The Train at Platform 1

The Friends of Honiton Station Newsletter 68 - November 2025

Welcome to the November newsletter. It continues to be a frustrating time for everyone who cares about our railway. With relatively little rainfall at the start of the Autumn, the condition of the clay banks has only been only improving very slowly. So the prospect of a resumption of the full hourly service is still uncertain. In the meanwhile, we continue to work with our colleagues and our MP (who has written on the subject in the local paper recently) to keep the long-term needs of our railway on the agenda. Decisions over Devon Metro and the future of the rolling stock are needed.

The sun sets over our railway, October 2025. Hopefully not a metaphor… Photo by Dave Tozer

No Return to Normal Service in October

SWR's stakeholders, including The Friends of Honiton Station received the latest update from Network Rail and South Western Railway on October 10th about the state of the track affected by Soil Moisture Deficit. (As we report later, a further update is planned on November 3rd).

The October update addressed the prospects of removing the the amended timetable currently in place on the West of England Line which was introduced on Monday 11 August, following the introduction of multiple speed restrictions across this section of the network caused by Soil Moisture Deficit. The news was as expected, and not good…

The statement said:

"Whilst we believe we are now moving beyond the driest conditions along the line and are beginning to see more regular rainfall, SMD levels have reached historic highs this year and remain severe. SMD levels are at their highest this year, while cumulative rainfall along the route remains at one of its lowest.

"Until we observe a significant further reduction in the Soil Moisture Deficit (SMD) readings, the underlying clay will not have stabilised sufficiently to support consistent track geometry under sustained train movements at line speed.

"Although recent weeks have brought increased rainfall, current ground conditions remain unsuitable for a return to the standard timetable. Once the SMD levels drop to the required thresholds, our engineering teams will be able to carry out the necessary works such as tamping, to restore proper track geometry and safely reintroduce the normal service."

Network rail insisted that they are not doing nothing while they wait for the weather. Extensive work on the track has continued since August and activities such as tamping (restoring line and level of track) are showing positive results, they say.

The joint statement went on to say:

"We hope to be able to lift one of the four speed restrictions currently in place (between Gillingham and Templecombe) within the next week.

"This marks an important step towards improving journey times for passengers, but on its own is not sufficient to enable a change to the current temporary timetable.

"Further speed restrictions remain in place; one east of Yeovil, two west of Yeovil and one between Axminster and Honiton."

It is clear that all speed restrictions on the line will need to be lifted before the full timetable can be reinstated. This is due to the extensive sections of single line track and the knock-on impacts to train and crew diagrams caused by the slower running of services.

Network Rail and SWR have promised to continue to provide updates to stakeholders.

In the meanwhile, the weekend following the issuing of this statement from SWR was one of the worst on record, especially on the Saturday, October 11th. A number of trains were cancelled, with the 0754 to Exeter being cancelled, as were the 1211 and 1411 service, leaving the 1012 as the only daytime service which ran.

A further train was cancelled in the evening. There were no direct daytime services to Waterloo for much of the day, with the services at around 10 a.m., 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. cancelled, and the 1203 service only going as far as Yeovil Junction.

Services were cancelled, SWR said, due to a shortage of train crew. Our colleagues at SERUG have contacted SWR to make our dissatisfaction at the situation clear and to ask for further explanation of what happened.

Trains were also cancelled on Sunday October 12th. Throughout, only a very limited number of replacement buses appeared, and station staff did not know when and where they would be, making attempts by them to manage the situation harder. This point has also been raised with SWR.

Commenting on the incident to The Friends of Honiton Station, Andrew Ardley, Regional Development Manager for SWR, said:

"Saturday was unfortunately a bit of a perfect storm of issues and not one we would expect to see as an ongoing problem.

"The primary driver of the driver shortage was a very high level of short notice sickness – I'm aware that we're seeing this across the wider communities too. We would normally be able to cover this through voluntary overtime but unfortunately there were fewer takers for that than usual.

"Whilst we did have spare drivers for later in the day, their availability could not be brought forward due to the proximity to their previous day's working schedule.

"We do currently have a full driver establishment at both Salisbury and Yeovil depots as well as a healthy pipeline of trainee drivers coming through. It is not therefore due the number of drivers we have on this line overall.

"As you know securing replacement buses at short notice can be tricky in the East Devon / Dorset / Somerset area. Our supplier had to go to companies over 50 miles away to secure the available vehicle. In circumstances like this we always try and give station teams the flexibility to manage the available vehicles and react to the situation on the ground, the needs of individual / groups of customers and the alternatives available at particular locations.

"The vehicles we are able to secure at short notice are often coaches which are too large to reach Whimple and Feniton stations. It would be in this sort of circumstance (e.g. travelling Exeter to Whimple) that station staff (including GWR or via help points) would have the discretion to use taxis where appropriate.

"Pinhoe and Cranbrook do of course also have good alternative bus services into Exeter for which we had ticket acceptance arranged. We also had ticket acceptance on GWR services on various routes.

"As you will know there is quite a significant time penalty in serving Crewkerne by bus and this has to be balanced with achieving connections at Yeovil Junction via unpredictable traffic conditions. Station staff will usually base the stopping pattern on known demand at the time and use taxis where appropriate to blend with that."

Fatality on Local Railway

We are very sad to have to report that on Monday October 13th, two people were killed on our railway, one at Vauxhall and another locally at Cranniford Crossing near Cranbrook.

In the local incident, an early morning train heading towards Exeter hit a person on the line. Emergency services attended the scene, but the person was declared dead. Train services were suspended for some hours.

Our thoughts are with all those affected by this tragic incident, including the family and friends of the person who died, the emergency services and especially the train crew. The driver and guard have been offered specialist support by SWR staff.

Thankfully deaths of this kind on the railway are relatively rare. However, when they do occur, we are grateful for the prompt and professional work of our emergency services. And we are pleased to note the efforts by the railway industry to improve support for staff affected by traumatic events such as these.

Engineering Report for November and December

Saturday 1st and Sunday 2nd November

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

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

London Waterloo to Exeter services will start from Salisbury.

London Waterloo to Salisbury stopping services will not run.

Additional services will run between London Waterloo and Basingstoke. Buses will run between Basingstoke and Salisbury.

Sunday 9th November and Sunday 16th November

The lines in the Salisbury area will be closed all day due to maintenance work. GWR services will also 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. Buses will run between Andover and Gillingham (non-stop). Buses will run between Andover and Gillingham via Salisbury.

Saturday 22nd and Sunday 23rd November

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

London Waterloo to Exeter St David's services will start from Basingstoke.

London Waterloo to Salisbury stopping services will start from Reading on Saturday.

Sunday 30th November

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

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

Christmas and New Year Services

There will be a number of alterations to services on SWR's network between Wednesday December 24th and Friday January 2nd 2026. See SWR's website for full details.

Services may finish earlier than usual on Christmas Eve, and there will be an altered service between December 27th and January 2nd, including on New Year's Eve.

There will be no trains on the SWR network on Christmas Day and Boxing Day.

Saturday December 27th to Sunday January 4th 2026

From Saturday 27th December to Sunday 4th January, track renewal work will affect some train services to/from London Paddington and trains will run to an amended timetable because only two out of four tracks will be available. As a result some trains are expected to be busier than normal

There will be line closures between London Waterloo and Clapham Junction from Sunday 27 December 2025 to Friday 2 January 2026. On some days, this will mean that Waterloo to Exeter services will start from Basingstoke.

Queenstown Road station will be also be closed for the whole of this period. Please use other nearby stations. For full details of the replacement service between Basingstoke and London Waterloo, see SWR's website.

Saturday 27 December 2025

London Waterloo to Exeter services will start from Basingstoke.

London Waterloo to Salisbury stopping services will start from Reading.

London Waterloo to Basingstoke stopping services and London Waterloo to Alton services will run combined to Woking where the train will divide. These services will call additionally at Wimbledon and West Byfleet. These services will run hourly.

Sunday 28 December 2025

London Waterloo to Exeter services will start from Basingstoke.

London Waterloo to Basingstoke and Alton services will run hourly. These services will start from Clapham Junction.

Monday 29 and Tuesday 30 December 2025

London Waterloo to Exeter services will start from Basingstoke.

London Waterloo to Salisbury stopping services will start from Reading.

London Waterloo to Basingstoke stopping services and London Waterloo to Alton services will run combined to Woking where the train will divide. These services will call additionally at Clapham Junction, Wimbledon and West Byfleet. These services will run hourly.

Wednesday 31 December 2025

London Waterloo to Salisbury stopping services will start from Basingstoke.

London Waterloo to Basingstoke stopping services and London Waterloo to Alton services will run combined to Woking where the train will divide. These services will call at West Byfleet.

Thursday 1 January 2026

London Waterloo to Exeter services will start from Basingstoke.

London Waterloo to Basingstoke and Alton services will be revised to run hourly.

Friday 2 January 2026

London Waterloo to Salisbury stopping services will start from Basingstoke.

London Waterloo to Basingstoke stopping services and London Waterloo to Alton services will run combined to Woking where the train will divide. These services will call additionally at West Byfleet.

Other Engineering News

Looking further afield, Network Rail engineers will be strengthening a railway embankment in Hamworthy and improving drainage at the Poole sidings to help protect the railway from flooding and improve long-term reliability.

Customers travelling in Dorset are advised to plan ahead and allow extra time to complete their journeys as buses replace trains between Saturday 15th and Friday 21st November, while Network Rail engineers carry out essential maintenance and upgrades to the railway.

During this period, engineers will strengthen a railway embankment in Hamworthy and improve drainage at the Poole sidings to help protect the railway from flooding and improve long-term reliability.

Further west, work will take place to renew the wheel timber - the long blocks that support the tracks - on the River Frome bridge near Wool. These will be replaced with modern Fibre-reinforced Foamed Urethane (FFU) alternatives, extending the life of the structure. Engineers will also complete footbridge improvements at Wool station.

This means that on Saturday 15th and Sunday 16th November, buses will replace trains between Bournemouth and Dorchester South. And between Monday 17th and Friday 21st November, buses replace trains between Poole and Dorchester South.

Speaking on behalf of Network Rail and South Western Railway, Mark Goodall, Wessex Route Director, said:

"We're sorry for the disruption to passengers while we carry out this work, but it's essential to keep services running safely and reliably. Our teams will be working around the clock to strengthen key parts of the railway and improve drainage in the area, helping to make the line more resilient in the years ahead."

GWR Survey Highlights Emotional Truth of Start of Uni Term

We could not resist sharing with readers one of the more unusual stories that surfaced recently from our local rail companies. Apart from shining a light on Student Railcards, it will have reminded many people about one of the more emotional times in our lives.

Whether as a student leaving home long-term for the first time, or as parents realising that the empty nest is suddenly really a thing, this research reminds us of days anyone who has experienced them will probably never forget.

As "freshers" settle into their first few weeks away from home, this new survey reveals the emotional reality behind university drop-offs - and why families are already planning their next hello.

The bedroom door stays closed now. The washing machine runs half-empty. Dinner conversations happen in whispers instead of adolescent chatter echoing through the house.

For thousands of parents across Britain, October doesn't just mark a new academic year - it signals the beginning of the longest stretch they've ever spent apart from their children.
But here's the thing: according to a recent survey they're not willing to wait until Christmas to fix it.

Research by Great Western Railway (GWR) has revealed the emotional truth about university families - nearly 85% of parents refuse to let a full term pass without seeing their offspring, with almost half of them hoping to plan a reunions within the three months of the autumn term and a third wishing for monthly meet-ups.

The numbers tell their own story:

- 50% of parents hope to see their ‘university child’ every three months;
- A third of parents are planning monthly visits or homecomings;
- Just 5% can bear waiting until the Christmas holidays;
- Most families will travel during the first term - either to visit campuses or welcome students home, even if that means some washing comes too.

GWR’s Head of Customer Research Jeremy Clarke says:

“Heading off to university is a milestone that breaks and rebuilds hearts in equal measure. Our research has highlighted how families refuse to let distance weaken their bonds. The train doesn't just carry passengers - it carries the love that keeps families connected, and builds stronger bonds when miles try to pull them apart.”

It is one of the great balancing acts of parenthood that every university student’s parent will recognise: giving your child space to grow while desperately wanting to know they're eating properly, making friends, and remembering to do laundry.

The survey, which explored shifting attitudes towards taking leisure breaks in the UK also showed that early autumn is an extremely popular time of year to travel for leisure.

A third of the people GWR spoke to were motivated by the realisation that there is more to discover in the UK than they initially thought. Warmer autumn weather has also increased many people's likelihood to consider the UK for short day trips and breaks.

In an interesting twist, GWR’s survey said that, offered a free train ticket, many people would use gifted tickets specifically to 'visit family and friends they hadn't seen in a while' - highlighting how physical distance can't diminish emotional bonds. Perhaps GWR should give free tickets a try!

After all, some adventures aren't just about getting from A to B. They're about keeping the connection to the people that matter most to us.

Community Rail Network Re-issues Vital Code of Conduct

Our colleagues at Community Rail Network recently updated the organisations Code of Conduct. As member of this network, we felt it might be helpful to share key parts of that document with our readers, as it is an excellent summary of the kind of values we seek to promote and live by.

In a society increasingly divided and ill at ease with itself, it is worth remembering the standards and values we all aspire to in community rail. In particular, we endorse warmly the Code’s determination to shape an *“inclusive, positive culture”*, and to seek a community rail movement *“free from discriminatory, disrespectful, derogatory or harmful behaviours.*”

Code of Conduct

We believe that community rail should be positive, inclusive, collaborative in all it does, enabling everyone to thrive and be themselves, and helping communities to be communities, in all their diversity and richness.

Everyone working and volunteering in community rail, and all those who engage with, support and benefit from community rail, should be treated with respect, and allowed to work, volunteer, engage and contribute in a safe, welcoming environment.

We do not tolerate discrimination in any form, or otherwise disrespectful, derogatory or harmful behaviours, amongst our staff, board, members, partners, or anyone coming into contact with Community Rail Network and our members.

We expect all our staff, board, members and partners to respect and uphold the Women in Community Rail Code of Conduct across all their activities and behaviours when working, volunteering or engaging with community rail:

- Promote positive relationships to deliver positive outcomes and discussions;
- Champion diversity and inclusion, aiming to ensure that community rail is welcoming, engaging and respectful for everyone;
- Value others by listening and not making assumptions;
- Challenge bullying, harassment, intimidation and report all negative behaviour;
- Never act in a manner that could bring community rail into disrepute.

We advise community rail partnerships and station groups to manage and promote their activities and meetings in ways that deliberately reinforce and uphold this, … ensuring policies and procedures are set up to ensure inclusivity and make clear that discrimination and disrespectful, derogatory or harmful behaviours will not be tolerated.

We will stand up to any form of discrimination, including around age, disability, gender identity, marriage and civil partnership status, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation or class.

We will always prioritise the safety and wellbeing of our team and all those delivering, supporting, involved in and coming into contact with community rail, doing as much as we can to protect people from harm.

We take seriously our role to lead on and shape an inclusive, positive culture across the community rail movement, with attention to, but also going beyond, protected characteristics, so that community rail is a movement free from discriminatory, disrespectful, derogatory or harmful behaviours.

This includes building a culture within our team and board, and amongst our members and partners, where diversity is celebrated, equity and inclusion are at the forefront, and people's wellbeing and mental health is value and prioritised.

We will encourage a culture within our organisation and across community rail that supports the reporting and resolution of allegations, suspicions or concerns about any kind of inappropriate or harmful behaviour.

New Report Claims Insight into Fare Dodging by SWR Passengers

South Western Railway faced questions last month about the number of people travelling on their trains without paying. This has long been a potential concern for those of us at the western arm of their network, as all stations on our line west of Salisbury, until you reach Exeter Central, do not have any gate line barriers.

Passengers should note, by the way, that the gate line at Exeter Central is presently being upgraded and moved, in a major project to improve passenger flows in and out of that station. Additional barriers are being installed in a newly configured entrance area to reduce the present congestion that occurs at peak times when busy trains arrive. Work has begun and is due to be completed in early 2026.

As for SWR and their fare dodgers, a report by a group called SWR Watch claimed that £45.5m is being lost every year by passengers traveling without paying. The estimated figure was based on a Freedom of Information request they made to SWR. This request revealed that SWR's estimate was that around 3.9% of journeys on its network were made without paying.

Responding to the report, SWR said: *"Our Revenue Protection Team is focused on effectively deterring fare evasion and bringing down the rate of ticketless travel."*

Readers will remember that we reported in the June newsletter that SWR has placed particular emphasis on its Revenue Protection Team this year, as they featured in a Channel 5 documentary highlighting their work to reduce fare dodging.

Far from being reticent about admitting the level of evasion, SWR has published its own figures regularly. In May they estimated that about seven million journeys made without a ticket on its services each year, costing the company dodging costs £40m a year in lost revenue. One persistent offender was found to have evaded £49,000 over five years, and another more than £19,000, the company said.

In its response to SWR Watch's latest report, SWR said that ticketless travel had reduced by 40% since 2017 and was now at its lowest ever level.

The Freedom of Information request made by SWR Watch also revealed that SWR spent more than £370,000 reimbursing passengers for hotels and taxis due to delays and cancellations, and that 7,293 trains in the last year were short formed and had fewer carriages than planned, due to train faults and other issues.

Jeremy Varns, who appears to be leading the SWR Watch group which campaigns for improved rail services, said he believed the service had got worse since May, when it became the first to be renationalised. Mr. Varns said:

"My primary concern is a lack of accountability. There's still no publicly accessible contract between the operator and government and Department for Transport.

"It's crucial that people have a positive experience when using the railway. SWR also needs to ensure that operational decisions are not made at the expense of passengers who have already been inconvenienced."

In response SWR pointed out that the present situation of the company was a transitional arrangement and subject to amendments. A final Service Agreement will be published, it said, in due course.

The SWR spokesperson added that it had a duty of care to customers. They went on to say:

"In times of significant disruption, we make every effort to ensure customers can complete their journeys.

"In line with the National Rail Conditions of Travel, we are obliged to provide customers with alternative means of travel to their destination, such as refundable taxis, or to provide overnight accommodation where we reasonably can."

The firm added that 0.18% of services were short formed in the last 12 months and the Arterio trains would add resilience to the current fleet.

We are grateful to our colleagues at SERUG, who campaign for better services on the West of England Line, and who work constructively with SWR. This includes the company sharing with them useful statistics on performance, so that we can gauge the true picture of how he line is performing.

And when things go wrong, which inevitably they do sometimes, SWR always responds to our concerns, tries to explain what happened and what measures are being taken to try to prevent it happening again.

This positive engagement, in which The Friends of Honiton Station try to act as a critical friend to the company is likely, in my view, to lead to much better long-term outcomes than the kind of megaphone, arms-length calling out that SWR Watch's report seems to be an example of.

I would be interested in members' responses on this matter.

Honiton Station Car Park: Risks of Inconsiderate Parking

Concern has been expressed by staff at Honiton Station about the behaviour of some drivers using the car park in front of the station. Drivers arriving to pick up passengers due to arrive at the station have been parking increasingly inconsiderably, causing potentially dangerous situations to occur on a regular basis.

Cars have been illegally parked in the spaces reserved for Blue Badge holders, in the area clearly marked for buses to turn around, as well in the bus stop itself. Cars have also been parked in areas marked with double yellow lines, in areas outside the marked parking bays, in front of the parking zone for Bradfords staff and even in front of other cars already parked in the pay-to-park bays.

The 1730 bus from Exeter leaving for Axminster, having dropped off its load of 100 Exeter College students. Note the car almost reversing into the side of it…

Such parking behaviour not only causes frustration for other users of the car park, not least bus drivers, but risks causing accidents, especially when all this extra traffic tries to manoeuvre its way out after the train has arrived. A damaged bumper is the least of the risks. One distracted driver or ill-timed manoeuvre and a pedestrian could easily be hurt.

On behalf of everyone, we appeal to drivers using the station car park to do so sensibly. Drivers should remember that reminded there is another car park, to the rear of Platform 2. And with half of trains presently using that platform, it is also a very convenient pick up point for passengers arriving from Exeter.

New trend for Autumn Travel; Britain’s Best-kept Travel Secret?

I have recently been reading Andrew Martin’s latest book called “To the Sea by Train.” It tells the story of some of the lines which over almost 200 years have taken day-trippers and holiday makers to some of our seaside destinations, many of which only grew up as a result of the coming of the railway. In many cases local entrepreneurs created both the resort and the railway.

Inevitably, much of the book describes journeys taken in summer, as the Victorian invention of the Bank Holiday, Wakes Week industrial holidayss and eventually the paid week’s holiday which came in around the time of the Second War War, all came together to make affordable seaside holidays something to which everyone aspired.
The decline of these holidays came when the Beeching cuts to routes that took passengers to some of these resorts – especially the smaller and less accessible ones – and the rise of the foreign package holiday conspired to change the holiday market forever.

And, of course, the number of people using the train to reach these seaside destinations also plummeted as car ownership massively expanded. When Andrew Martin visits some of these places today, he finds that in many cases the disused stations have all too often become car parks!

However, it is not just during the frenetic high summer season when the focus should be on our railways. As new research from GWR makes clear, Britain's best-kept travel secret may just be how Autumn has become the nation's favourite season to travel.

Early autumn now outranks summer, say GWR, as the preferred time for leisure breaks, with 'empty-nesters' leading a quiet travel revolution. Forget peak summer jostling and winter weather worries - Britain has fallen in love with autumn travel, and the numbers prove it is no passing trend.

The research from Great Western Railway (GWR) reveals that early autumn (September-October) has overtaken every other season as the nation's preferred time for leisure travel, chosen by 39% of travellers compared to just 14% who prefer peak summer months.

The data paints a picture of a nation rediscovering the joys of off-peak exploration, with practical motivations driving growing demand for autumn breaks.

The research identifies 2 primary drivers reshaping Britain's travel habits: economics and experience. Half of all respondents cite “lower prices and better value” as the attraction of autumn travel, while 46% are drawn by “quieter destinations and fewer crowds.”

This shift represents more than seasonal preference - it's a fundamental reimagining of when premium travel experiences are available. Where summer once commanded peak pricing for crowded destinations, autumn now offers superior value for a more relaxed, authentic experience.

The data reveals a particularly compelling story among 'empty nesters' - parents whose children have left home. This demographic emerges as autumn travel's most enthusiastic advocates, with 63% likely to book an autumn leisure break compared to 51% of the general population.

For this group, autumn represents liberation from school holiday constraints and family schedules. The research shows they're primarily motivated by "easier and less stressful travel" (54%) and the realisation that there's "more to discover locally than I realised" (37%).

Their preferred autumn activity? "Unwind and relax" topped their responses at 34%, suggesting a demographic ready to prioritise personal restoration after years of family-focused planning.

Climate patterns are reshaping travel decisions in surprising ways. The survey found that 57% of respondents confirm warmer autumn weather has made them more likely to consider UK short breaks and day trips - a trend that rises to 65% among those experiencing post-summer blues. Not to mention the amazing autumn colours.

This weather dividend extends the practical travel season, making outdoor activities and sightseeing more appealing well into October. Combined with reduced accommodation costs and tourist crowds, it creates what many describe as optimal travel conditions.

Perhaps most striking is Britain's appetite for impromptu autumn adventures. The research shows 59% of respondents have previously taken a spontaneous day trip by train in autumn and would do so again, while another 22% express interest in trying one for the first time. This spontaneity is enabled by practical considerations: easier booking, flexible travel options, and the reduced need for advance planning that characterises peak season travel.

GWR Head of Customer Research Jeremy Clarke says:

“As the crowds ebb away in the lull between summer and Christmas, many people have found a new affection for autumn travel. The amazing colours we’ve seen over the past few years, even if just seen from the train window, the opportunity to be spontaneous with great value rail tickets, make sit the perfect time to get out there!”

The research indicates autumn travel's popularity stems from practical advantages rather than romantic notions of seasonal beauty. Lower costs, fewer crowds, easier logistics, and increasingly favourable weather create compelling conditions for leisure travel.

For millions of Britons, autumn is no longer about winding down from summer - it's about gearing up for the year's next adventure.

The More Things Change, The More They…

As we head towards the end of the year, I thought it might be interesting to look back to the stories that we were covering in our newsletter five years ago. While the world looks a very different place since 2020, for so many reasons, it is fascinating (and a little sad perhaps) to see how little has changed on our railway.

November’s newsletter in 2020 was dominated, of course, by the Covid Pandemic, and how we were facing up to another national lockdown. The advice was: *“not to use public transport for other than essential journeys, for those who need to travel to work or college or for medical appointments.”*

Despite the imminent lockdown, we were given permission to launch our commemorative booklet outlining the history of the station, and a display of photographs in the waiting room. The display remained in place until this year, when a new historical display was created as part of Honiton's Telling Our Stories, Finding Our Roots project.

The booklets were available from the museum when it re-opened, as we were unable to stock them at the station for some time, due to Covid restrictions.

Despite the lockdown, train services continued to operate, with a week-long diversion of GWR trains through Honiton, while the line was closed at Tiverton Parkway. As I noted at the time, this caused a number of changes to the SWR timetable to accommodate even some of the GWR service to the South West.

As I said in that newsletter: *"The level of disruption to the timetable necessary to accommodate these extra services is a perfect example of why we badly need the line improvements recommended in the recently published CMSP report. We need the extended passing loops proposed west of Honiton and west of Whimple, in order to allow both the capacity for diverted services, and the much-anticipated Devon Metro service from Axminster to Exeter."*

Five years later, nothing has changed; the need is still the same. That said, the solutions proposed by Network Rail and SWR continue to fluctuate, with eyes having fallen on Feniton for a while, only to return to favouring the loop west of Whimple that we have talking about for two decades now, if not longer.

In 2020, Network Rail sounded a note of quiet (very quiet, some might say) optimism, saying: "*The DfT were very supportive of our plans for the West of England Line; we were also pleased to get such great support at the meeting from Mark Hopwood, Managing Director of SWR."*

Five years on, and the only conclusion we can draw is that there is no money. Until the Treasury can be persuaded that it is worth it to invest in rail improvement schemes that are not big ticket, but have strong local impact, as they did ultimately with the re-opening of Okehampton, we are going to stuck in our present limbo.

One thing that has continued to improve over the last few years, is our awareness of the need to live more sustainably. We cannot go on using up the earth's resources so carelessly, and we need to cut our carbon emissions if we are to avoid the worst efforts of global heating.

In 2020 we gave the example of the Sip, Save and Recycle scheme at Waterloo to recycle coffee cups. As Network Rail said at the time: "*We believe the initiative will go a long way to supporting the circular economy and making our stations more sustainable.*"

There was an inevitability that the 2020 newsletter would include a story about leaves on the line. Described at the time as, *"The railway's equivalent of black ice on the roads,"* the article explained how a fleet of leaf-busting trains were talking the problem across the network.

With the naming last month of Control Alt Deleaf, Network Rail's latest leaf-buster, the story clearly remains as relevant today, and the problem every bit as urgent.

Indeed, SWR goes as far these days as to make minor changes to timetables, to give train drivers extra time to accelerate and brake more slowly when track adhesion may be compromised in this way.

A key theme that I have sought to address over the last five years has been mental health. The stresses of the pandemic and the social isolation many people felt drew attention to mental health issues in a way that had, arguably, never been done before. And ultimately, it has had great benefits, making us all more aware of the need to look out for each other and to support one another.

After all, that was the origin of the newsletter. It was a response to the advice from our Community Rail Network link person, that, just as he was keeping in touch with Chairs of Station Adoption Groups to support us during lockdown, we should be doing the same for our members.

What began as a regular email, touching base with members, quickly became a monthly news magazine, not just keeping in touch, but sharing news and articles.

In 2020, the newsletter featured the work of Samaritans, and their partnership with the railway, to try to reduce the toll of suicides taking place at or near the railway. This work goes on, and regular tragic incidents show that the need for this work continues to be vital.

A popular feature of the newsletter over the years have been the articles submitted by members. As well as the Chairman's account of the Feniton rail crash of 1860, which he had written for the Honiton and Village News magazine, we also featured in the November 2020 edition a fascinating piece from Dave Withey about his trip to Canada in 2017, which included a journey on the Rocky Mountaineer train from Banff to Vancouver.

I would be delighted to include further articles on a range of rail-related topics in future issues.

The newsletter has continued to develop and change over the last five years. And it has benefitted enormously from the regular contributions of members, especially with an excellent range of photographs. The newsletter is a vital part of our shop window to the world, as well as continuing to be a great way for all of us to keep in touch. I am grateful to everyone who has worked to make it a success.

Looking back over the 68 issues of the newsletter also reminds us that five years may have brought many changes, but the fundamental issues, and the fundamental problems associated with our railway remain the same. Problems that, sooner or later, will have to find solutions.

Stop Press… Soil Moisture Update

SWR have announced that the latest update on the Soil Moisture Deficit issue affecting the West of England Line will take place on Monday November 3rd. As soon as we know details of the content of that review, we will let everyone know.

PS: Next month will be our Christmas Special newsletter. Any seasonal items, including photographs, for inclusion will be gratefully received.