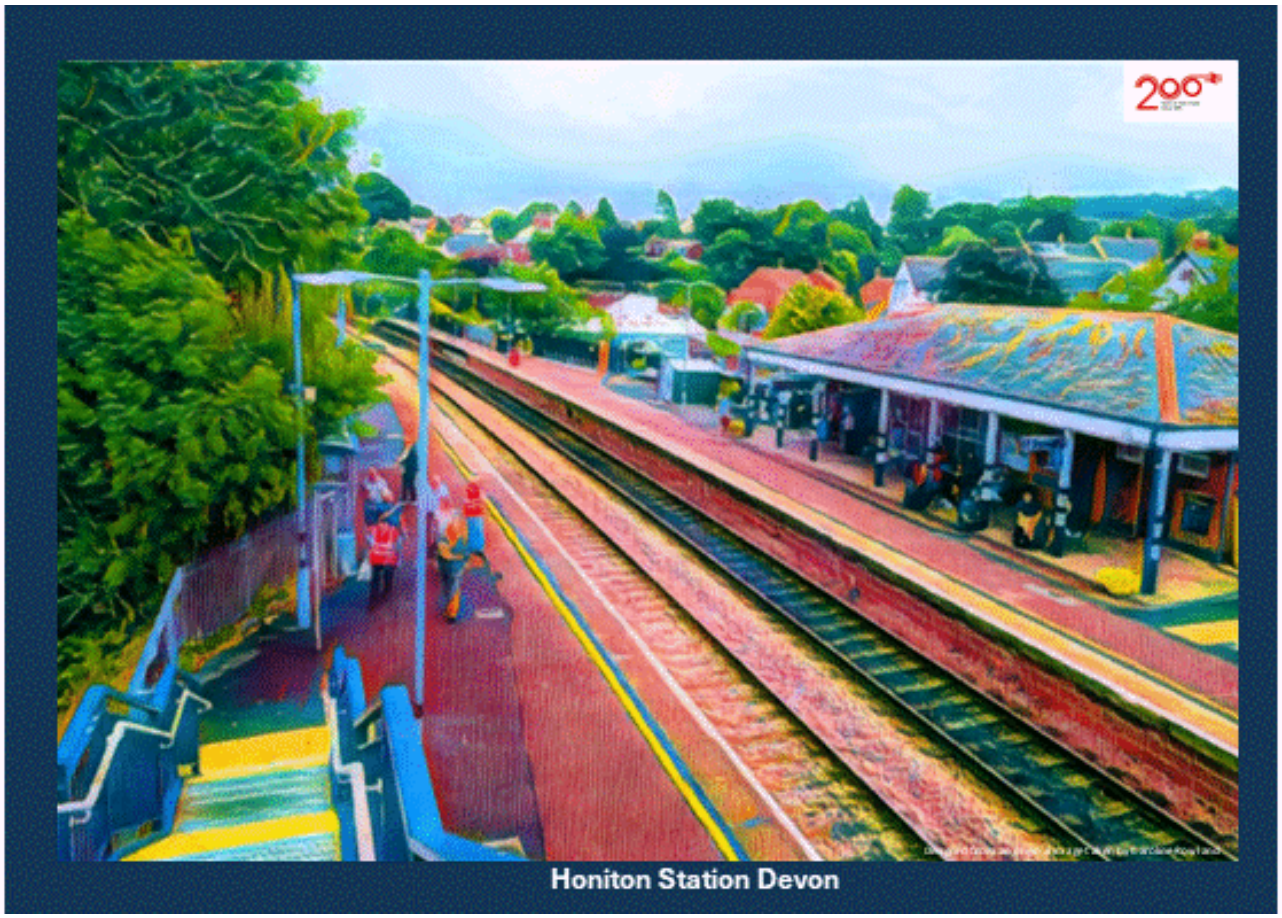
The Train at Platform 1

The Friends of Honiton Station Newsletter 65 - August 2025

Welcome to the August newsletter. It was so good to welcome everybody to the station last month, to celebrate the 165th birthday of the station, as part of Railway 200. As well as cutting our birthday cake, we unveiled a plaque to help us remember the significance of this important milestone in the history of our railways. Members joined with our local MP, the Mayor, councillors and representatives of the railway industry to mark our special day. Sadly, this month we also reflect on the news that an emergency timetable will be introduced again from August 11th.



Railway 200 postcard of Honiton Station. Credit: Blackmore Vale Community Rail Partnership

Stop Press: Emergency Timetable Introduced from August 11th

As we went to press, SWR and Network Rail announced that due to continuing problems with soil moisture deficit, services between London Waterloo and Exeter St Davids will run to a reduced timetable from Monday 11th August. Customers are advised to plan ahead and allow extra time to complete their journeys, with the following timetable changes:

- One train per hour from London Waterloo to Yeovil Junction - taking approximately 25 minutes longer than usual.

- One train every two hours from London Waterloo to Exeter St Davids - reduced from one train per hour, taking approximately one hour longer to Exeter than usual.

The amended timetable will restore train services to Crewkerne every two hours, which had been served by buses since Monday 28th July. SWR and Network Rail had announced late last month that services between London Waterloo and Exeter St Davids would not call at Crewkerne until further notice.

Following the region's driest spring since 1836 and a prolonged dry spell continuing into the summer, which is forecasted to be the driest for 200 years, clay embankments between Salisbury and Axminster have, they say, dried out and shrunk. The condition known as 'soil moisture deficit' has disturbed the levels of the tracks above, meaning trains cannot travel safely at their normal speeds.

Network Rail began recording soil moisture levels in 2009. Levels at some sites in the Southern Region, which stretches from Kent to East Devon, are at their lowest since those records began.

Many of the Victorian-era railway embankments that support tracks across the Southern Region are made of clay, which absorbs a lot of water and severely shrinks when it is dry. In very high temperatures clay soil dries out through heat radiation, and any remaining water in the ground is then soaked up by trees and other vegetation. As the soil dries out, it shrinks, disturbing the track above it.

A temporary speed restriction of 40mph was initially implemented over four miles in the Crewkerne area and, due to the impact of slower running trains on the wider West of England Line timetable, Crewkerne was served by a rail replacement bus service, connecting to Yeovil Junction and Axminster.

On August 1st, SWR and Network Rail made the decision to go further, and cut the service west of Yeovil Junction to one train every two hours. Journey Planners will be updated from Monday 4th August with details of the weekday service, with the weekend service to follow shortly afterwards.

A spokesperson said:

"We are conscious that plans may need to be further altered for the return of schools and colleges in early September and we are working on these now. We will be in contact with the affected schools and colleges in advance.

"The temporary timetable is designed to provide customers with a reliable service while trains adhere to speed restrictions, the result of a condition known as soil moisture deficit."

According to the Met Office, the spring of 2025 was the UK's warmest and sunniest since 1910 and saw the least amount of rain since 1976. Continuing into summer, the extremely dry conditions have removed moisture in clay soil embankments between Gillingham in Dorset and Axminster in Devon, causing them to shrink.

Track that sits above these embankments has been disturbed, so four speed restrictions are now being imposed for the safety of passing trains. Instead of travelling at a maximum of 85mph, trains will be forced to travel at 40mph.

Dry conditions are set to continue, so it is possible further speed restrictions will be required. Attempting to stabilise the track now would only provide a short-lived fix, as the soil continues to move. Once soil moisture levels improve and the ground begins to rehydrate and settle, engineers will carry out lasting repairs to stabilise the embankments and restore track levels, allowing the normal timetable to return.

A spokesperson for South Western Railway and Network Rail added:

"We understand how critical this line is to the communities it serves and apologise sincerely for the inconvenience. This decision has not been taken lightly, and we are continuing to monitor conditions and restore the normal timetable as soon as it is safe and feasible to do so.

"When soil moisture levels improve, engineers will stabilise the affected embankments and restore track levels, following which the normal timetable will be able to return. SWR and Network Rail will continue regularly monitoring the area, but at present, soil moisture level is not expected to improve until the autumn. This means that the amended timetable may need to be in place for several months.

"We are aware that this could potentially impact on school and college students when they return in September and will engage with the schools and colleges well in advance of that to ensure that sufficient communication plans and mitigations are in place as required."

Birthday Cakes Celebrate 165 years of Axminster and Honiton Stations

A huge thank you to everyone who came along to Honiton Station on Saturday July 19th, to celebrate Railway 200 with a special birthday event to mark the 165th anniversary of the opening of the Yeovil to Exeter railway, and both stations, in 1860.

The festivities started at Honiton station when Richard Foord MP, joined by Honiton Mayor Cllr Andrew Pearsall and Devon County Councillor for Feniton and Honiton Richard Jefferies, first cut the special birthday cake and then unveiled a commemorative blue plaque. The cake was made by James' Patisserie in the town.

Honiton's new Town Crier Caroline Kolek read out a message of celebration on the station platform (photograph, right, by Vernon Whitlock).

The focus then moved to Axminster where Axminster Mayor Cllr Jill Farrow, joined by Richard Foord MP and Paul Hayward, Axminster's Devon County Councillor, cut the special cake and then unveiled Axminster station's commemorative blue plaque.

Several people including Richard Foord MP, Richard Burningham and Andrew Ardley, Regional Development Manager (West) for South Western Railway, attended both events, travelling between Honiton and Axminster by train (of course!).

Richard Foord, MP for Honiton and Sidmouth said:

"It was a joy to mark the 165th anniversary of railway stations at Honiton and Axminster. South Western Railway has just entered public ownership. With this significant development, as well as the 200th anniversary of British entrepreneurs who laid the first track in 1825, it was well worth getting together with local businesses, councillors, station staff and service users. Here's to the next 165 years – and hopefully more trains!"

The events at Honiton were organised by the Friends of Honiton Station and those at Axminster by the Railway Kitchen, the Ale Way (both of which are based at the station) and by local charity For the Love of a Railway which celebrates the former branch line between Axminster and Lyme Regis.

At both stations, they were assisted by South Western Railway and the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership.

Andrew Ardley, Regional Development Manager (West) for South Western Railway said:

"The two events on Saturday at Honiton and Axminster epitomise all that is great about the railway in this area - a partnership between the railway industry, community organisations and local businesses where everybody works together to achieve more than the sum of the parts.

"We have been so pleased with the number and quality of events at stations on the SWR network in this 200th year of the modern railway which have really showcased what stations mean to their local communities.

"Thank you to everyone involved in making the celebrations such a success and we look forward to continuing to work with you in the future"

Photograph right: Councillor Andrew Pearsell, the Mayor of Honiton, and Andrew Ardley from SWR unveil the plaque, accompanied by Richard Burningham, Manager of the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership. Photographs by Dave Withey.

The Chairman of The Friends of Honiton Station, Martin Long, said:

"We were delighted to welcome people to the station, to celebrate the tremendous contribution the station and its outstanding staff make to our community.

In this year of Railway 200, it was good not just to look back to the founding of our railway, but to look forward with hope to the vital role it can play in the future."

Axminster Town Mayor Cllr Jill Farrow added:

"Our railway is without doubt one of Axminster's greatest assets, It's impossible to put a value on its contribution to this community, and it's highly appropriate that we celebrate and support it. We have the advantage of living in a gloriously beautiful part of the world and, when the need arises, can get to London in less than three hours!"

The Axminster celebrations also included a celebration barbecue run by the Ale Way and a display, also in the Ale Way, of previously unseen and unique railway photographs taken by Percy Bird, a driver on the Axminster to Lyme Regis Line in the late 1930s and 1940s.

Earlier, commemorative model trains had been run on the layouts at the For the Love of a Railway Visitor Centre in Chard St, Axminster. The photographic display at the Ale Way continued during the Ale Way's usual opening hours until Sunday 27 July, when Axminster Model Railway Exhibition also took place across the station area.

The previous evening, Friday 18 July, had seen a supper event at the Railway Kitchen featuring the launch of Sentimental Journey, a real-time video journey along the old Lyme Regis line with commentary from Terry Guppy, who worked as a locomotive fireman on the line.

Events at Axminster. Photograph courtesy of For The Love of a Railway

Previously, a vibrant display of colour, creativity and community spirit recently took centre stage at Cranbrook Station, as students, artists, and Town Council and rail representatives came together to unveil a new public art installation.

Created during workshops led by artist Alistair Lambert, the artworks reflect the imagination and identity of Cranbrook's young residents, offering travellers a splash of inspiration and beauty to enjoy during their commute.

The artwork celebrates what makes Cranbrook special, depicting not only the homes and lives of its residents but also the town's crown jewel – the national award-winning Cranbrook Country Park and its rich natural habitat.

The project was commissioned by the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership and funded by South Western Railway and the Community Rail Development Fund, administered by Community Rail Network on behalf of the Department for Transport.

Rebecca Catterall, Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership Development Officer, said:

"This wonderful new artwork will not only enhance the experience for people using Cranbrook Station but really showcases the creativity of the young people involved."

Lead artist Alistair Lambert said:

"All the pupils involved rose to the challenge by cutting out, tearing and assembling paper collage images to create colourful designs based on the buildings and green spaces of Cranbrook.

"I was spoilt for choice by the range of beautiful, imaginative and vibrant work that the pupils produced in our short workshops and their enthusiasm and creativity shows through in the composition that I am proud to have assembled to greet visitors to Cranbrook Station."

These events were all part of local celebrations of Railway 200, the 200th anniversary of the modern railway which began with the Stockton & Darlington Railway in 1825.

Progress On Major South West Rail projects

Network Rail has released new aerial photos showing the first six months of progress on Okehampton Interchange station, which is set to open in 2026. The station will be the newest addition to the Dartmoor Line, connecting West Devon, Torridge and North Cornwall with Exeter and beyond. The £15 million scheme is being funded by the Department for Transport (DfT) with contributions from Devon County Council and West Devon Borough Council.

Images credit: Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership

Since work began in January, major progress has been made to create the new station on the edge of Okehampton, two minutes from the A30. In March, 300 metres of the single-line track was moved 90cm north to allow a new platform to be built alongside it. The previous track layout didn't allow for a platform to be built that meets regulations for new stations.

New track and 20 concrete sleepers were installed in the new alignment and 1,000 tonnes of ballast (track stone) laid and compacted. Drainage work also took place with two new chambers built under the track and 300 tonnes of stone laid to allow water to flow away from the railway. Then in May, 25 bored piles were driven 12 metres into the ground to support the new platform, footbridge and lift.

The next major stage of work will see the footbridge and lift shaft installed in autumn. Work is also ongoing to build a 200-space car park and station platform.

Network Rail lead portfolio manager Alex Phillips said:

"The last six months has seen strong momentum on this important project, with several significant milestones reached. There's more to come and we're excited to bring the new station to life in the months ahead."

GWR Regional Growth Manager David Whiteway said:

"We're really pleased to see the new Okehampton Interchange beginning to take shape. This will build on the success that the reopening of the Dartmoor Line has already had, better connecting people with jobs, students with education services, and leisure opportunities for all – providing valuable support for the community and local economies."

The Government has announced that two other key rail projects in the west have been given permission to make further progress following last month's Spending Review.

The rail line between Bristol city centre and Portishead – which was last used six decades ago – will be reinstated, delivering two new stations at Pill and Portishead and bringing thousands of people closer to the railway and the economic opportunities it provides.

The Government is investing a further £27 million to reinstate passenger rail services between Portishead and Bristol city centre. Once complete, the new passenger service will connect 50,000 residents to the railway network by reopening a line that was closed in 1964. The scheme is part of the MetroWest programme, which will bring suburban services to more stations across the west of England. A new hourly train timetable will provide economic and leisure opportunities for passengers and support a new housing development.

Further work has been agreed towards the building of two new stations at Wellington in Somerset and Cullompton in Devon, improving transport links to Exeter and beyond and unlocking significant new housing developments.

An official announcement said that Cullompton station and the linked A382 upgrade will move into what is called the "Delivery Planning Stages", with further announcements expected later this year. Once eventually complete, Wellington and Cullompton Stations will provide two additional stations that will serve the Great Western Mainline from London Paddington to Penzance and sit either side of Tiverton Parkway station. The original stations closed in 1964 and both towns have grown in population since then and are the largest settlements unserved by a rail station between Exeter and Taunton.

Marcus Jones, Network Rail's Western route director, said:

"We're pleased that these two projects have been given the go ahead in our region, providing significant economic benefits as well as boosting sustainable travel options for commuters in Somerset, Devon, and Bristol.

"Improved rail links connect people with job and leisure opportunities that support local economies, and we look forward to bringing the railway closer to communities that haven't had easy access to train journeys for more than 60 years."

Major Disruption Hits Waterloo

Saturday July 19th and Monday July 21st saw major disruption at Waterloo, due to a major signalling failure. Platforms 1 -14 were all closed.

On July 21st, this led SWR to issue a rare non-weather-related Do Not Travel Notice, urging passengers to delay or cancel their journeys. Announcements at Honiton informed passengers that journeys were undertaken at passengers' own risk, with no replacement busses or taxis offered if services were further disrupted or cancelled.

In the event, through the practice of trains being turned at Salisbury or Basingstoke, trains through Honiton to Exeter ran more or less normally all day.

So, what had happened, what caused such disruption? SWR takes up the story…

We're very sorry for the disruption faced by customers over the several days from Friday 18 to Monday 21 July. Such serious disruption over multiple days is very rare, but we know how frustrating and inconvenient it is, so we are grateful to all customers for your patience and understanding.

We have contended with three major signalling failures on our network over the past few days – on Friday, Saturday and Monday.

On Friday evening from around 20:30, a signalling failure at our Rail Operating Centre in Basingstoke prevented us from running trains on the Windsor and Reading side of our suburban network. While the rest of our network was able to run normally, services on these routes were unable to run for the rest of the night. Signalling was restored at around 01:00, with services able to resume on these routes the following morning.

On Saturday morning at 09:30, a signalling failure at London Waterloo station, connected to the Wimbledon Area Signalling Centre, prevented the use of Platforms 1 to 14. This affected long-distance and some suburban services heading south of London.

Trains on the Windsor and Reading routes were unaffected by this second incident. Services were subject to significant delays, cancellations and revisions for the rest of the day, with signalling restored at around 21:00.

This morning (Monday) at around 05:00, another signalling failure at London Waterloo station once again prevented the use of Platforms 1 to 14, affecting the same routes as the incident on Saturday.

Given we could only move very few trains in and out of the station, and trains and crew were not in the right place for the morning peak, we issued a 'do not travel' message for customers. Signalling was restored at 09:00 this morning.

As so many trains and crew were out of position, the 'do not travel' message remained in place until midday. The restoration of services progressed throughout the day, particularly for suburban routes, and customers were advised to 'check before you travel' from 14:30. Given the significant challenges involved, service recovery was more difficult on the long-distance routes to Weymouth, Portsmouth and Exeter.

When a signalling fault occurs, the system automatically enters a safety mode — known as a 'fail safe' — which turns all signals red. This is a built-in feature that stops all train movements when the system loses visibility or control over the tracks and helps keep customers safe.

London Waterloo is one of the busiest stations in the country. The vast majority of SWR services – around 1,600 on a typical weekday – either start or terminate at the station.

When space is severely limited at London Waterloo, such as on Saturday and today (Monday), it creates a knock-on effect that spreads disruption to the whole network. When trains cannot leave or enter London Waterloo, trains might terminate short of the station or not be able to leave the depot at all. The result is that trains and crew are not where they need to be and services cannot run as intended.

Trains and train crews are assigned to carefully planned schedules – called diagrams –accounting for several different services during the day. If one train can't get into or out of London Waterloo, this can disrupt many services throughout the day. Train crews must also adhere to safe working hours and require knowledge of the route they are working, so the right crew has to be available for a service to run.

On Saturday and today (Monday), 14 out of the 24 platforms at the station could not be used, severely limiting the number of services able to run and preventing trains and crew moving around the whole network. Even once the problem at London Waterloo is resolved, it can take a long time for trains and crews to get back to where they need to be, so the impact often lasts for hours afterwards.

Engineers worked urgently on site to fix the faults and restore the signalling systems as soon as possible so services could resume. We'll now be officially reviewing what happened in detail, to understand the root causes, and to ensure we learn the lessons to help prevent such incidents from happening again.

On the following day (Tuesday), the new Managing Director of SWR, Lawrence Bowman, wrote to all stakeholders, including The Friends of Honiton Station, to issue a personal apology for the disruption. He said:

"I'm very sorry for the disruption our customers have faced over the past four days, caused by three separate signalling incidents. While such disruption over multiple days is very rare, I understand how frustrating it is and am grateful for your patience and understanding.

"During each outage, the signalling system automatically entered its built-in safety mode, turning all signals to red to help protect the safety of everyone using the railway. Even after engineers have fixed the original issue, the knock-on effect of trains and crews being in the wrong place mean it can take a long time to restore services.

"The issues have now been resolved, but we will conduct a thorough review of their root causes, and to ensure we learn the lessons to reduce the risk of such incidents happening again. Repeated failure like these, and the impacts they had on your journeys, are unacceptable. I sincerely apologise for the disruption your encountered."

New Balls Please

Every year, railway companies, including SWR, seek out ways to support sports fans trying to travel more sustainably to watch their favourite stars in action.

This year has been no exception, with SWR making announcements at stations – including at Honiton – of short-term changes to timetables to help fans get to and from the tennis at Wimbledon. Among other changes, passengers on the 0752, 0855 and 0955 trains from Honiton were able to travel direct to Wimbledon, with a later evening train offering a daily return journey.

Other regular SWR promotions include travel to watch Hampshire Hawks one-day cricket fixtures at Southampton. Plans are in place to encourage fans to travel to group games in the Women's Rugby World Cup being held at Sandy Park in Exeter, to travel by train.

Engineering Report for August and September

Saturday 2nd and Sunday 3rd August

Due to maintenance work in the Wimbledon area, some late evening services on Saturday and early morning services on Sunday will be cancelled, revised or replaced by buses for all or part of their journey.

Saturday 6th and Sunday 7th September

The lines in the Wimbledon area will be closed all weekend due to maintenance work. Berrylands station will be closed all weekend. Please use other nearby stations.

Saturday

London Waterloo to Exeter St Davids services will be revised.

Buses will run between Clapham Junction and Surbiton

Sunday

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

Buses will run between: Clapham Junction and Surbiton

Saturday 27th and Sunday 28th September

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

London Waterloo to Exeter St Davids services will terminate at Yeovil Junction.

Buses will run between Yeovil Junction and Exeter St Davids.

Railway 200 Exhibition Train Reaches Waterloo

The special Railway 200 Exhibition Train 'Inspiration' arrived at London Waterloo on July 17th as part of its year-long tour across Britain. Waterloo, Britain's biggest station, welcomed the train when it pulled into Platform 19. Steam was in the air, as it was preceded by our old friend the Merchant Navy Class Clan Line No. 35028, which formed the head of the train.

The following day representatives from Network Rail and South Western Railway, and VIPs including Rail Minister Lord Hendy formally welcomed the train to Waterloo prior to it opening to the public.

Over the course of its year-long tour, more than 200,000 visitors—including numerous schoolchildren—are anticipated to visit the train as it travels to 60 locations throughout Britain, presenting the history and future of rail in informative and engaging ways.

The train serves as a centrepiece of a year-long celebration marking two centuries of British railways and aims to encourage interest in railway careers by showcasing the industry's diverse range of roles and opportunities.

Curated in partnership with the National Railway Museum, the four carriages include:

- A ‘Railway Firsts’ coach, which highlights significant moments in the development of the railway;
- A ‘Wonderlab on Wheels’ coach that allows visitors to test their engineering skills with various interactive exhibits;
- A carriage called ‘Your Railway Future,’ which showcases less visible roles in rail and encourages consideration of careers in the industry for the future; and
- A ‘Partner Zone,’ which will change as the train travels across Britain and stops at different locations.

Tom Desmond, Operations Director for Network Rail, said:

“We are honoured to welcome Inspiration, the Railway 200 Exhibition train, to London Waterloo, the London terminal of the South Western Railway network and the third busiest station in the country.

“The railway is a fantastic industry to work in and this train is a wonderful way of inspiring the next generation. Demand at Waterloo has been fantastic with all tickets snapped up but future opportunities will arise in the coming months when it returns to the south of England.”

Emma Roberts, programme manager for Railway 200, said:

“This special exhibition train is a new, free national visitor attraction, offering an unforgettable experience for hundreds of thousands of people across Britain, including many schoolchildren. It will excite, enlighten, entertain and inspire them to take a fresh look at the railway, as part of its anniversary celebrations.”

Lyndsey Robson-Malone, Service Delivery Director for South Western Railway, commented:

“Across the SWR network, the last seven months have been packed with events marking special anniversaries, station birthdays and more for Railway 200, celebrating the countless big and small ways the railway shapes and supports our region.

“As we host the Inspiration train at the country’s biggest station, we hope it will encourage the next generation to take our great industry forward in the decades and centuries ahead.

“Alongside many more Railway 200 activities planned for the rest of the year, we look forward to welcoming the Inspiration back to the SWR network at Southampton Central in December.”

James Cousins, Press and Communications Officer for Merchant Navy Locomotive Preservation Society, said:

“We are delighted to support the Inspiration Train at London Waterloo for Railway 200 and promote railways, past, present and future for all ages and to help inspire the next generation in railways.

“Given the location which is greatly associated with Clan Line's rich history being 'London's Locomotive', it’s fitting to see our engine back at this historic station for this extra special event.”

Just Where is the Worlds' Oldest Railway?

There is an excellent BBC documentary on iPlayer from the series Our Lives. Called "The World's Oldest Railway (a claim there might be a few quibbles about), it tells the story of the work of volunteers at Tanfield in the North East to bring back to life a railway – originally a wooden trackway built to haul coal – whose origins go back 300 years.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of volunteer rail enthusiasts, what could have been a forgotten relic has instead become a thriving monument to the region's industrial past and a showcase of the impact the region once had on the world.

Now the railway community who saved it is preparing for a fitting celebration. They're working against the clock to complete specially restored engines, pass down heritage skills to the younger generations and create a moment in history with their biggest event yet.

We meet young train enthusiasts Sophie, Dave and Tom as they keep the railway going, alongside Peter and Bob who restored the railway in the 1970s. With six steam engines and the oldest locomotive in the UK visiting the railway, along with 500 guests, it's a logistical challenge.

One incredible feature of the film – both on the part of the volunteers and the BBC's producer – is the 30-minute film manages not to mention Railway 200 once!

Atlantic Coast Express Back in Town: Possibly?

As we went to press, we were still hoping to welcome Tornado to the station at the head of the Atlantic Coast Express (ACE) on Saturday August 16th.

The running of this service depends on Network Rail giving permission, during this period when speed (and presumably weight) restrictions are in place on the line.

If the steam special runs, it is due to arrive at around 12.25, with the train waiting at Honiton until about 12.55.

If you are planning on coming to see the ACE, why not complete it with a visit to Gate to Plate, Honiton's annual food festival, taking place on the High Street all day.

It is always well worth a visit.