The Train at Platform 1

The Friends of Honiton Station Newsletter 75 - June 2026

Welcome to the June newsletter. This month, we feature details of an important interview given to Rail Magazine by SWR's Managing Director, Lawrence Bowman. It is well worth seeking out the full interview. We were delighted to welcome the Atlantic Coast Express back to East Devon last month. Steam specials always bring out the crowds, especially some younger rail enthusiasts. We also welcome news of successful projects at Okehampton and at Portishead. It gives us hope for the future in securing improvements here. And don't forget to read the (brief) Engineering Report.

Special guests are taken from Bristol Temple Meads to visit the site of the new Portishead Branch, as contracts for the line are signed. The service was operated, of all things, by a Pacer!

SWR Managing Director Sets Out His Stall - Performance Must Improve

Rail Magazine recently published a fascinating interview with SWR's Managing Director, Lawrence Bowman. In a wide-ranging piece written by former BBC Transport Correspondent Paul Clifton, Bowman admitted that there is much to do since bringing SWR and Network Rail together into one of the first post-nationalisation Integrated Business Units.

Putting it quite bluntly, Lawrence said: *"We have to make performance better."* He admitted that SWR had failed to meet any of its key performance targets in February. *"Every single day,"* he said, *"we are working through challenges,"* pointing to a number of issues that month, from trespassing on the line, track faults, speed restrictions and a range of infrastructure failures.

The article revealed that in the year from April 2025 to March 226, SWR cancelled 4.8% of its services, although Lawrence stressed that the great majority of these not directly attributable to the train operator.

Bowman was clear in identifying some of the key issues facing the company. These range from finally getting more of their Arterio trains onto the network, years after originally planned, to completing the process of recruiting and training enough drivers. Ironically, the Managing Director pointed out that, in the short term, the driver training had added to existing shortages, as: *"When you include the driver trainers, seconded from elsewhere to the Arterios, we had 40 or 50 people a day off the roster. That compromised the service."*

Bowman also acknowledged that SWR is losing £40 million a year through fare evasion and fraud, representing 4% of fare income. *"Revenue leakage"* as he called it, *"frustrates not just us, but the customers who pay fairly."*

Naturally, the interview soon turned to the state of the West of England Line, which Bowman described as: *"Our worst-performing route."* He said that: *"You need everything to work perfectly every day on the long single sections west of Salisbury,"* for the service to operate effectively. *"It only needs one component to fail for performance to become really tricky."* Something of an understatement perhaps, given events later in the month (see article below)…

While he had no immediate answer to the problem of Soil Moisture Deficit (SMD), he reiterated the need for a Modernisation Plan for the West of England Line, a task he has placed in the hands of a senior colleague. This will include attempts to increase line speed in places, as well as the long-term goal of re-dualling key stretches of track.

Sadly, Lawrence could not offer any solutions to the need to replace the aging Class 159 rolling stock. Paul Clifton inferred from his remarks that the proposal to convert Class 450 units, and to extend third-rail electrification, is finally dead. However, nothing else is yet on the horizon, meaning that the refreshing of the Class 159 units, presently under way, will have to take them through up to ten more years' service. This may turn out to be a challenge, given another round of several short-formed trains in May, caused by various mechanical issues.

Lawrence made much in the interview of the prospects for the planned timetable refresh across the SWR network, due to be implemented from the Winter of 2027.

However, he stated that the refresh would not be a one and done deal; the timetable will continue to develop incrementally from then. This would, of course, be necessary, if and when the line improvements West of Salisbury increase line capacity.

One key point, however, hidden in the detail, shows a change of emphasis from the last timetable review in 2018-19.

Rather than use advantages gained, such as those from new and faster trains, wholly to reduce journey times, the plan will be to split the benefit, with part of its going to better reliability of service.

In other words, the timetable will deliberately leave some slack in the timing, so that if (when?) things go wrong, trains can more easily catch up.

If this is a minute here and a minute there across a series of stops, passengers possibly won't notice, as clearly they did during the SMD timetable last Summer, when trains sat for ages at stations. By leaving small amounts of slack in the timetable, Bowman believes that he would be able to run a more reliable (if slightly slower) and more resilient railway.

While at times the interview was interspersed with jargon and business speak, Bowman was keen to address some of the key issues, while not giving too many hostages to fortune. He ended, however, with a simple challenge, and a note of necessary caution.

In getting from SWR and Network Rail Wessex, to a fully-fledged and integrated GBR South Western – if that is indeed what it is eventually called – the goal, he said, will be: *"A high-performing railway, where we are cancelling a lot fewer trains and hitting (our on-time performance targets) a bit more."*

And the note of caution? *"There are prizes to be had,"* he said. *"But they will be incremental."*

Engineering Report for June and July

Saturday 6th and Sunday 7th, Saturday 13th and Sunday 14th and Saturday 27th and Sunday 28th June

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

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

July

At present, there are no reports of any planned engineering work on our line in July.

Reminder of Autumn Planned Line Closure

Between Monday October 26th and Sunday November 1st, planned engineering work will be taking place around Honiton Tunnel.

SWR and Network Rail Wessex describe the works as: *"Embankment stabilization at the tunnel and improving drainage in the area to help prevent landslips during the wetter winter months."*

Considering that we know how drying out due to Soil Moisture Deficit is also a problem on our line, and caused speed restrictions and emergency timetables last year, Network Rail had this to say about the situation in our area: *"The West of England Line is seeing heavier levels of rainfall and our teams are proactively working in the area to improve line resilience."* I guess, all we can say is that the rain is falling in the wrong place, or at the wrong time!

Ticket Sale Hailed a Success

Last month, South Western Railway launched its first-ever May Rail Sale – just the ticket for customers eager to swap expensive getaways for affordable breaks at half-term.

From Friday 8th until Monday 18th May, SWR offered 40,000 discounted tickets to some of the most popular destinations across the South West for travel during the May half term period.

The sale came as new SWR research suggested Brits are increasingly embracing shorter, lower-cost UK breaks this half term. More than a than a third (34%) of respondents said lower costs were the main reason for choosing short UK trips, while others reported reduced travel time (33%), ease of planning (29%) and flexibility (24%).

The research also found that just over a quarter (26%) would consider replacing one overseas holiday with multiple UK trips instead.

From sandy beaches and harbour towns to cathedral cities and countryside escapes, SWR's May Rail Sale included some of the South West's most popular leisure destinations.

Coastal favourites such as Bournemouth, Poole and Weymouth were available from £12 each way, while history lovers were able explore Winchester and Salisbury from £9.

And in case you think all the goodies were reserved for our friends in the capital, low prices were also available for journeys to London for sightseeing, shopping or a theatre trip - with the London Eye, South Bank and The Shard all just a short walk from Waterloo station.

Matthew Winnie, South Western Railway's Chief Customer and Commercial Officer, said:

"Our first-ever big May Rail Sale is all about helping customers enjoy great value days out and short breaks across the SWR network during the half-term and May bank holiday period. Whether it's a seaside escape, a cultural city break or a countryside adventure, there are so many fantastic destinations that can be reached easily, affordably and sustainably by rail."

Success of New South West Projects Give Us All Hope for the Future

While we continue to work with SWR, rail user groups, MPs and others to campaign for improvements to our line, it is always good to see that projects can, and do, succeed in the end. We celebrate two this month.

First, the opening of Okehampton Interchange station is now imminent. Work is more or less completed on site, and test trains have begun to stop at the station to make sure that everything is as it should be. Look out for announcements of the start of service, and the opening ceremony.

Elsewhere, GWR announced that contracts had been signed to bring the railway back to Portishead and Pill. This will bring more than 50,000 people back into direct contact with the rail network, with the opening of two new stations open in winter 2028/29.

This is the final stage of preparation to reinstate the Portishead railway line closed to passengers since 1964, reconnecting communities that have been without a rail link for six decades, opening access to jobs, education and opportunity, and powering economic growth across the region.

The core works involve building two new stations, relaying three miles of track and delivering the infrastructure needed to run a modern, reliable rail service along a corridor that has been dormant for generations. Construction is now underway at both sites.

To celebrate the contract signings, invited guests joined a special train journey from Bristol Temple Meads along the line towards Portishead and the site of the new Pill station - travelling a route that will soon carry thousands of passengers every day.

However, as our cover photograph shows, it was somewhat of a “back to the future” moment, as the special train was… a Pacer!

Helen Godwin, Mayor of the West of England, said:

“This is an historic moment for Portishead, Pill and the whole of the West of England, as we continue to grow our regional rail network and look to increase the frequency of trains across the board.

“Through this new £200 million train line, the West of England and North Somerset, alongside our industry partners, we can connect more people to work, nature, and leisure. This investment will also help unlock sites for new homes and strengthen the country’s fastest-growing regional economy.

“Travel times between Bristol and Portishead will be halved by train services, helping the West get out of the slow lane and cutting congestion. Our record investment in more trains and better buses will get our region moving, while we continue developing mass transit plans for the longer-term.”

Journeys to Bristol Temple Meads will take around 25 minutes from Portishead and 20 minutes from Pill - around half the time it takes to complete these journeys by road.

The Portishead Line project is forecast to generate an estimated £43m in economic growth each year when complete.

GWR Managing Director Mark Hopwood said:

"It is really pleasing to officially mark the start of work here today and to invite people back onto this stretch of the railway - which represents a major step forward in reconnecting this area by rail.

"But this isn't just about trains and track – it is about reconnecting people to rail and providing a vital economic catalyst across the region. This project validates our belief that reliable rail services are essential for local and national growth.

"The line will allow thousands more direct access to the rail network and in the fullness of time will connect with our other new station, Bristol Brabazon, and the new Aviva Arena, creating further sustainable links for residents and visitors."

GWR's new timetable, starting on May 17th, and the opening of Okehampton Interchange, heralds a milestone year for GWR, with the company in its modern incarnation set to reach 200 stations for the first time. Of course, it has a long way to go to match the huge reach of the original Great Western Railway before Dr. Beeching did his worst.

Since 2021, GWR has opened five new stations, at Okehampton, Marsh Barton, Reading Green Park, Portway Park and Ride and Ashley Down. Okehampton Interchange (the 200th) is due later this summer, and a further four stations over the next two to three years at Bristol Brabazon, Charfield, Portishead and Pill (but not Cullompton or Wellington yet).

Richard Burningham Retirement

As we first reported a couple of months ago, the beginning of June marks the retirement of Richard Burningham, the Manager of the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership since 1998.

It is no exaggeration to say that it would have been quite impossible for us to have achieved the things we have at Honiton Station without the calm professionalism, experience, wisdom, support and advice of Richard.

His skill in helping us navigate our way through the complexities of the railway industry, and his close working relationships with all the key figures both locally and nationally, has made an incredible difference.

Nor is our experience unique. Station Adoption Groups and Rail User Groups across the two counties have benefitted from his unique experience, heading what was the very first Community Rail Partnership.

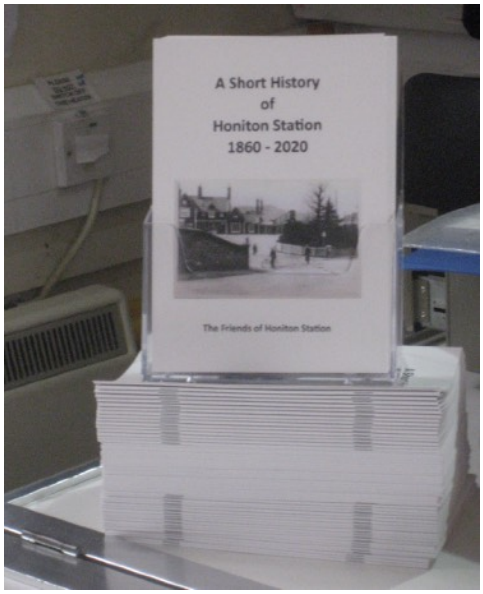
Projects large and small, whether it be station improvements, artwork, better services, or indeed whole new lines such as the Dartmoor Line, owe so much of their success to Richard's work.

Here at Honiton, Richard worked with Jenny to create the original vinyls in the shelter, created the community rail noticeboard in the car park which has been such a great success, and worked with a range of partners, included rail companies, the Thelma Hulbert Gallery, artists and others, to promote the rich and varied artwork that now adorns our station.

During COVID, he was such a massive support, as we created our lockdown project, to create a celebratory booklet marking the first 160 years of our railway line. 1000 copies of the resulting publication were given out free, initially at the Allhallows Museum and then at the station.

The Line Forum he created for the East Devon Line is an important way in which groups like ours can meet together, along with local councillors and representatives of the railway industry, to share knowledge and experience, and to raise the profile of campaigns for a better railway.

It is typical of Richard, that so much of his legacy is going to be how we all continue to bring people together in this way, to encourage dialogue and to promote cooperation. For these are the hallmarks of Richard and all that he does and all that he is.



Richard was awarded the MBE for services to the rail industry in the South West in the 2010 New Year's Honours. He is going to leave huge shoes to fill. We look forward to continuing to work with DCRP, and wish Rebecca Catterall good luck as she takes up the reins.

Richard, thanks for everything. And we wish you a very happy retirement. We hope that you will continue to take a close interest in the railways of the two counties, and that we will see you from time to time at SERUG events.

In the meanwhile, we hope that you will enjoy more opportunities to follow your beloved Brentford FC next season.

Atlantic Coast Express Makes Latest Visit to Honiton

Well over 100 people of all ages gathered at Honiton Station on Saturday 23rd May to enjoy the spectacle of a much-loved steam locomotive as it passed through the town. Merchant Navy Class locomotive Clan Line spent twenty minutes at the station during its journey from London Waterloo to Exeter.

Built at Eastleigh in Hampshire, Clan Line entered service in 1948, and was withdrawn in 1967. Since that time, it has been owned and operated by the Merchant Navy Locomotive Preservation Society.

Clan Line's most recent steam excursion celebrates the iconic Atlantic Coast Express service which operated between Waterloo and Devon and Cornwall between 1926 and 1964. Among many other places, the service once served the towns of Bude and Padstow, long-since disconnected from the railway network.

This year's commemorative run was organised by The Railway Touring Company of King's Lynn, Norfolk, and took Clan Line from Waterloo to Exeter and then on to Bristol, Bath, Salisbury and back to Waterloo.

Crowds of enthusiasts came to Honiton Station to take photographs, shoot videos and meet the crew. As always, there was a special atmosphere, with steam fans, families and people of all ages mixing together to share their love of steam.

Martin Long commented: *"It was great to see so many people at the station to celebrate the heritage of our railways. It is always such a highlight of our year."*

Warm thanks go to the South Western Railway station staff for their hospitality and to The Railway Kitchen for extending their opening hours to serve all the extra visitors to the station.

New Planting Project Well Under Way

Huge thanks to everyone who has helped with the on-going project to update the planters at the station. As we reported last month, Steve and his family, along with Paul, had cleared out and prepared the large containers for the new planting scheme.

As the photographs below show, some of the planters had become rather overgrown, and there were a number of plants that did not survive the extremely dry Spring and Summer last year.

Steve and his family then returned to install the new plants. They are now being kept watered as they bed themselves in, by the station staff, with Paul's support. To thank the station staff for all their support, we have bought them a new watering can. The station staff have also asked to take on the planting up of one of the planters, as well as to plant out the two small round pots, which staff member Keith has repainted. We have offered them funds to help complete their project.

Before…

And After.

Let's hope that the weather is kind this year, so that the new planting can fully bed in. We can then plan how best to continue to move this project forward in the future.

Summer at the Victoria Rail Garden

With summer arriving with a vengeance in May across large parts of Britain, millions of sun-seekers warmly embraced the change in the weather forecast.

But while this heat wave was welcomed by many, such events bring into sharp focus the huge challenges that weather events, brought on by climate change, increasingly pose to elements of day-to-day life.

And to highlight what this means for the railway, Network Rail created a special 'Summer Rail Garden' inside London Victoria station to show how hot and dry weather affects the network and the work that takes place to keep trains running safely and reliably for passengers.

Lisa Angus, Network Rail's industry weather response director, said:

"Following on from the Chelsea Flower Show, we are showcasing our own garden – with a twist - at London Victoria station.

"Due to climate change, summer weather now brings more extremes than we have seen before, and can present real challenges for the railway, and many of these are not widely known or understood.

"That's why we have designed a garden specifically to bring to life the work that goes on behind the scenes to keep trains running – helping to keep passengers moving to visit family and friends, head to the countryside, the coast, or wherever else they like to go when the sun is shining!"

Extreme heat can affect track, ground conditions, power and signalling systems, increasing the likelihood of disruption across the network, while sudden summer rainfall can cause flooding and threaten lineside equipment and structures.

Network Rail says that the key impacts of hot weather on the rail network are:

- Buckled rails - High temperatures cause steel rails to expand, which can lead to them bending or buckling. This can require trains to run at lower speeds to keep passengers safe.

- Soil moisture deficit - Prolonged dry weather causes clay soils and embankments to shrink, increasing the risk of ground movement that can affect track stability.

- Sagging overhead lines - Heat reduces the tension of overhead wires on electrified routes, increasing the risk of sagging or contact with trains, which can disrupt services.

- Overheating signalling equipment - Extreme temperatures can cause signalling and electrical systems to overheat, increasing the likelihood of faults.

The Summer Rail Garden brought those challenges to life, featuring a buckled rail, sagging overhead line equipment and dried, cracked soil – things passengers rarely see but which can have a significant impact on their journeys.

The garden also highlighted how these challenges are being addressed through long-term planning, innovation and new technology, helping to strengthen the resilience of Britain's railway network.

Lisa added:

“Through a combination of proactive monitoring and investment in smart technologies — including remote sensors and innovative cooling solutions — we're protecting critical infrastructure and keeping passengers moving safely during extreme weather.

“We hope customers passing through London Victoria station will take a moment to explore the garden before heading off on their journey.”

Built using reclaimed wooden sleepers and recycled track, the garden was installed into the station over the late May Bank Holiday weekend. It is due to be dismantled and reassembled at the National Railway Museum in York, where it will have a permanent home.

And In Other News…

This past fortnight has been another strong reminder of the growing influence of community rail in shaping the future of the railway. At the UK Rail Conference, Jools Townsend, Chief Executive of Community Rail Network (CRN), of which we are a member, joined a panel sharing insights on what it will take to ensure the railway works for everyone.

The message was clear: engaging communities is not a “nice-to-have”, but a critical part of delivering better connectivity, climate-safe mobility, and fair access to opportunity.

We’re also pleased to see recognition of community rail’s role in shaping rail use and behaviour in a Department for Transport-commissioned review. The findings reinforce what CRN members see every day: that barriers to rail use are often about confidence, familiarity, accessibility and the complexity of end-to-end journeys.

With support from New Forest Community Rail Partnership and SWR, the Friends of Ashurst Station have built a lasting memorial to the British and Indian soldiers who were camped adjacent to the station during World War One.

Between October and November 1914, soldiers were based at the station (then called Lyndhurst Road) to exchange their artillery pieces for larger ones. These would be transported from Woolwich Arsenal in London by train to Ashurst New Forest Station.

The station volunteers worked with historian Nick Saunders and artists Simon Chadwick and Stewart Wilkins to collate stories and images for the new display, as well as building a special memorial planter and establishing a Magnolia tree, a native plant to India.

And Finally… What Will Summer Bring?

I don't usually comment directly on such things, but sometimes being the "critical friend" I always try to be to our railway means that such comment feels right. May came to a more than disappointing end on our railway. A combination of issues, many out of SWR's control, conspired together to cause the service to come under increasingly severe strain over several days.

First, several 159 were taken out of service, leading to a number of short-formed trains. Some sources suggest that part of the problem was with oil leaks (other unconfirmed reports talked about oil contamination). As with previous issues affecting these units, sourcing suitable spare parts has proved difficult, something that surely can only get worse in the future.

Thursday May 28th saw services cancelled due to the failure of a level crossing between Axminster and Crewkerne.

And then, of course, there was the first official heatwave of the year, and to mangle (or possibly destroy) a well-worn saying forever, it soon became "the perfect storm." After struggling, and just about coping over the Bank Holiday, Tuesday May 27th proved to be a pretty awful day for everyone concerned. For the record, we saw:

- Network Rail imposed a series of speed restrictions, including one at Wimbledon, due to the effect of the heat on a number of rails. With air temperatures in London reaching record levels for May for two days running, rails were under some stress.

- Drivers reported several track faults between Gillingham and Salisbury, faults which needed to be urgently inspected. Although initial assessments were that services could continue, further reports of faults in this area were made by drivers later in the day.
- At least one track circuit failure was reported, causing further disruption to services.
- Several train faults were recorded, including a failed set of doors. These led to units being taken out of service.

The result of all this was, firstly, delays to services, then services from Exeter being terminated at Basingstoke, and finally a series of cancellations across the day.

There is little point arguing about the root cause of all of this, although we have to point out that ageing infrastructure and stock cannot be helping. Climate change is an unavoidable reality; our railways have to find a way to cope, to adapt, and ultimately to thrive in this new normal.

Days like last Tuesday and Thursday remind just how far there is to go make our railway what we hope for. However, we know that everyone at South Western Railway and Network Rail Wessex want to make things work, from the Managing Director, Lawrence Bowman (see his interview above) and his Leadership Team, to the excellent local station team.

What could yet turn out to be another challenging Summer on our railway will be the perfect test of what progress can be made in the short term, and what hope there is for real change in the longer term.

Over to you, Lawrence.

Clan Line makes its way into Exeter at the head of the Atlantic Coast Express on Saturday 23rd May. Photograph by Dave Tozer. We continue to be grateful to Dave for sharing with us a range of photographs of interesting and unusual train movements across our region.

Thank you also to all our members for your continuing support to The Friends of Honiton Station. Everything you do makes a real difference. It has been wonderful to showcase all your achievements in the first 75 issues of our monthly newsletter.

Postscript: A Summer at Honiton 2026

Here is the first version of our annual diary of Summer events. We hope you find it useful in planning your Summer. Many of the events are accessible by public transport.

To encourage as many people to travel to Honiton by train to attend these events, several of them will be promoted by banners on the fence on Platform 2, with the kind permission of SWR.

Tuesday July 7th. 4.30 p.m. to 7 pm. Yeovil Railway Centre

SERUG Members' only event

A chance to have your say on the state of our line and on the future. Details will be sent out shortly to Salisbury to Exeter Rail User Group members.

Saturday July 11th to Saturday August 29th. Thelma Hulbert Gallery

Double Elephant: 30 Years Shaping Print

This exhibition, celebrating 30 years of the Double Elephant Print Workshop, will feature stunning contemporary works by Double Elephant members showcasing screen print, relief and intaglio printmaking processes with a coordinating programme of workshops and demonstrations.

This exhibition shines a spotlight on both the timeless traditions of printmaking and the experimental, innovative approaches shaping its future.

Discover the tools, papers, plates, and blocks that bring each process to life, and gain insight into a variety of printmaking methods.

Coordinating print workshops take place throughout the exhibition, plus a free family workshop on Saturday August 29th, between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m..

Saturday July 18th. From 10 a.m.

Honiton Market Charter Day

Get ready for a town-wide celebration across the Town Centre, Allhallows Playing Field, and Northcote Lane. The day features all the familiar favourites you love, alongside brand-new surprises for the whole family.

The theme for this year is 'Storytelling' to coincide with the National Year of Reading. With a particular focus on the stories behind Market Charter Day and from celebrations in years gone by, the organisers are looking forward to seeing a variety of themed stalls, activities and windows!

Friday July 24th. Honiton Station

Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership Event

Stay tuned for further details of a special event at the station to promote health and well-being.

Tuesday July 28th. From 12 Noon. Honiton High Street

Hot Pennies

Enjoy the traditional start to Summer at the famous Hot Pennies Ceremony. Led by the Town Crier and Town Mayor, join in this informal celebration of the history of the town and its historic fair.

Thursday August 8th. From 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Honiton Showground

Honiton Show

As one of the country's largest one-day agricultural shows, it celebrates local farming, rural crafts, and family entertainment. Highlights include a cookery theatre with chef demonstrations, over 100 vintage tractors, and more than 400 trade stands.

There will be a free shuttle bus service to the show ground from Honiton High Street (in front of Boots).

Saturday August 22nd. Honiton High Street. From 10 a.m.

Honiton Gate to Plate

Enjoy a delicious day out at this festival of local food and drink, with over 75 producers in the centre of Honiton. Trading will take place from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Please note that the much of the High Street will be closed to traffic for this event.

The event is fully accessible for buggies, scooters, pushchairs and is also dog friendly.

Local small businesses selling cheeses, gourmet meats, wine and cider, desserts and craft inspired by the land. Menus for vegan. GF, AF and every dietary choice.

Sunday August 30th and Monday 31st. Smeatharpe

Honiton Hill Rally

Honiton Hill Rally promises a dynamic showcase of agricultural, vintage, and entertainment highlights. From tractors and farm machinery to vintage vehicles, military displays, and a lively fairground, the event offers a diverse range of attractions.

Witness tractor pulling competitions, explore historical fire engines, and discover the charm of stationary engines.

Photograph: Honiton Market Day 1912