# The Train at Platform 1

**The Friends of Honiton Station Newsletter 70 - January 2026**

Happy New Year. Welcome to the first newsletter of 2026. December brought the latest figures on passenger numbers, which was good news for our line, as well as for much of the rail network. While these figures reflect a period before the recent four months of disruption, they do provide an optimistic picture of the line's potential. This month, we also give readers some advance notice of some important Engineering Work in the Honiton area in February, as well as a first look at the new livery that will eventually begin to find its way onto trains, once GBR becomes a reality.

**The shape of things to come, as the DfT launches the first photos of GBR's proposed livery.**

## Honiton Set for February Weekend Line Closure and Replacement Buses

Network Rail and South Western Railway have announced that the line between Honiton and Exeter St Davids will be closed for the weekend of February 14th and 15th due to planned engineering work in the Exeter area. This will also affect services between Exeter and Exmouth.

During this line closure, London Waterloo to Exeter St Davids services will terminate at Honiton. Replacement buses will run between Honiton and Exeter St Davids. Provisional details of the replacement bus service are on SWR's Journey Planner and on Real Time Trains. We will be watching closely to ensure that neither Feniton nor Whimple are offered less than their full expected service during this closure, especially on Sunday, as local residents have previously reported. The provisional bus service on both days shows a good level of service.

Sports fans should note that Exeter City are at home to Northampton and Exeter Chiefs home to Gloucester on Saturday February 14th, and Exeter Chiefs Women are at home to Loughborough Lightning on February 15th. They should consider making suitable arrangements for travelling to these games, due to the replacement bus service on offer.

# New Figures Show Encouraging Rise in Rail Passengers

December saw the annual issue of rail usage statistics by the Office of Rail and Road, covering the period from April 2024 to March 2025. They showed that 1,730 million passenger journeys were made to and from Britain's 2,589 stations. This was an increase of 7% over the previous year.

Here in East Devon, we saw a 9.4% increase in passengers using the six stations between Pinhoe and Axminster. However, as with last year's figures, large pinches of salt should be used when assessing the usage figures for Pinhoe, which have nearly doubled in three years. This seems to be due to very large numbers of passengers saving money by using split tickets which name Pinhoe as the location of the split…

Despite that, it is pleasing to see that a record number of passenger journeys were recorded along our section of line, reaching over 1.2 million for the first time.

Honiton saw a 7.5% increase to 337 040 passengers, after a further 8.8% rise the previous year. We should note, however, that we still have a way to go to match the record for Honiton of 390 050, set in 2016/17.

We were pleased to note that our neighbouring station at Axminster topped 400 000 for the first time, reaching 417 946 passengers over the last year.

**ORR Figures for East Devon - April 2024 - March 2025:**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Pinhoe | 231 830 | + 20.6% |
| Cranbrook | 120 374 | + 5.1% |
| Whimple | 51 140 | - 3.6% |
| Feniton | 54896 | + 2.0% |
| Honiton | 337 040 | + 7.5% |
| Axminster | 417 946 | + 10.0% |

The ORR reported that the most used station on the network (which expanded by 6 stations during the year) continues to be London Liverpool Street with 98 million entries and exits. Waterloo's place at the top of the rankings is now a distant memory, since the opening of the central section of the Elizabeth Line added a large number of new passengers to Liverpool Street.

Waterloo now comes in second with around 70.4 million passengers a year, just a half a million ahead of Paddington. The busiest station outside of London is still Birmingham New Street with 36.6 million passengers.

At the other end of the scale, the least used stations showed some familiar names, as well as some newcomers to this dubious accolade. The five least used stations were:

- Elton and Orston, Notts (68 passengers)
- Shippea Hill, Cambs (76)
- Ince and Elton, Cheshire (98)
- Denton, Greater Manchester (100)
- Reddish South, Greater Manchester (102)

Regular readers will recognise that Shippea Hill has regularly featured in these statistics, although the number of passengers had often risen after being named by ORR, as enthusiasts make some kind of pilgrimage to least used stations.

In our region, the top five stations continue to be Bristol Temple Meads (10.9 million), Bath Spa (6.5m), Swindon (3.2m), Exeter Central (3.0m) and Exeter Central (2.9m). During the year, one more station was added to the network in the South West - Ashley Down, Bristol with 51,000 passengers.

The ORR figures show a continuing upward trend for rail usage across the country, with the long-term recovery from the effects of the fall in commuting during and following Covid. On our line, the effect of the ever-rising number of Exeter College students continues to be felt, but there are signs also of a long-term trend towards more leisure travel among adults.

Finally, with house building continuing to go ahead or to be planned all along the line, it is clear that the railway can play an ever more important role. Therefore, the campaign to improve our line, including securing replacement rolling stock, replacing outdated signalling in the Exeter area, and of course re-doubling sections of the line between Honiton and Exeter, will go on.

## January and February Engineering Work

### Sunday January 4th

In additional to the continuing 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.

### Saturday 7th and Sunday 8th February

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

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

London Waterloo to Exeter services will be revised and will terminate at Salisbury.

A revised service will run between Gillingham and Exeter.

Buses will run between Andover and Gillingham (non-stop).

Buses will run between Salisbury, Tisbury and Gillingham.

South Western Railway services to Yeovil via Westbury will terminate at Salisbury due to work in the Warminster area.

### Saturday 14th and Sunday 15th February

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

London Waterloo to Exeter St Davids services will terminate at Honiton.
Buses will run between Honiton and Exeter St Davids.

**NB Exeter City are at home to Northampton, and Exeter Chiefs home to Gloucester on February 14th, and Exeter Chiefs Women are at home to Loughborough Lightning on February 15th.**

## Barnstaple Station Unveils New "Signal Box"

Barnstaple Station has a new 'signal box' on Platform 2, thanks to work carried out by Braunton Men's Shed and the Friends of Barnstaple Station.

The station volunteer group submitted an application to Great Western Railway's Customer and Community Improvement Fund, which has seen the creation of the bespoke large-scale bug house, designed as a signal box.

The box has now been unveiled at a ceremony in early December, where the Mayor of Barnstaple and Ian Roome, MP for North Devon, were present.

Tim Steer, chair of the Friends of Barnstaple Station, said:

*"We were delighted to unveil the finished signal box in front of the Mayor of Barnstaple and the North Devon MP.*

*"The North Devon Line continues to rapidly grow in usage, with the 12 stations' total footfall up 63% since the year before the pandemic, and we know that this bug house will excite those users waiting for the next train and users arriving at Barnstaple. A special thanks to the North Devon MP who is campaigning to modernise the performance of the line for the existing and future rail users."*

Cllr Janet Coates, Mayor of Barnstaple, said:

*"This addition complements the ongoing improvements at Barnstaple Station thanks to the Friends group and reflects the Town Council's strategic priority on its commitment to a cleaner, greener Barnstaple."*

Roger Byrom, chair of Braunton Men's Shed, said:

*"When the Friends of Barnstaple Railway Station asked us if we would be interested in this project, we were delighted to say yes. Our Shed is in a refurbished railway carriage so making items for a train station felt just the right thing to do."*

David Whiteway, Great Western Railway's regional development manager for the West, said:

*"We love how this project by the Friends of Barnstaple Station exemplifies how strong community partnerships can enhance the passenger experience and celebrate local heritage. Through the dedication of the group and the craftsmanship of Braunton Men's Shed, this installation is not only visually striking but also a testament to collaboration and innovation. We are proud to support projects that make stations welcoming, memorable spaces for everyone."*

# Goodbye to HST Castle Class in South West

Castle Class trains made their last scheduled journeys on the Great Western Railway network on Saturday 13 December.

The Class 43 locomotives and Mark 3 coaches have been in service on the Great Western network for almost 50 years. Originally introduced in 1976, they were the mainstay of Intercity services across the country.

Following the introduction of the Intercity Express Trains, these trains stopped operating long-distance GWR routes in May 2019 before being refurbished to support regional services between Cardiff and Penzance.

They will be replaced by GWR's existing fleet, along with its 26 recommissioned Class 175 trains, which will be gradually rolled out throughout 2026, having been transferred from Transport for Wales.

To help manage expected interest from those wishing to mark the last journeys, an additional special service aimed at enthusiasts operated a round-trip between Plymouth and Penzance on the final day.

The service left Plymouth at 15:16, calling only at Par, before returning from Penzance at 17:32, again calling only at Par, and arriving into Plymouth at 19:17.

As well as services between Plymouth and Penzance on the last day of service, one final run was due to take place to Exeter. The Class 43 locomotives and Mark 3 coaches of the Castle Class sets are due to be returned to their leasing companies in the new year.

The first of Great Western Railway's recommissioned Class 175 trains entered passenger service on December 15th ahead of their phased rollout next year. The first service, the 1340 Plymouth-Penzance service was operated by 175001. It then operated the 1552 return service.

GWR leased 26 Class 175 trains earlier this year as part of plans to rejuvenate its regional and suburban services.

The full fleet will be introduced throughout 2026, operating predominantly between Exeter St Davids and Penzance, as well as to Barnstaple and Okehampton.

In the early stages of the rollout, services operated by the 175s will vary to support wider training and maintenance needs.

**Photograph: Great Western Railway. 175001 at Plymouth Station**

## Government Unveils GBR Livery

As our cover picture shows, the government has unveiled its branding for Great British Railways (GBR), marking a further small  step towards plans to nationalise the railways.

The new livery and branding uses a red, white and blue colour scheme to mirror the Union Flag and will be used on GBR trains, at stations and on its website and app. The rollout of the design, which was created in-house, is expected to take place gradually, with passengers beginning to see the trains across the national network from next spring.

The GBR logo is the distinctive double-arrow logo currently used by National Rail, which provides passenger information and tickets, and was created in the 1960s as the logo of British Rail - the state-owned company which previously operated Britain's railways.

Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander said that the new design *“isn't just a paint job”*, and that it represents *“a new railway, casting off the frustrations of the past and focused entirely on delivering a proper public service for passengers.”*

We’ll see…

# SERUG Annual General Meeting to be Held in Yeovil Railway Centre

A reminder that our friends at the Salisbury to Exeter Rail Users Group will be holding their AGM at the Yeovil Railway Centre on Wednesday 21st January.

The meeting will take place 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.

During the meeting, officers will report on progress with their campaigns. They will also discuss the five keys priorities they are focusing on with their regular dealings with South Western Railway and Network Rail.

These priorities are:

- Existing Rolling Stock - including 6-carriage units, reliability and repairs and planned maintenance;
- New Rolling Stock - including its potential specification and time-scale for introduction;
- Line Resilience - especially the problems caused by Soil Moisture Deficit;
- Onboard Refreshments - which were removed in 2019;
- Infrastructure Investment - especially securing track and station improvements;
- Timetables - including a better deal for East Devon.

The guest speaker at the meeting will be Peter Williams, Customer and Commercial Director for South Western Railway. Peter is responsible for customer and commercial strategy, marketing, retail systems and corporate affairs.

Peter has worked in similar roles at ScotRail and East Coast Trains, and also had a spell working in the United States for Keolis.

Nick Hurrell, Secretary of SERUG, said:

*“2026 will be a big year for South Western Railway. With track and train now under a single management team, a formal Business Plan is expected to be published in March - and we're told that future developments for the Waterloo, Salisbury and Exeter Railway (aka West of England Line) will feature in that Plan.*

*“Whilst we won't have specific detail at our January meeting, this is an excellent opportunity for us all to gain an update on progress towards that announcement.*

*"With current train performance - since the return of the full timetable in late November - some way short of target, it will be important to hear SWR's views on their plans to improve the current passenger experience - certainly in terms of rolling stock shortages and general timekeeping.”*

One of the issues we will no doubt want to discuss with Peter is the news, reported in December by Rail Magazine, that the Department for Transport has published a programme of projects that train operators which have already been nationalised must achieve over the coming years.

Since the nationalisation of South Western Railway (SWR) in May, Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander has said operators must “earn the right” to carry the Great British Railways name. As part of that process, she says, operators are set to have tailored objectives to meet.

For South Western Railway, these objectives are:

- Modernise and improve West of England Line fleet between December 2025 and 2028, including overhaul of '15x' fleet;

- Build a new timetable with public consultation in autumn 2026;

- Complete £600 million of infrastructure upgrades by March 2027 including West of England line resilience works, London Waterloo-Clapham Junction and Fareham - Havant and Portsmouth Harbour strengthening.

A government source told RAIL they did not think the operators would fail in meeting these objectives, but said they could "hold back" the GBR branding if they do.

The news of a new timetable design is welcome, and long-awaited news. The last major timetable overall was due just before the pandemic. After long and detailed consultation, the new timetable model was due for implementation, before having to be cancelled. It will be interesting to see what ideas are put forward this time across the network, and what, if anything, is proposed for the West of England Line.

The mention of rolling stock means that the already-planned refurbishment of the existing Class 159 units will go ahead and be completed by 2028 (later than originally envisaged). The need for decisions on replacements for this stock in the mid-2030s is still urgent (and not yet forthcoming).

Commenting on the AGM, 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

## Rail Industry Sends Christmas Greetings

Among the messages from our friends in the railway industry, we received this from Paula Aldridge, Community Rail manager for SWR, who commented on all the wonderful things that have been happening during Railway 200, including our plaque unveiling and cake cutting in July:

*"Wow we have made it ! I have just finished supporting The Railway 200 train in Southampton over the past 3 days – where we had over 2000 visitors.*

*"A huge thank you for everything you have done this year and especially for supporting our Railway 200 vision. It's been a busy one, but we've absolutely smashed it — delivering over 90 events with your help, which is amazing. I really do appreciate everything you've done."*

In our turn, we send our thanks to SWR for the successful ticket offer they made to West of England Line passengers in December. For two weeks, until December 17th, passengers were able to get a 30% discount on tickets, which meant that with a Railcard the Honiton to Exeter journey was just over £4 (£3 after 12 Noon). It certainly got people talking about the railway in a positive light again, which after the long months of disruption has to be good news.

We also received greetings from Richard Burningham and his colleagues at the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership. Richard wrote:

*“Wishing you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year from the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership.*

*“2025 has been a great Railway 200 year. As part of it, we researched stories of how the railway has shaped the local area in amazing and unexpected ways. Thanks for your help and support over the last twelve months. We look forward to working with you in 2026, a year that promises more exciting progress for the region's railways.”*

We are grateful to Richard for all the support he has given us over so many years. His expertise, wisdom and encouragement mean the world to us.

## Thanks to Station Staff

A huge thank you to all our wonderful station staff, who do such a great job day in, day out, to deliver a first class service to all our passengers. As is traditional, the Chairman delivered presents to the staff at Christmas - If any waistlines have expanded, blame it on the chocolates and biscuits…

Thank you to the staff, especially Stacey and Keith, for the wonderful decorations which adorned the waiting room over the holiday season. The room looked great and really put everyone using the station in the holiday mood.

## Best Quiz Question Ever?

Viewers of the lateral thinking TV Quiz Only Connect were faced with arguably one of the best questions ever, during the third Quarter Final tie, broadcast on Monday December 22nd.

Contestants were asked to find the connection between four “apparently random clues”:

See if you can work it out. Clue: there’s a reason it is in this particular issue of the newsletter…

*Rebus: learn new skills*

*Resbus: hold back*

*Conbusdication: a reason not to have a particular treatment*

*Unbused: not having been taught particular skills*

The answer is at the end of the newsletter.

## And in Other News: An End of Year Round Up

**Happy Birthday to Cranbrook Station**, which celebrated its 10th anniversary in December.

Cranbrook was the last of our local stations to mark its birthday as part of Railway 200, which we celebrated in July, along with our colleagues at Axminster.

Andrew Ardley, Regional Development Manager for SWR, was on hand as the birthday cake was cut at Cranbrook. Also represented were Cranbrook Town Council, Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership and East Devon District Council.

**Passengers using Honiton Station** may have noticed that, since the return to the normal timetable, trains have sometimes been shown on the Departure Screens as leaving from Platform 2, only for an automated announcement to inform passengers of a “platform change” and the departure to revert to Platform 1.

This phenomenon, largely affecting the 0855 and 1155 departures to Waterloo, is caused by the presence on the master timetable of GWR route-learning services scheduled to pass at Honiton at those times.

However, as our diligent observer of all trains Dave Tozer points out, these Q paths as they are called, have never actually run, in the 9 months in which they have periodically appeared in the timetable.

At present, there is little anyone can do, apart from making sure that passengers are not confused, and that signallers set the route for the up train as early as possible, so that the correct platform appears on the departure board in plenty of time.

**Services after the Christmas shut down** got off to a less than happy start, when a signaller due to work in the Exeter area on December 27th called in sick at short notice. The result was that a number of trains were cancelled, with the service not returning to anything like normal until the 1016 to Exeter, which left at 1035, and the 1155 to Basingstoke (services terminated there due to the New Year engineering work).

Stacey and Keith did a valiant job at Honiton making sure that passengers who did arrive, many of whom had long journeys ahead of them as they returned to the London area after Christmas, were able to get on their way. Taxis had once again to take up the strain.

Services to and from Exmouth were also cancelled for most of the morning. Shoppers heading into Exeter for the start of the sales were probably not best pleased…

In contrast, services through Honiton on Sunday December 28th ran on time all day. Which proves, I guess, that it can done…

## Support Brew Monday 2026: Make Time to Reach Out

On Brew Monday, which this year is on January 19th, Samaritans will once again be reminding everyone to reach out for a cuppa and a catch-up with the people you care about.

As in previous years, the rail industry will be supporting Brew Monday, with special events across the network. Watch out for railway staff and Samaritans volunteers at larger stations on January 19th. In previous years, volunteers have been out at Exeter, Bristol and Plymouth, among other places, in our area. SWR will be hosting events further east.

Launching Brew Monday 2026, Samaritans said:

*“Today’s the day. The day you put the kettle on. The day small talk turns into big talk. The day you break open the biscuits and the taboos. The day you remind everyone how good human connection feels. How easy it is. And what a difference it can make.*

*“Let’s prevent suicide with a cuppa and a catch-up this Brew Monday. Because for many, tomorrow’s too late.”*

As Samaritans remind us each year, there is no such thing as ‘Blue Monday’ (which used to be a media obsession each year,) and that feeling low isn’t just something that happens on Mondays or a random day in January. **So, we say out with the blue and in with the brew!**

There’s always time for a cuppa and a catch-up. It doesn’t matter if it’s a Monday morning or Saturday night, or if you’re drinking green tea or black coffee. If you’re sharing a cuppa, talking and listening, you’re doing it right.

Reaching out to someone could help them know that they are valued and that someone cares. If you’ve noticed someone has gone quiet in a group chat or you haven’t heard from them in a while, reach out and check in.

A simple message can mean a lot to someone who is going through a difficult time. Just reaching out and asking someone how they are can give them the opportunity to open up about how they’re feeling.

## Work to Replace Lifts to Affect St Davids Passengers

Passengers using Exeter St Davids Station have been warned that there will be no lifts between platforms for the next few months owing to a major refurbishment project.

All three passenger lifts at the station are being replaced from Monday 5th January, with the work expected to be completed in the spring.

Those passengers who are unable to use the stairs between the platforms will be helped by staff to use an alternative route instead. A temporary assisted travel lounge will be set up on Platform 1 to support those requiring help with travel. Additional station staff will also be on hand to support customers using the stairs with bikes, prams or luggage.

Customers who normally change trains at Exeter St Davids have been asked to consider using alternative stations if they cannot manage the stairs.

The work is probably timely, as the lifts, especially the one on Platform 1, have regularly been out of order in the last year or so.

Alex Bennett, Network Rail project manager, said:

*"Upgrading the lifts at the station will give passengers with limited mobility or those with prams, bikes or heavy luggage the confidence that they can conveniently use Exeter St Davids station.*

*"We're sorry for the disruption, but I'd like to assure passengers that step-free access to all platforms will still be available throughout the work and extra staff will be on hand to help."*

This news comes on top of the recent disruption at St Davids, with the toilets on platform 1 being closed for refurbishment work, and Portaloos replacing them during the work.

Work is also still ongoing at Exeter Central to replace the gate line barriers and create a new café area on the concourse.

Among other things, this project should reduce the potentially dangerous overcrowding that sometimes occurs when busy trains (and sometimes two) arrive at the station and cause long queues on the stairs as the gate lines cannot cope with the sheer number of passengers.

At the same time, a new cupola has been installed on the roof of the station, bringing the look of the station back to its 1933 design.

The previous wooden structure had to be removed by Network Rail when it is was discovered that the structure was rotten. The new replacement, made from modern materials, was installed following discussions with the Exeter Civic Society.

A spokesperson for the Society said:

*"After many months, Exeter Central Station has been restored to its original appearance with a lookalike cupola made from modern materials.*

*"A couple of years ago Network Rail discovered that the wooden frame of the old cupola was rotten, and took it down to ensure that it didn't collapse onto anyone, which gave the building an unfinished look.*

*"Now a replica has been manufactured and has been lifted into place.*

*"The new cupola has a steel frame and is made of fibreglass, which will put less weight onto the roof.*

*"The building is not listed, so Network Rail could have chosen not to replace the cupola.*

*"But it would have been a sad loss to the city, and their decision to install the lookalike is to be applauded."*

Keith Lewis, Chairman of Exeter Civic Society, added:

*"We welcome National Rail's decision to replace the cupola on the station.*

*"The distinctive building has been a part of Queen Street for many years, and some of its character would have been lost without its central tower."*

The full project at Exeter Central is due to be completed by early in 2026.

**Photo Credit : Exeter Civic Society**

## Coffee and Conversation

Our next Coffee and Conversation meet up session is at The Beehive Cafe on Monday February 9th at 11 a.m.

We will be talking through some of our plans for 2026, as well as reflecting on the AGM being held by our colleagues at SERUG in January.

There will also no doubt be lots of news from the world of railways to catch up on and to discuss.

I do hope that as many members as possible will be able to join us

## Only Connect Quiz

The solution to the quiz is this:

If you replace the word bus in each clue with the word train, you get the word defined in the clue. In other words, it is **a train replacement bus service**…

Rebus: learn new skills… becomes Retrain

Resbus: hold back… becomes Restrain

Conbusdication: a reason not to have a particular treatment… becomes Contra-indication

Unbused: not having been taught particular skills… becomes Untrained

**Dave Tozer took this photograph of a very special train on December 19th at Silverton. But what is it? A clue: it is probably due for retirement in 2026…**