The Train at Platform 1

The Friends of Honiton Station Newsletter 72 - March 2026

Welcome to the March newsletter. As Winter slowly begins to moves towards Spring, we continue to report on the engineering work being carried out along our line in order to try to prevent further problems later. Our monthly round up has all the latest information. On February 9th, members came together to talk about some of our plans for the future. I am grateful for everyone's continuing enthusiasm and effort, as we continue to try to make our station an even more welcoming and attractive place to be. Watch out for future announcements on our plans…

Planned engineering work took place between Exeter Central and Exmouth Junction on February 14th and 15th. Buses replaced trains all weekend. Photograph by Dave Tozer

Anyone For Coffee? Station Stall to Re-Open in March

We are delighted to welcome the owners of the Railway Kitchen at Axminster Station, as they take over the Honiton Station coffee shop. It is due to re-open on **Thursday March 12th at 8 a.m.** We look forward to welcoming this successful and community-based local company to the station.

Once things settle down, the new owners say they intend to open six days a week, from 7.30 a.m. until 2 p.m. each day. This mirrors the opening hours at their Axminster site.

The new owners have said that they are keen to develop the kinds of community links, and take part in the kinds of projects, they have done in Axminster already. We wish the new coffee shop owners every success.

Jack Price, Operations Director of Railway Kitchen, said:

"We would be keen to work with and support The Friends of Honiton Station where we can. We have a very strong working relationship with our Axminster-based group 'For Love of a Railway.'"

The owners say that the new branch will follow the original site's blend of freshly made breakfast and lunch options, coffee, and friendly service, but in a takeaway format.

In advance of the opening, Jack added:

"After four fantastic years in Axminster, we are incredibly proud to be expanding. The support from our customers has allowed us to grow, and we're excited to bring the same quality, friendly service, and locally sourced products to a new location in a format that suits busy customers and commuters."

The Honiton branch will offer a selection of sandwiches, toasties, pastries, cakes, and other grab-and-go options. All coffee will be made using beans from Crema the Crop Coffee, a nearby roaster. Tea fans can enjoy Clipper Teas, sourced from Beaminster.

The Railway Kitchen is also introducing its hot drinks loyalty card at the new site, allowing customers to collect 10 stamps and receive their 11th drink free. Stamps can be redeemed at both the Axminster and Honiton locations. The business is also offering a 10 per cent discount to Blue Light Card holders in recognition of their service.

The Railway Kitchen has built a strong reputation in Axminster for its commitment to flavour, freshness, and sourcing ingredients from trusted local suppliers. The new site promises to deliver that same standard of food and drink in a fast, convenient package. Its cakes and sweet treats will continue to be made with care and high-quality ingredients from nearby producers.

Over the last few years, the coffee shop has been run by Wilson and Bay, a start-up company based in Newport, South Wales. We would like to thank them for their work in running this essential business at the station.

They would, I am sure, be the first to say that they were not fully able to carry out some of their ambitious plans for the site. Initially, they hoped to operate a seven day a week extended hours service. Due to staffing and other reasons, this did not prove to be possible. Customers have, for whatever reason, also not always been able to rely on the Wilson and Bay outlet being open, and have therefore often been seen arriving with coffee bought from elsewhere in town.

By the way… A word of apology, before we go any further with this month's newsletter… We may have slightly under-estimated the cost of the refurbishment of the Class 159 units presently being undertaken. Our last newsletter said that SWR had set aside a budget of £16 to complete the work, which would just about buy coffees for a couple of fitters for a day.

What we meant to say, of course, was that SWR will be spending £16 million on updating this fleet. Even I can't drink that much coffee!

Storms and Heavy Rain Cause Travel Disruption on GWR Branch Lines

Following Storms Ingrid and Chandra, and ongoing heavy rain, Network Rail and Great Western Railway found themselves unable to operate three of the branch lines in Devon and Cornwall for some days, to allow for safety inspections following the storms.

Engineers initially completed work to repair visible damage to the track on stretches of the Barnstaple and Okehampton lines. Specialist dive teams were then called in to inspect submerged structures along the routes – including bridges and viaducts – to make sure that the water hadn't caused any damage.

However, this work was delayed when the water was still too high and flowing too fast for divers to work safely, even days later.

Bus replacement services are operating between Liskeard and Looe until at least March 6th. Heavy rainfall combined with high tides resulted in the water levels at several bridges along the branch line being above the level which allows GWR to safely run trains.

Network Rail has inspected the bridges, and it has been found that repairs to the infrastructure are required before GWR will be able to run trains again. They said that once the water levels drop again repair work will start.

It was decided that buses would have to replace trains on the line between Crediton and Barnstaple until at least February 16th. Train services to Okehampton had by then also resumed.

Following further inspections and forecast further rain, the full re-opening of the Barnstaple line was put back to Friday February 20th.

Network Rail's remote monitoring equipment detected water levels exceeding the threshold for closure at a number of structures along the line.

The water level began to fall, but before they could run trains along the line, the structures had to be inspected by specialist divers for any damage below the water level.

Because of the amount of rain that has fallen, the river current was running too fast for Network Rail to be able to deploy specialist divers to carry out their inspections.

Daryn McCombe, Director of Performance and Train Service Delivery for GWR and Director of Network Operations at Network Rail's Western route, said:

"We're really sorry for the continued disruption on these lines following Storm Chandra last week. GWR and Network Rail teams have been working tirelessly to safely keep customers moving wherever possible.

"We've been able to fix the problems we can see, but it's really important to make sure that underwater structures remain sound and it's not safe for divers to enter the water yet.

To further compound passengers' woes, later in the month the line between Par and Newquay was added to the list of branch lines affected by flooding, when it was reported to be closed on February 19th.

Network Rail to Carry Out Important Engineering Work on Heart of Wessex Line

Buses will be replacing trains between Yeovil Pen Mill and Weymouth on the Heart of Wessex Line between **28th February and 8th March**. A rail replacement bus service will run, calling at all stations between Yeovil Pen Mill and Dorchester West before continuing to Weymouth. Buses are unable to stop at Upwey, so passengers will need to use South Western Railway train services from Weymouth.

During this time, Network Rail engineers will be working to strengthen the embankments between Chetnole and Maiden Newton around the Evershot Tunnel. To do this, the team will be cutting through soil and rock to stabilise the slope by using soil nails and netting. This work will protect the railway from landslips, which could cause longer closures, as well as posing safety risks to passengers.

Engineers will be taking advantage of the closure to:

- Stress test the continuous welded rail to improve reliability, reducing the need for speed restrictions in hotter months;
- Carry out minor improvements to the track in the Thornford area following recent track renewal in September 2024;
- Carefully manage vegetation by selecting dead, dying and diseased trees that could cause delays to the running of trains between Chetnole and Maiden Newton stations.

Tom McNamee, Infrastructure Director for Network Rail, said:

"This latest investment in the Heart of Wessex Line will give our passengers a stronger and more reliable railway. Over the last few years, we have been investing in the Heart of Wessex Line to improve services in the rural communities this route serves."

Jordan Welsby, Great Western Railway's Station Manager for the Heart of Wessex region, said:

"Replacement road transport will be operating during this period between Yeovil Pen Mill and Weymouth stations. South Western Railway trains still run between Weymouth and London Waterloo, or between Yeovil Junction and Salisbury or London Waterloo. Please note there will be reduced parking available at Yeovil Pen Mill station due to the rail replacement operation."

March and April Engineering Report

Saturday 7th and Sunday 8th March

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

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

Buses will run between Yeovil Junction and Exeter St Davids. Buses will also run between Honiton and Exeter St Davids.

Saturday 14th and Sunday 15th March

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

Saturday

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

London Waterloo to Salisbury stopping services will start from Reading.

Buses will run between Woking, Guildford and Basingstoke.

Sunday

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

Buses will run between Woking, Guildford and Basingstoke

Saturday 21st and Sunday 22nd March, and Saturday 28th and Sunday 29th March

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

Saturday

London Waterloo to Exeter St Davids services will be revised.

London Waterloo to Salisbury stopping services will start from Basingstoke.

Sunday

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

Most late afternoon and evening London Waterloo to Salisbury stopping services will start from Basingstoke.

Friday 3rd to Monday 6th April

SWR and Network Rail had previously reported that planned engineering work would affect our line between Friday 3rd and Friday 10th April, for work on the Crewkerne Tunnel Cutting earthworks and drainage works at Wayford Cutting.

It has now been confirmed that the line will be closed between Yeovil and Honiton between the **3rd and 6th inclusive,** with bus replacements in place.

Waterloo to Exeter St Davids services will terminate and start at Yeovil Junction on these dates, and a two-hourly rail shuttle service will operate between Honiton and Exeter St Davids during what SWR describe as “daylight hours”. The shuttle trains will call at all stations.

The first train will leave Exeter St Davids at 0725 (0925 on Sunday), returning from Honiton at 0810 (Friday), 0815 (Saturday and Monday), or 1016 (on Sunday).

The last train will leave Exeter at 1725, returning from Honiton at 1814.

Replacement buses will run every two hours between Yeovil Junction and Honiton calling at Crewkerne and Axminster to connect with the shuttle service.

On opposite hours to the shuttle service, two buses will operate between Yeovil Junction and Exeter St Davids, with one calling at Crewkerne, Axminster, Honiton and Exeter Central, and one calling at Crewkerne, Axminster, Honiton, Cranbrook, Pinhoe and Exeter Central.

The latter services become hourly after shuttle service stops running.

Some evening buses will call additionally at Feniton and Whimple.

Sunday April 19th

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

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 April 25th

The lines between Woking and Basingstoke will be closed all day due to maintenance work.

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

London Waterloo to Salisbury stopping services will start from Reading.

London Waterloo to Basingstoke stopping services will not run.

Additional services will run between London Waterloo and Woking.

Buses will run between Woking and Basingstoke (non-stop).

Buses will run between Woking and Basingstoke via Farnborough.

Sunday April 26th

The lines in the Basingstoke 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.

Buses will run between Woking and Andover via Guildford and Basingstoke.

London Waterloo to Basingstoke stopping services will not run.

Exeter Engineering Work Hits Honiton Half-Term Weekend

On Saturday 14th and Sunday 15th February, train services between Exeter and Honiton were suspended due to planned engineering work between Exeter Central and Exmouth Junction. This work also affected services between Exeter and Exmouth.

At the same time, GWR services remained suspended between Exeter and Barnstaple following the recent storms and heavy rain.

These changes to services had a considerable knock-on effect for travellers, including people trying to attend home games for Exeter Chiefs and Exeter City. Traffic was reportedly much heavier than usual in the Exeter area on Saturday.

During this engineering work, trains from Waterloo terminated at Honiton, from where an hourly replacement bus service operated. Two buses left Honiton once the train arrived, with a fast, direct service calling at Exeter Central and St Davids only, and the other bus calling at all stations.

Whilst these bus services operated smoothly, an ongoing concern is the timing of their arrival at Honiton, where they often have only six minutes in hand to make the connection with the departing train.

With the increased traffic in Exeter, this was particularly noticeable, and connections were quite tight at times. This matter has been raised with SWR on previous occasions.

Questions were also asked about the amount of time trains waited at Honiton Station with their engines running during this, and previous, engineering work. The timetable required trains to sit at the platform for 40 minutes, to await their xx55 departure time.

There are apparently technical reasons why it is not practical for trains to switch off their engines during this extended visit – although I have seen it done before at Honiton during slightly longer waits, when a train has had to be terminated at Honiton and parked for an hour on Platform 2.

However, there is a certain irony to this extended period of trains running their engines, given the notices displayed outside Sherborne Station, urging car drivers not to leave their engines running while they are parked at the station to collect or drop off passengers.

The notice urges drivers to be part of the solution, not the pollution. Hopefully SWR can find a solution to the running of engines at stations for long periods in this way, to set an example of their own.

And talking of Sherborne, February 13th saw the start of half term for students at the town's prestigious boarding schools. The result was considerable congestion on the eastbound platform during the afternoon, as students, along with their luggage, arrived in great numbers.

It is believed that in former years, additional trains were operated at such times when peak loading was expected, to manage the demand. These seem to have been discontinued.

However, SWR did deploy extra staff at the station to manage the crowded platform, to maintain a safe environment for all passengers. This congestion at Sherborne seems to be a regular feature, so hopefully SWR is continuing to monitor it, and its impact, carefully.

Congratulations to SWR for Work To Safeguard Passengers

As the local press report recently, South Western Railway has once again received the highest possible score for safeguarding vulnerable people on its network.

Vulnerable people can include children or adults who are at risk of harm, who are victims of crime, or who are escaping from exploitation or abuse.

For the third year running, SWR has achieved a 100% pass mark for the Safeguarding on Rail Scheme (SRS), with British Transport Police (BTP) congratulating SWR for the "exceptional achievement".

BTP interviewed senior leaders and station staff, reviewed key documents and visited stations. The result was a 100% pass mark on the assessment and full accreditation for a third consecutive year.

To achieve this score, an organisation cannot simply rely on previous work but must be continually developing and embedding new and improved safeguarding practices.

Since transferring to public ownership last year, SWR has continued to cement its leadership in keeping customers and colleagues safe by:

- Making around 850 body-worn video cameras available to frontline colleagues, with roadshows at traincare depots promoting the benefits for colleague safety, crime deterrence and securing prosecutions;

- Delivering Junior Citizens events to teach Year 6 pupils about rail safety – reaching more than 1,000 children across eight days ;
- Enlisting 51 colleagues as Safeguarding Champions, with in-person training to promote safeguarding across the business;
- Co-hosting the second National Safeguarding Conference with fellow publicly owned operator Southeastern, focusing on best practices and shared responsibility for safeguarding across rail operators, police, councils and charities;
- Convening new bi-monthly safeguarding meetings to share intelligence and coordinate responses with police forces, local councils and other train operators in the coastal area from Southampton to Weymouth ;
- Launching a new initiative with Railway Children and South Bank Business Improvement District to support vulnerable young people in the London South Bank area, with dedicated outreach worker based at London Waterloo.

Safeguarding training is mandatory for all SWR colleagues, with refresher training every two years. From this year, Safeguarding Champions will have the opportunity to enhance their skills by completing a Level 3 Safeguarding Support Officer Apprenticeship.

Local Transport Minister Lilian Greenwood said:

"Under public ownership, South Western Railway continues to lead the way in protecting passengers and staff on its network. This perfect score is a fantastic achievement and shows how using modern technology and working closely with BTP, local partners and charities is helping to make the rail network safer for everyone."

Grant Robey, Head of Security and Safeguarding for South Western Railway, said:

"To achieve a perfect score in our assessment for a third year running shows the dedication of not just the Security and Safeguarding team but the whole of SWR and how seriously we take the task of safeguarding everyone who travels on our trains and passes through our stations.

"We will continue to work with our charity and stakeholder partners on existing and new initiatives to ensure that we continue to lead the industry in providing the best possible safeguarding for customers and vulnerable people."

Detective Chief Superintendent Peter Fulton, BTP's Head of Crime and Public Protection said:

"The accreditation reflects an exceptional achievement and a 100% pass mark—testament to the significant work undertaken to protect and safeguard vulnerable people across the network.

"The dedication of the Safety and Security Team and their determination to deliver excellence was evident throughout the audit. Their proactive approach, strategic planning, and commitment to embedding safeguarding as 'business as usual' sets a benchmark for best practice in the rail industry."

SWR supports White Ribbon UK, recently participating in the 'race the dark' event, and is actively involved in preventing and responding to violence against women and girls, including alongside other publicly owned operators in a DFTO working group.

SWR say that, building on the success of collaborations such as the Safe Space at London Waterloo which provides a haven at the station for anyone who needs it, and rail safety sessions in schools, the newly integrated SWR and Network Rail Wessex team will apply for the next safeguarding accreditation together.

This will ensure that track and train are aligned on safeguarding commitments, they say, as the industry prepares for Great British Railways.

And talking of GBR…

Secretary of State Outlines Her Vision for the Railways

In another busy few weeks for transport events and policy, the Secretary of State for Transport Heidi Alexander took the opportunity of giving the annual George Bradshaw Address in February to flesh out her vision for the future of Britain's railways (see previous newsletters), a future, she said, *"Where public interest is at the heart, decision-making is brought closer to communities, and rail becomes a powerful catalyst for socio-economic change."*

We carry this address in full (no selective editing here!), so that readers can make up their own mind on what she said, what the Government is promising, and the likely effects it may, or may not, have for everyone who uses the railway.

I hope you don't mind, but I'd like to start with a thought experiment. I wonder what Bradshaw himself would say about the 19th-Century railway.

Would he describe a fragmented structure, with many companies pursuing different incentives? Yes. I think he would. Or a railway crossing the country with little accountability and coordination? Absolutely. How about nimby-ism in the face of rail expansion? 100% yes.

Some of you will know where this is heading. If a week is a long time in politics, it seems two centuries is rather short in the rail industry.

Previous speakers at this event, from Keith Williams right through to our very own Rail Minister Lord Peter Hendy, have all described an industry Bradshaw himself would likely recognise.

I'm obviously not saying there hasn't been any progress in that time. But my point is this. The challenge of taking a complex railway and turning it into something useful, something the public can depend on, isn't new. And Bradshaw, in his own way, serves as an inspiration.

Despite not laying a single line of track nor operating any new train, few have done more to bring the railway closer to the lives of ordinary people. His timetables were a Victorian guiding mind of sorts. Turning a disparate industry into a single railway. Creating order out of chaos.

For the first time, people could easily plan long-distance journeys for work or leisure – exploring not only the limits of the country, but the limits of their ambition and their imagination.

Soon, this engineering marvel, which grew from the pursuit of private profit, would become a social revolution, which began serving the public good. Victorian Britain was by no means fair, but I truly believe the railways and Bradshaw made it fairer.

So, as we stand at the cusp of the biggest transformation of this industry in over 30 years, we face a similar task. How do we rewire the industry towards the public good above all else? And it starts, I'm afraid, by going back to basics. Asking ourselves what the railway is for. And who should it serve?

For me, the railway has always been about more than timetables and trains. More than simply getting people around, it's a means to get on. The same railway that gave my dad his first job as an electrical apprentice now employs bright young apprentices in Newton Aycliffe, building the trains of tomorrow.

The same railway that shaped my hometown of Swindon 200 years ago – with workers' cottages and health centres built by the Great Western Railway later regenerated East London in the 1980s, thanks to the DLR and the Jubilee line. And that same railway is unlocking tens of thousands of new homes from Newcastle to Cambridge, transforming brownfield land near stations into vibrant communities.

And so, I think, an enduring truth emerges. Across generations, rail has been a catalyst for social and economic change. And that impact stretches beyond this industry. It allows us to choose where we live. Choose who we spend time with. Choose what sorts of jobs we do. Choose how we raise our families. It gives us a sense of mastery over our own lives.

That's why I firmly believe when public interest is at the heart of the railway, we don't just connect people with places, we make everyone's lives a bit easier. We bring opportunity a bit closer and make the country a little bit fairer.

But over the last decade, this unspoken contract between the railway and the public has been broken.

I don't need to tell you this government inherited a railway that was, frankly, a mess. Passengers paying spiralling fares for unreliable services. Taxpayers footing the bill for an industry not incentivised to work together. Rail staff hamstrung by rigid contracts and a toxic blame culture. Places held back by poor connections and even poorer infrastructure.

And all this matters because connectivity really does tilt the scale of life chances.

Whether it's the constituents of mine, in Swindon, who ask me, on an almost weekly basis, why it costs them over £80 more for a peak return to London than it would if they lived in Oxford. Or disabled passengers who board a service wondering if there will be a working accessible toilet. Or our northern mayors who, until last month, felt understandably aggrieved by the prospect of a permanent second-rate infrastructure for the communities that they represent.

All of this points to a railway on the wrong side of public aspiration.

There are 2 examples I'd like to focus on this evening, which show not just the scale of the challenge, but the opportunity for change.Let's take December's East Coast Mainline timetable change. Postponed for years and years under the previous government, it meant the benefits of billions of pounds of investment for new trains and infrastructure couldn't be realised.

After the 2018 fiasco, everyone was understandably cautious. And no one in the current system was able to take charge to act in the interests of passengers and taxpayers, to take a judgement about the overall public good. No one was able to bring the industry together to deliver this change with minimal disruption.

So, we ended up with a system where it fell to Peter Hendy, as Rail Minister, to press go on a decision that really should be taken by experts, not politicians. And while the early signs have been positive, with minimal delays and more services, this is no way to run a railway.

The Rail Minister should no more be making timetabling decisions than I should be coordinating airspace above Heathrow or directing traffic on the M6.

Peter stepped in to fill a vacuum. A vacuum of leadership that will be filled in future by Great British Railways (GBR). But I will say this. I will always remember the smile on Peter's face when he sat down in my office before Christmas – shortly after the last readiness meeting – and said: 'as someone who has spent decades in rooms of railway people armed with contracts, you can't believe how good it felt to be sat there with people who just wanted to make it work'.

We talk about the need for a guiding mind for the railways and I think the story of the East Coast Mainline timetable encapsulates it.

The second issue I want to talk about is cost. Last year, taxpayers spent £12 billion on our railways. That's equivalent to £400 per household to just run the trains and maintain the track.

Let me be clear, I think this is unsustainable. I say this not because I think rail subsidies are inherently a bad thing. In fact, the opposite is true. If we agree that rail – like healthcare and education – is a lifeline service that drives cohesion and growth. If we agree with Rick Haythorthwaite, who at the very first Bradshaw address, said: 'there is a price for not investing in our railway', then we must show that rail makes a positive contribution.

That requires us to confront some uncomfortable truths – starting with the passenger experience. Given we have some of the highest average fares in Europe, are passengers getting what they pay for? Do they easily engage with the railway, with clear expectations? Do they feel looked after when things go wrong?

Or let's take infrastructure. We spend a similar amount per year to Germany and France. And yet, because we have a smaller network, our infrastructure costs per kilometre outstrip our European neighbours.

I believe there is genuine public support for a railway that delivers value for money for passengers and taxpayers. And I do believe we can change the national debate on rail – to stop it being an easy target for cuts, as we've seen over the past decade.

So, I'd like to propose a new vision for the industry. Where its customers don't just have a better experience but where they become rail's strongest advocates. Where the railway strives to become boringly reliable – but attracting more people, carrying more goods and earning more revenue. Where stories are not about the difficulty of the journey, but about the excitement of the destination.

And what needs to happen to make that a reality is experts, not politicians, in the driving seat – taking responsibility and making long-term decisions, which put customers first. That is the modern, reformed railway Britain needs.

Now, the railway has had 30 reviews since 2006. It's been 8 years since Keith Williams was asked to diagnose the industry's weaknesses. And in the past decade, two serving transport secretaries have stood here, at the Bradshaw lectern, promising change.

Successive governments have all arrived at the same diagnosis, yet have been unwilling to administer the medicine. That changes now. Nothing short of wholesale reform is needed to secure rail's future and this government started the work of change as soon as we were elected.

Within weeks, we ended two years of national rail strikes and introduced the landmark Public Ownership Bill. Within a year, we approved dozens of rail projects previously in financial limbo – as well as being honest when projects were not affordable within our fiscal inheritance. And we lifted the veil on performance data – making it more transparent than ever before.

Within 18 months, we allocated £45 billion in a historic commitment for Northern Powerhouse Rail. We introduced the Railways Bill followed by the launch of the new Great British Railways brand.

We are now seeing what happens when political will matches the industry's demand for change. And green shoots are now visible. Performance is improving. DfTO operators are performing better on punctuality and cancellations than those yet to come into public ownership. They have added more than 76,000 extra seats per week, whilst Southwestern Railway (SWR) has quadrupled the number of new Arterio trains in service.

Ticketing is becoming simpler, with easy-to-understand fares in Manchester giving us a glimpse of the future. And passengers are keeping more of their hard-earned cash thanks to the first rail fares freeze in 30 years.

Of course, this is just the start. The journey to reform will have many stops along the way and I'd like to talk about 3 of them, starting with Great British Railways. GBR will be the directing mind the industry has long needed. Ending fragmentation. Sweeping away decades of bureaucracy and waste. And guided by a single mission – a better, more reliable railway, for passengers and freight.

Caring about customers is one thing. Having the power to act in their interest, and their interest alone, is another. So we will give GBR the tools it needs for the job. From a single profit and loss approach that drives value for money to a new simplified access rules that optimises capacity for passengers and freight. All told, the railway will start working for the public, rather than expecting the public to work around the railway.

But let me reassure everyone here tonight, we are not returning to the centralisation of the past. GBR won't be a Kafkaesque blob – a plaything of politicians who secretly want to run the railways. Instead, it will be agile, commercially focused and run by people who know the industry in their bones.

More decisions will be taken closer to local communities and thanks to strengthened partnerships with mayors and devolved regions, we will integrate rail into local and regional transport plans.

Finally, there will be no hiding place for failure. For the first time, one integrated business plan will set the direction of the railway and you have my word: GBR will be held to account for it. First, by an independent GBR board, filled with the right expertise. And second by the ORR, which will provide independent advice to government on GBR's performance whilst also enforcing GBR's compliance with its licence, which we will consult on later this year.

And if I might now turn to the most important people in all of this – the industry's customers. GBR will be obsessed with passengers and freight. In fact, it will have a statutory duty to promote the interests of both. And their experience will change beyond recognition.

As a passenger, you will no longer navigate multiple companies for different parts of your journey. Buying tickets in one place, checking timetables somewhere else and being pushed from pillar to post to get compensation if your train is delayed.

You'll now deal with one railway. One brand. One organisation in charge. With your entire experience starting and ending with 3 letters: GBR.

And you'll have a strong champion when things go wrong. The Passenger Watchdog will ensure the passenger is always front of mind when decisions are made. It will set tough consumer standards, with powers to investigate issues and demand improvements.

So, if your train is late, if you experience shoddy customer service, if you're let down by Passenger Assist – the new watchdog will fight your corner.

We're also dragging fares into the 21st Century. Because if we are to drive passenger growth, buying a ticket should be effortless. That's why a new GBR online retailer will simplify ticketing, ensuring you get the right fare every time with no booking fees and ending the surreal situation where 14 different operator websites and apps all offer the same fare – or worse, different fares for the same journey!

And we'll continue to roll out Pay-As-You-Go to make train travel even easier. That includes a further 20 stations in the South East later this year, followed by 90 stations across the West Midlands and Manchester.

Of course, passengers aren't the only customer. And I've heard concerns the Railways Bill will lead to worse outcomes for the freight sector. So let me set the record straight. Moving more goods on our railways makes both economic and environmental sense.

Yet to date, freight providers have had to find ways to work around a complex system not set up for them. We're changing that. And I am reassured to see the 30 bi-mode GBRf locomotives starting to be introduced – showing it's not all doom and gloom!

The growth of the freight sector will be written in to the DNA of GBR. It will ensure freight paths for future growth are in the timetables of the future. The GBR board will include a member with responsibility for freight, championing your interests from within.

There will be more flexibility to lower charges for new services. And faster, more transparent decision making will give businesses the confidence to invest and grow.

We have a bold ambition to increase freight by 75% by 2050 and I'll set out further targets over the coming months to help deliver that goal.

Finally, I'd like to speak about a new culture for the railway. I know many rail staff get up each morning ready to serve the public, knowing they deliver a service that millions rely on each day. It's a vocation.

Yet I see that sense of pride has steadily been chipped away. Because instead of fixing problems and making things better for passengers, staff and managers are sometimes encouraged, even contracted, to look the other way if it's technically someone else's responsibility. To make money out of failure.

It's why operators aren't incentivised to invest in making it easier to clear leaves off the line. Why it takes multiple contractors to fix a broken light bulb. And why staff shortages lead to cancellations – because there's no single body that looks long term at our workforce needs.

I say enough is enough.

We are building one railway with one team – where each problem is everyone's problem. And we're already moving closer to this future. Integrated leadership teams are now in place on South Eastern and South Western, and the Anglia region following soon.

So, when problems arise anywhere in that part of the network, Jamie, Lawrence and Steve will be empowered to knock heads together to fix it.

But this sense of collective ownership must apply everywhere, right down to the station floor. I want more decisions made closer to the passenger, where GBR staff are entrusted to act when they see something going wrong. At the heart of this new approach will be pride in service and trust in the people who deliver it.

Now, I realise I am the first woman to deliver the Bradshaw address. So, I do feel it's incumbent on me to use the little time I have left to talk about diversity.

Some of you will be familiar with the Dave Test – where you check if your team has less women than it has men called Dave. Don't worry, I'm not going to apply it here tonight! But what started out as a joke to mock Silicon Valley's gender gap now reflects a sad reality across our economy.

And it may not surprise you that the RDG board, as recently as last year, failed the Dave Test. Unfortunately, this disparity plays out across rail, where only 19% of staff are female. This is about more than just representation. Because if rail is closed off from the full spectrum of talent available, this moral issue will turn into an existential crisis.

At current rates, 68,000 rail staff are projected to leave the industry by 2030. There are gaps in critical areas like signalling and systems engineering. We cannot afford to keep our heads in the sand.

It's why today we laid legislation to lower the minimun train driving age from 20 to 18, bringing us in line with the likes of Germany and Australia. Thousands of young people can now leave school and immediately take the first step on their rail career. But we must do more.

So tonight, I'm setting a clear expectation that GBR will be as much a champion of diversity inside the railway as it will be a driver of social mobility outside. That means flexible working opportunities that are attractive to all, including those who have long struggled to access the labour market.

That means ensuring we have the right skills in the right places. It means taking long-term investment decisions on workforce planning and training. And it means building diverse leadership teams, ensuring multiple perspectives to help us see around the corner and confront the challenges of tomorrow, today. Building a railway that reflects the society it serves is a personal mission of mine and it will be GBR's too.

I'd like to end by borrowing a phrase from a former leader of my party: 'the opportunity to serve is all we ask'. The railway now has an opportunity to serve the public in a way it hasn't been able to for the last 30 years.

The past 18 months show that we can change the railways. None of the progress so far would have happened without some brilliant people, many of whom are in this room. And I'm determined this change will not happen to you, but with you.

Right now, you are helping design the future of GBR. You are shaping the long term rail strategy. You are working with my team as we steer the Railways Bill through parliament. And I need you to work relentlessly for better performance, revenue growth and cost reduction.

Together, we can make GBR a world class public body. A driver of living standards and opportunity. A symbol of quality and high standards for its consumers. An employer of choice, open to every community. A boringly reliable railway. But a railway of which we can all finally be proud.

In other related news, the Transport Select Committee has reported on its inquiry into the Railways Bill. The Committee has called for clearer timelines, changes to prevent undue political interference, and a stable, long-term strategy to deliver a more integrated, accountable network.

You can read a copy of the full report, including a detailed series of recommendations for amendments to the Bill, at:

publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmtrans/1472/report.html

SERUG Reminds Rail Industry of Vital Needs for West of England Line

To set against these words from the Secretary of State, our colleagues at the Salisbury to Exeter Rail Users Group took the opportunity last month to remind the new management of team of SWR/Network Rail Wessex (see previous newsletter) of its own key vision for our line.

Speaking in their latest newsletter (Issue 25, available on the SERUG website and sent out directly to its members), SERUG says:

In previous Newsletters, we have regularly set out our "stall" on what rolling stock and infrastructure upgrades we believe are necessary to improve the passenger experience on our line.

With so many new senior level appointments at SWR since Nationalisation, we thought it prudent to reiterate the key developments that we would expect them to cover within their forthcoming Business Plan.

Bruce Duncan (Chairman of SERUG) addresses their AGM. Photograph by Nick Thompson

Below is a summary of what we have submitted to SWR:

1. It is crucial that an early commitment is made on new rolling stock and, in particular, the power source for the new trains. Until that is done it is impossible to move ahead with a decision for a new maintenance depot at Salisbury (outlined in a document entitled Salisbury Area Station Strategy Study (SASS).

2. The implementation of the SASS proposals is needed before crucial platform, signal and track improvements are made at Salisbury.

3. In order to pave the way for a faster and more frequent service, we need – as an absolute minimum - the construction of passing loops in both the Whimple and Tisbury areas. These improvements were specified (along with others which would further improve capacity) as part of Network Rail's Continuous Modular Strategic Planning (CMSP) back in April 2020.

4. Deliver signalling modernising improvements and upgrades in the Salisbury area set for Control Period 8 (CP8) which runs from April 2029-March 2034.

5. CP8 also has provision for new signalling and station improvements and upgrades at Exeter Central and Exeter St Davids with Network Rail's Wales & Western region.

6. The implementation of the proposed "Devon Metro" scheme to provide more frequent services into and out of Exeter and it's travel to work area. As a minimum these should run from Axminster to Exeter Central.

7. Once these improvements have been made an opportunity will exist to develop a new and improved timetable for the line.

In the meantime, there needs to be concentration on maintenance of the existing track and signalling. So called Soil Moisture Deficit Issues, which caused the drying out of clay embankments in 2025, and the subsequent disruption to services, need to be tacked with a long-term resilience plan. The Department for Transport needs to ensure extra money to deal with extreme weather events.

In addition to the points detailed above, foliage along the line is another huge problem. Leaves on the track were found to be the cause of the collision at Salisbury Tunnel Junction in October 2021 and a similar accident in the Welsh borders in Oct 2024.

Trains sliding on rails contaminated with leaf mould, cause flat spots on the wheels. Units then have to be taken out of service for the wheels to be refurbished or replaced.

Of course, all the above items are inter-related and need to form part of an overall coordinated plan for the line.

Items 1-6 above were actually approved in principle, by SWR, Network Rail, Devon, Somerset, Dorset and Wiltshire Councils as well as Western Gateway and Peninsula Rail, prior to the formation of the new national Great British Railways.

In addition to this, of course, we want the trolly service back – it is top of the wish list for many travellers. No "development plan" or a "strategy" required.... It just needs some innovative thinking – and willpower.

Although we hope that SWR's Business Plan to the Government / Department for Transport will encompass points 1-7 above, in the end it will be government that funds it (unless any of our members win the lottery...!) through the clumsily named Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline. (RNEP) which, according to the Railways Industry Association, has not been updated since 2019 despite original promises to update it annually!

It is our view that the RNEP process does not necessarily suit enhancement projects, ie funding for improving the railway, as opposed to the cash needed for routine maintenance to ensure signals, stations and infrastructure are kept in good order.

And Finally…

Wednesday February 4th saw one of the more unusual reasons for trains through Honiton being cancelled. According to sources close to what took place, after the last passenger service went down on Tuesday night an engineering train was sent from Chard Junction to Feniton. It was delivering material for work in the Feniton area. This train was left blocking the line overnight.

As part of the work, a Road Rail Vehicle was deployed. In the early hours, this vehicle apparently broke down. Incredibly, there was no fitter as part of the work crew, and he/she had to come from an hour away. The vehicle was repaired and the work resumed, only for the RRV to break down again.

In the early hours, it was decided by SWR that trains in the morning would be cancelled, as the line could not be handed back by Network Rail on time. All services were rearranged, with a number terminated or started from Salisbury.

Eventually, nearly two hours behind the scheduled time, the works train set off back from Feniton to Chard Junction.

My information is that if the train due to operate the 0916 from Honiton had been en route, it may have been possible to run the service to Exeter, and certainly to operate the 1018. However, by early morning, trains had already been cancelled west of Salisbury until much later in the morning, presumably because it was unclear until then at exactly what time Network Rail would be able to hand the line back.

This may be due to what happened in the floods on the previous Tuesday, when trains backed up rather than be finally and irrevocably cancelled. When the line was due to reopen they started to come through to Honiton, but one of them had taken so long to get to Honiton that the driver had already officially exceeded his hours by the time he got there.

Hopefully, lessons will have been learned from these recent events.