The Train at Platform 1

The Friends of Honiton Station Newsletter 69 - December 2025

Welcome to the final newsletter of 2025. The big news this month is the resumption at last of the full hourly timetable between Waterloo and Exeter, with journey times returning to normal. It has been a deeply frustrating time for everyone. Let us hope that not too many passengers have been put off using the trains by this long saga. Our railway has done much to keep itself in the public eye during the wonderful celebration that has been Railway 200. We need to build on this, to remind everyone of the role public transport can play in reducing emissions and fighting climate change.

OK, so not the best image of reducing emissions! But still a lovely shot of Tornado, taken by Dave Withey on a recent visit to the Bluebell Railway (see details later in the newsletter)

Normal Timetable Resumes on West of England Line

We were delighted to hear at the start of November that South Western Railway planned to to reinstate the full West of England Line timetable from Saturday 29th November. Direct train services between London Waterloo and Exeter St Davids are once again running hourly, and have returned to their regular journey times, after several months when journeys to London took an additional hour.

Tom Desmond, Network Rail's Wessex Route Operations Director, speaking on behalf of South Western Railway and Network Rail, said:

"We know just how important this line is to its local communities, with our customers using services to reach their places of work, or local schools and colleges.

"We have closely monitored ground conditions and are now able to start track repairs. Once those repairs are complete, trains will be able to run at full line speeds, bringing the full timetable back into operation.

"We are very grateful to our customers for their continued patience and would like to sincerely apologise for the disruption they have experienced since August."

Bruce Duncan, Chair of the Salisbury-Exeter Rail User Group, said:

"After a very challenging few months for students, commuters and leisure travellers using SWR's services between Salisbury and Exeter, we are absolutely delighted the hourly timetable will be restored from Saturday 29th November.

"The SWR and NR team have worked hard to remedy the issues caused by the dry embankments, made particularly challenging by the extensive sections of single track on the route, and we look forward to working with them on long term plans to mitigate the ongoing impacts of climate change."

The amended timetable was introduced in August following the driest spring ever recorded. The extremely dry conditions caused clay embankments between Gillingham in Dorset and Axminster in Devon to shrink, an issue known as 'Soil Moisture Deficit'.

This disturbed tracks above the embankments and forced engineers to introduce speed restrictions, with trains travelling at much slower speeds than normal. Due to the single line sections of track between Salisbury and Exeter St Davids, trains were then unable to pass each other in their usual locations, and an amended timetable was needed.

Soil moisture levels remained low through what was the hottest ever summer in the UK, and engineers were unable to carry out lasting repairs, as the clay embankments continued to shrink and move tracks.

With autumn rain and lower temperatures slowly restoring moisture levels, the clay embankments are stabilising, and engineers have been able to restore track levels.

Our local MP, Richard Foord has taken a close interest in the problems experienced by passengers on the West of England Line. Commenting following SWR's latest announcement, he said:

"It is not acceptable for this line to have become the railway line that time forgot.

"If ministers want to show that nationalisation will improve Britain's railways, they must invest in our rail infrastructure."

He went on to say that a lack of investment in our line by successive governments was having what he called: *"disastrous consequences for local people."*

Following the announcement of the return to the normal timetable, SWR announced that they were making thousands of additional discounted off-peak tickets available for travel when the full timetable was restored. SWR made available 20,000 more of its lowest priced Advance fares, for journeys between London Waterloo/Clapham Junction and stations west of, and including, Salisbury.

There were also discounted tickets for customers travelling to all stations between Salisbury, and Exeter, making spontaneous local travel more affordable for customers who were affected by the reduced timetable.

The offer includes a third off all Off-Peak, Super Off-Peak, Evening Out and Sunday Out fares. For example, a return ticket between Yeovil and Exeter will cost as little as £15.20, compared to the normal lowest fare of £23.

These fares were available on SWR's website, at www.southwesternrailway.com.

Peter Williams, South Western Railway's Customer and Commercial Director, said:

"We want to thank our customers for their patience since the amended timetable was introduced in August. To welcome customers back, we are pleased to offer a wide range of discounted fares on West of England line journeys.

"Our full timetable is set to be restored from Saturday 29th November, with discounted advance fares from this date until Wednesday 17th December, available to purchase now.

"We hope our customers enjoy everything the West of England has to offer as we approach the festive season."

Advance tickets are subject to availability for travel up to 17th December 2025 for journeys between SWR stations west of Salisbury and London. Discounted tickets are only available for travel at off-peak times.

December and January Engineering Work

Christmas and New Year Services

There will be a number of alterations to services on SWR's network between Wednesday December 24th and Sunday January 4th 2026. See SWR's website for full details.

Services will finish earlier than usual on Christmas Eve, and there will be an altered service between December 27th and January 4th, 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 27th December 2025 to Sunday 4th 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 27th 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 28th 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 29th and Tuesday 30th 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 31st December 2025

Waterloo to Exeter service will run hourly.

There will be additional late local services from Waterloo for people retiring from New Years Eve events.

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.

Sunday January 4th

In additional to work in the Claphan Junction area, lines in the Woking and Andover area will be closed all day due to maintenance work.

London Waterloo to Exeter St Davids services will start from Andover and will call additionally at Grateley.

A revised service will run between London Waterloo and Woking. Buses will run between Woking and Andover via Basingstoke.

Services will end earlier than usual, at around 11 p.m.

Saturday 10th and Sunday 11th January

Some lines will be closed between London Waterloo and Clapham Junction all weekend due to maintenance work.

London Waterloo to Exeter services will start from Basingstoke.

Sunday January 25th

The lines between Exeter Central and Exeter St Davids will be closed until 1800 due to maintenance work. London Waterloo to Exeter St Davids services will terminate at Exeter Central until 1800.

Buses will run between Exeter Central and Exeter St Davids.

Saturday January 31st and Sunday February 1st

Some lines will be closed between London Waterloo and Clapham Junction all weekend due to maintenance work. It is not clear yet whether Exeter services will be impacted. See SWR's website for full details.

Network Rail Update: SOBC Progress Report

Network Rail recently gave an update on work towards two vital projects on our line. Each are presently at the early, Strategic Outline Business Case stage.

The first update concerned the Devon Metro project which potentially affects us directly here in Honiton.

This SOBC was originally initiated with Devon County Council following the publication of the West of England Line CMSP (a Summary document is also available).

Following the initial phase of work on the Devon Metro SOBC, which looked at what was required to extend the Barnstaple service through Exeter to Axminster, the decision was taken for Network Rail to fund the completion of the SOBC, exploring what other service options which could offer a phased approach to delivering capacity, connectivity, and performance benefits for passengers.

The team at Network Rail are working closely with their Train Operator Company (TOC) colleagues at SWR and GWR, as well as East Devon District Council, Devon County Council and Peninsula STB to finalise the SOBC and identify funding sources to take the concept beyond SOBC.

The three service options being put forward are (our preference is for option 1, I think):

- Barnstaple/Okehampton to Axminster ;
- Barnstaple/Okehampton to Honiton;
- Exeter Central to Axminster.

Working in partnership with Western Gateway Sub-national Transport Body (STB); and Network Rail colleagues from the Performance, Timetabling and Engineering teams, the SOBC affecting Tisbury has been successfully completed. This set out the aspiration of enhancing services between Yeovil Junction and Salisbury.
Timetabling and engineering feasibility work was done indicating that extension of the Tisbury Loop would be required to enable the aspired to two trains per hour service. This would also enhance performance resilience of existing services on the West of England Line.

The next steps for this initiative are to explore how the extension of the Tisbury Loop could be incorporated into the Salisbury area signalling renewals and what additional funding may be required.

Furthermore, Network Rail says that they will look to take forward a West of England performance study that will aim to provide a full understand of how delay on the West of England Line impacts the wider network; and how the Tisbury Loop could mitigate these issues.

New Mural Unveiled at Waterloo for Railway 200

SWR and Network Rail recently unveiled a new mural at London Waterloo as a lasting commemoration for Railway 200 at Britain’s largest station. '200 Years of Romance' was created by artist Patricio Forrester, the founder of Artmongers, who specialise in engaging with local community groups to transform shared spaces using art. The mural is a collection of photographs that encapsulate moments in time and show the connection between people and the railway.

Image by South Western Railway and Network Rail

To create the mural, created to commemorate Railway 200, colleagues at SWR and Network Rail submitted images that they felt represented the best of the railway, while local rail community groups such as The Friends of Honiton were also asked to contribute.

We sent in two images, a black and white photograph taken by Dave Withey of the Atlantic Coast Express at Honiton and Cat Easeman's artwork for the old ticket booth at the station. The latter image can now be seen on the mural.
Other contributions to the mural included:

- A cake celebrating Brockenhurst station's 178th birthday this year;
- A fond farewell to the Island Line's 1938 London Underground trains, which were retired in 2021;
- Queen Elizabeth II's visit to Salisbury station during her Diamond Jubilee in 2012;
- A moment of pride from London Waterloo's 175th anniversary celebrations in 2023.

Stuart Meek , SWR's Chief Operating Officer, unveiled the mural alongside artist Patricio Forrester and Mike Lamport, a historian, member of the Railway 200 Steering Group, and former railwayman, who can trace a family connection to London Waterloo as far back as the 1850s. Mike's great grandfather, Matthew, worked as guard with the London & South Railway. The family connection continues as Mike's son Andrew works as a guard at SWR today.

Patricio took inspiration by travelling on the SWR network, visiting stations, including London Waterloo. After the unveiling, Patricio Forrester said:

"The three aspects integral to the design of the mural were Monumental, Industrial, Perspective. The joining of two tracks, the vanishing point on the platform as the train passes through the station. London Waterloo is monumental and industrious just like a cathedral. This gave me the idea to showcase the photos as stained glass, the photos have been designed to look translucent to let the light through, much like stained glass."

The mural can be found near Exit 3 and is made up of approximately 40 images. Around 200 people were involved in compiling the collection, documenting special moments connected to rail, including those who work and volunteer on the railway, as well as local groups.

Speaking on behalf of South Western Railway and Network Rail, Paula Aldridge, Community Rail Manager at South Western Railway, said:

"Waterloo's new mural showcases so many special moments. It shows how important the railway is to people, but also how the railway's 200-year history is all about people.

"The artwork has given this part of the station a new lease of life and sits proudly in the busy heart of London, for all to see."

SERUG to Hold Annual General Meeting in January

Our friends at the Salisbury to Exeter Rail Users Group have announced that, now the timetable has returned to normal, they will be holding their Annual General Meeting.

The meeting will be held on Wednesday 21st January at the Yeovil Railway Centre, between 16.30 and 18.30, timed to coincide with the times of trains at Yeovil Junction Station, which is just a couple of minutes walk from the station entrance.

The guest speakers the meeting will be Peter Williams, Customer and Commercial Director for South Western Railway.

A spokesperson for SERUG said:

"We are delighted that Peter can join us. We will ask him to give us updates on a number of key issues, including: Rolling Stock, Infrastructure Investment, On-Board Catering and Great British Railways."

SERUG say that new members are always welcome. Fees are just £8.00 per year. (February to February). Payment can be made by PayPal, bank transfer or cheque. Please see the Membership page on their website: www.serug.co.uk for details, or email: membership@serug.co.uk

SERUG recently issued their latest newsletter (issue 24) to members. In his introduction, Chairman Bruce Duncan said:

"There is no doubt the rail industry is in turmoil. An unknown Great British Railways (GBR) has brought uncertainty over jobs, future financing of enhancements and generally, a lack of leadership. That means we have to keep lobbying - especially our MP's – but have the patience to listen and become flexible in how improvements might be delivered.

"The decision on new rolling stock has to be the driver. Until we know what will be delivered, few concrete plans can be made for other infrastructure improvements. The rolling stock decision means new investment and that certainly requires Government funding but, even the Transport Minister (Lord Hendy, a highly respected railwayman) says there is no Treasury money.

"In the meantime, Nationalisation of all train companies is nowhere near complete and maybe not so until mid-late 2027, so there will be minimal cross working arrangements in the interim that might benefit passengers.

"We wait for serious Government action - not words but delivery - and certainly not 'we have no money'. They will have to invest in railways, but we have to push as a serious lobby group to be heard. On that point, our current policy is to continue to lobby all the MP's (8 of them) on the line, to ensure they pull together as one and lobby for action."

Railways Bill: A Useful Briefing

Talking of nationalisation, our colleagues at Community Rail Network recently sent out this really useful briefing on the Railways Bill that has now been introduced into Parliament, at the start of its very long process to becoming law. It is this legislation that will eventually pave the way - some time in 2027 we think - for the creation of Great British Railways.

The Railways Bill aims to overhaul what the Government describes as the 'fragmented and inefficient structure' of Britain's railways, replacing the franchising model with a publicly owned and integrated system led by a new body: Great British Railways (GBR).

GBR will unify track and train operations, simplify decision-making, and be accountable for delivering reliable, affordable, and accessible services.

A central theme of the Bill is putting passengers and communities back at the heart of the railway, and it states that GBR will collaborate with local partners to bring decision-making as close to communities as possible.

The Bill introduces a statutory role for Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs) and Devolved Governments, requiring GBR to:

- Consult them on significant changes to passenger services;
- Have regard to their transport strategies;
- Share relevant information to support local decision-making.

This creates a legal foundation for local partnerships, enabling communities to influence service planning, station management, accessibility, and multimodal integration. The government also commits to a 'right to request' further devolution, allowing MSAs to seek greater control over services and infrastructure.

Final agreement of partnerships will not take place until GBR is formally established.

GBR will be structured with regional Business Units, combining infrastructure and operations into locally focused teams. These units will act as the "face of the railway" for communities, providing a single point of contact and leadership.

This model is designed to:

- Improve responsiveness to local needs;
- Support community-led initiatives;
- Encourage local patronage and economic development.

This proposed structure aligns with the goals of the community rail movement, working to promote local rail use, improve stations, and connect rail services with wider community priorities.

The Bill states that all tiers of local government in England will benefit from empowered local GBR business units who will provide a single point of contact for local railway matters.

GBR design is being progressed separately to legislation and detail regarding the regional structure will be confirmed ahead of GBR operation.

The Bill places a strong emphasis on accessibility, with GBR required to:

- Consider the needs of disabled passengers in all decisions;
- Meet minimum accessibility standards in its licence;
- Engage with accessibility stakeholders.

A representative for accessibility will sit on GBR's board, ensuring that inclusive travel remains a priority.

This could benefit community rail by supporting efforts to make local stations and services more inclusive and usable for all, including disabled people and marginalised groups.

GBR will take over station asset management, streamlining maintenance and repairs. This change is expected to:

- Reduce delays in fixing issues (e.g., lighting, signage);
- Enable more efficient upgrades;
- Support community use of station buildings and spaces.

A more joined-up management approach could help to facilitate community rail initiatives such as projects to revamp station buildings and land, potentially reducing bureaucratic hurdles.

The Bill supports a simplified fares system, with GBR consolidating ticketing across operators and launching a single online platform. While independent retailers will remain, GBR will lead on:

- Making fares easier to understand;
- Expanding 'Pay As You Go' ticketing;
- Ensuring railcards and discounts (e.g. for disabled, senior, young people) are protected.

This should benefit communities and community rail by making rail travel more accessible and improving understanding of how to access affordable fares.

GBR will be incentivised to support economic and social value, including:

- Unlocking housing and regeneration opportunities near stations;
- Supporting tourism and local businesses;
- Promoting rail freight to reduce road congestion and emissions.

Community rail can play a role in these goals by linking rail services to local development plans and tourism strategies. The reforms aim to make GBR a proactive partner in such initiatives.

GBR will be held to account through:

- Clear performance targets;
- Public reporting at over 1,700 stations;
- Oversight by a strengthened Passenger Watchdog.

This watchdog will monitor passenger experience, investigate issues, and advocate for improvements. It will also have a specific role in accessibility and be able to escalate concerns to the regulator.

This framework empowers communities to raise concerns and expect action, including community rail partnerships and groups, as directly cited in the Bill consultation response.

The Bill introduces a new Periodic Review (PR) process for funding GBR, providing five-year financial settlements.

This gives communities and local authorities greater certainty about investment in infrastructure and services. It also enables better planning for community rail partnerships and projects, which tend to rely on stable funding and long-term support.
The government received over 2,300 responses to the consultation, including ten from across community rail, alongside local authorities, and campaign organisations. Key themes included:

- Support for public ownership and simplification;
- Calls for stronger duties on accessibility and environmental sustainability;
- Desire for more local influence and transparency.

The government has responded by embedding accessibility in legislation, committing to consult on GBR's draft licence, and ensuring local leaders have a statutory role.

In conclusion, the Railways Bill represents a significant shift in how Britain's railways are structured and governed. For communities and community rail, the potential implications are:

- Greater local influence and partnership opportunities;
- Improved station management and accessibility;
- Simplified fares and ticketing;
- A focus on economic growth and regeneration;
- Stronger accountability and transparency.

While the full impact will depend on the detail as to how GBR is implemented, the legislative framework sets the stage for a more responsive, inclusive and community-focused railway.

Community Rail Network is working proactively to engage DfT, Shadow GBR, DFTO and other industry leaders and policy-makers to feed into the design and set-up of Great British Railways, to ensure community voices are heard and the role of the community rail movement is protected and developed.

Bluebell Railway Giants of Steam: October 17th to 19th.

The Bluebell Railway held its Giants of Steam event on the weekend of 17th - 19th October. The main attraction was the presence of all four new-build steam locomotives: 60163 Tornado, 6880 Betton Grange, 2999 Lady of Legend and 32424 Beachy Head.

The gala was attended by one of our members, Dave Withey, who reports:

"It's a straightforward rail journey to the Bluebell Railway from Honiton, with just one change of train at Clapham Junction for the Southern Railway service to East Grinstead, whose station is only a minute's walk from the northern terminus of the Bluebell Line.

"I visited this well-attended event on 17th and 18th October, stopping overnight in East Grinstead. I enjoyed travelling behind each of the new locomotives during the course of my two-day stay, as well as taking many photos.

"In addition to riding on the trains, there was lots to see and do including looking around the workshops and museum at Sheffield Park and being entertained by music and songs from a band at Horsted Keynes!"

Photographs of the Giants of Steam at the Bluebell Railway in October by Dave Withey.

Honiton Flyer Article: Winter 2025

As usual, the Chairman wrote an article for the latest edition of the Honiton Flyer, the town's free community magazine, published by Anthony Bucke. Here is the piece, on what makes a better railway. It was written before the announcement of the resumption of the normal timetable on the West of England Line.

Here at The Friends of Honiton Station one things matters above all: working with the railway community to help create a more successful railway. But that supposes that everyone agrees what that looks like. More frequent trains obviously, but that counts for little if they are cancelled or delayed.

Our friends at the campaign group Railfuture were brave enough to suggest what makes a successful railway. First and foremost is reliability. It is ironic that the reduced timetable introduced in August has actually been more reliable, with fewer delays. When the service returns to normal, everyone wants to see the same reliability maintained.

South Western Railway has worked hard to ensure there are enough seats on our trains. With most now running with six carriages, even peak time services are much improved.

Fares need to be value for money and simpler to understand. That said, we all need to do our bit as well. The number of times I have stood behind people queuing at Honiton to buy a ticket, and the staff member has asked if they have a Railcard, only to hear them say no. Any local travelling wholly within Devon and Cornwall can buy a Railcard that gives them 30% off all journeys after the morning peak. And there are a wide range of National Railcards offering the same discount. The Senior Card for older travellers is great value.

Passengers want to see journey times cut, better links between trains and buses, and easier connections when changing from one train to another.

Customer service is crucial, and here is where Honiton really hits the spot. Customers expect service to be helpful and efficient, with staff ready to go the extra mile to help passengers. Our staff at Honiton do that and more.

Nationalisation will soon bring those responsible for train and track back together, meaning the industry will be structured in a way that encourages people to work together, to put the customer first.

But with that comes the need for renewed investment. We all know that money is very tight at the moment. But investment in public transport is vital, to get people out of their cars, reducing congestion and cutting emissions.

As a perfect example, improving the line between Honiton and Exeter, which is supported by our local MP Richard Foord, local councils and a range of campaign groups including ourselves, would be a valuable investment in all our futures.

Copies of the Honiton Flyer are delivered free to all Honiton addresses, and can also be collected from the Station, The Beehive and several businesses in the town.

GWR Finds Inspiration and Funds Great Escapes

Great Western Railway ran a series of special trains last month to take visitors to the free Railway 200 'Inspiration' train as it visited the West Somerset Railway. The exhibition train was apearing at Bishops Lydeard as part of a national tour to celebrate 200 years of the modern railway. Special GWR shuttle trains, hauled by a Class 150 unit, ran from Taunton over a section of track which is rarely used for passenger services.

For those who like nothing better than to enjoy an amusing – and hopefully informative – podcast, why not try a new offering which has been sponsored by Great Western Railway.

Great Escapes claims to uncover some of the the UK's hidden gems – meeting fascinating locals, sharing funny stories and exploring everything from wild swimming off the coast of Pembrokeshire to delving deep into caves in the Forest of Dean.

Hosted by comedians and actors Isy Suttie (Peep Show, Shameless) and Dan Skinner (Shooting Stars, The Kennedys), Great Escapes blends travel, humour and a healthy dose of curiosity as the pair uncover the characters and communities that make Britain tick.

Part travelogue, part comedy and all discovery, each episode sees Isy and Dan head off in different directions to explore two contrasting sides of a destination before meeting up to swap stories and compare adventures.

Short Formed Trains Caused by Autumn Wheel Problems

Regular travellers will have noticed that recently a number of trains through Honiton have been formed of only three carriages.

On some days, the majority of trains have been short-formed, including those due to carry Exeter College students. This has led to issues with overcrowding. On one day, the 0753 from Honiton was already full, standing and overcrowded when it arrived. Thankfully, staff sent a bus from Axminster to take the 100 students waiting there (although that would have had a knock-on effect later in the morning).

SWR reported that they were having had issues with train availability, due to issues with damage to wheels. The affected trains had to be taken to a lathe to have them re-profiled. The likeliest cause of this damage can be traced back to leaf fall which results in wheel slip and flats. There was also the incident when a train overshot Cranbrook Station despite emergency braking, following a section of track being contaminated with a still-unidentified white substance, which coated some of the wheels (we have asked Network Rail what the substance was).

There were delays getting wheels fixed on all these trains because the lathe at Wimbledon, where the trains were sent, developed a fault, which reduced the number of trains that could be fixed each day. SWR did, however, manage to secure access to an alternative lathe operated by Siemens, which helped alleviate the problem.

Andrew Ardley, Regional Development Manager for SWR said, *"It's unusual for the main college trains to be short formed, especially in the current reduced timetable. The problem was that we've had up to 6 of 31 units on the line out of action on some days and at that point it is very difficult to protect all the busy services including those into London."*

The situation slowly improved over the following week, although passengers are likely to still see some short formed trains for some time yet.

Welcome Freeze on Some Rail Fares Announced by Government

In the run up to the Budget, the government announced that for the first time in 30 years regulated rail fares in England are to be frozen next year. The freeze includes season tickets and off-peak return tickets. Rail fares traditionally have gone up in January, based on the July rate of the retail price index (RPI) + 1% - although this formula has not always been followed. More recently, the annual increase has come into effect in March, the last being in March this year, when fares rose by 4.6%.

The government said freezing rail fares was intended to *"directly limit inflation"* by holding down *"a major component of everyday costs"*. When March comes around, this means that the effect of last year's increase may drop out of the official calculation of inflation.

However, at this stage, this was not certain, as government sources made clear that it was still possible that unregulated fares would rise, but insisted they usually followed regulated fares. Unregulated fares are set by Train Operating Companies, which of course in some cases are now directly owned by the government!

The Rail Delivery Group, a representative body made up of the UK's rail operators, said the freeze would be *“good news for customers.”* They added: *“We want our railways to thrive, that's why we're committed to working with government to ensur*e upcoming railway reforms deliver real benefits for customers.”

About 45% of rail fares are regulated by the Government in England, Wales and Scotland - but the freeze announced only applies to England, and to services run by England-based train operating companies. Regulated fares include season tickets covering most commuter routes, some off-peak return tickets on long-distance journeys and flexible tickets for travel in and around major cities.

The chancellor said the freeze was being put in place to help ease cost of living pressures, and make *“travelling to work, school or to visit friends and family that bit easier.”*

Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander said it was part of the government’s wider plans to rebuild Great British Railways. The government has previously said that part of its plans for the new body is to *“gradually move away from annual blanket increases”.*

Rail Safety To Be Taught in All English Schools

As part of its regular review of the National Curriculum, the new Personal, Social and Health Education programme for schools in England will now include aspects of Rail Safety Education.

To coincide with the announcement that the topic will be taught from September 2026, Network Rail has re-launched its Switched On website, with enhanced, age-appropriate resources for school pupils from ages 3 – 16. New materials added including resources to help tackle the influence of dangerous social media trends and peer pressure encouraging bad behaviour on or near railways.

The safety materials will provide teachers with free curriculum-linked materials designed to teach children how to keep themselves safe in a rail setting and reduce the number of railway safety incidents involving young people.

Early years children aged 3-6 access foundational railway knowledge through 'Switched On Travels with Suzi', featuring animations, quizzes and new resources as young children follow Suzi and her mum during a journey to a nature reserve, whilst learning how to stay safe around the railway. Materials for schoolchildren aged 7-11 aim to develop good judgement and decision-making skills, so that they can identify potential dangers and spot risky behaviours in others when in a rail setting.

New website content includes resources based on the popular 'Arlo's Adventures' book series, where Arlo takes his first independent train journey, as well as design-your-own-poster activities and 'pick up cards' games teaching hazard recognition at stations, near tracks and level crossings.

New resources for secondary students aged 12-16 include content developed alongside TikTok sensation, and science creator of the year (2024), Big Manny. His social media videos demonstrate the science behind railway dangers and the potentially life-changing impact of unsafe decisions.

The secondary programme also includes materials to stimulate debate and discussion challenging students to think critically about the role of peer influence on their decision-making and social media trends that encourage creating material in rail settings.

Priti Patel (no, not that one!), Chief Health, Safety and Wellbeing Officer at Network Rail explained:

"We have always believed that it is essential to educate children about rail safety, which is why we, alongside our rail industry partners, have an extensive schools' engagement programme in place.

"I'm delighted to know that when rail safety becomes a mandatory part of the English national curriculum next year, we are one step closer to our desire to ensure that every child is taught how to keep themselves safe when in a rail setting.

"The Switched On website is a great one-stop shop that provides useful tools for schoolchildren – from videos and interactive games to classroom activities and teacher guidance – all free of charge. I am sure that it is a welcome resource for teachers that will enable them to deliver effective rail safety education to children of all ages."

A Word from the Chairman

This month, we welcome Ben Harden as our new Station Manager. We wish Ben Stephenson well in his new role at Southampton.

Our thoughts are with everyone affected by the recent terrible events at Huntingdon, including the train crew and emergency service workers who responded to the stabbing with professionalism, skill and bravery.

At this festive time of year, let us remember those who work so hard all year to provide us with a safe and successful railway.

Despite all the challenges our line has faced this year – with the railway struggling for months with a reduced timetable – all our friends at South Western Railway and Network Rail, especially our wonderful staff at Honiton Station, have continued to go above and beyond every day.

To each and every one of you, thank you.

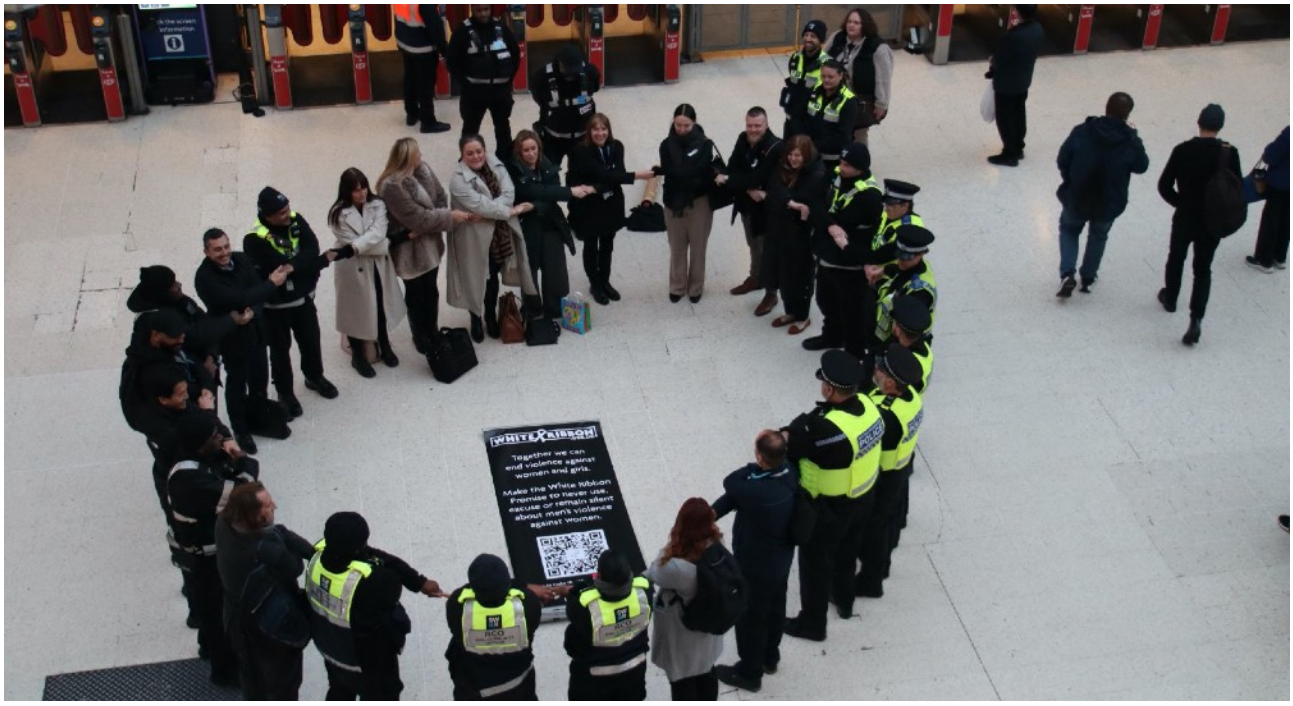
SWR Races the Dark for White Ribbon Day

Our colleagues at SWR showed their continuing and welcome support for White Ribbon UK by taking part in a ‘Race the Dark’ event for White Ribbon Day on 25th November. White Ribbon UK is the leading charity in England and Wales engaging men and boys to prevent violence against women and girls. SWR has supported White Ribbon UK since 2022, with many of its Class 450 trains carrying the White Ribbon logo.

Inspired by White Ribbon, the Race the Dark event aims to spark important conversations with customers and colleagues which shed light on the fear many women and girls experience daily, and the precautions they routinely take to feel safe.

SWR began its race in Weymouth just after sunrise, when a group of four colleagues boarded a service bound for London Waterloo. A White Ribbon baton was then passed along in a relay through stops at Winchester, Woking and Wimbledon stations. Further colleagues and volunteers joined the relay at stations along the way, encouraging colleagues and customers alike to sign the White Ribbon Promise to support the cause, creating and promoting a culture of respect and safety on our trains and at our stations.

A team of 20 arrived with the White Ribbon baton at London Waterloo just after 3pm, ahead of the sunset at 3:59pm. As a finale, a human chain was formed to symbolise the stand being taken against violence aimed at women and girls, serving as a poignant way to end the crucially important 'Race the Dark' event.



Speaking on behalf of South Western Railway and Network Rail, Grant Robey the Head of Security and Safeguarding for SWR, said:

“We have supported White Ribbon UK for the last three years and are committed to play our part in helping to end violence against women and girls. The Race the Dark event reflects both SWR and Network Rail’s commitment to safeguarding on the railway, and we are very pleased that so many customers and colleagues took part today.”

On behalf of The Friends of Honiton Station, we wish all our readers a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

I am grateful to all our members, supporters and industry partners for all their loyal support, help and advice in 2025. I look forward to working with everyone again in 2026.