The Train at Platform 1

The Friends of Honiton Station Newsletter 76 - July 2026

Welcome to the July newsletter. This month we report on SWR's work so far to plan the refresh of their timetable, due to come into operation at the end of next year. Their in-person consultation event took on particular piquancy, as it came in a week when the present timetable was struggling under a welter of short-formed trains. To help you plan your summer, we also re-print our guide to the holiday events in and around Honiton. However, SMD may just ruin the party, as there is every chance that an emergency timetable will be in place by the end of July (or early August).

Building a Timetable Fit for the Future

South Western Railway and Network Rail are now well under way with work towards a full refresh of the SWR timetable, which is due to be implemented at the end of 2027.

Launching their initial request for ideas and views, SWR said: *"This process allows us to design a refreshed timetable that makes best use of our network, infrastructure and people, and performs better for our customers and stakeholders."*

As part of this process, I attended an in-person consultation event at Salisbury Station on June 11th. As well as representatives of the PR team supporting the review, several key SWR staff were in attendance, including two of the team undertaking the timetable review process.

All of them were very aware of – and very complimentary about – the role played by the Salisbury to Exeter Rail User Group, and several referred to conversations they had already had with Bruce Duncan, SERUG's Chairman, about the timetable refresh.

SWR's representatives were grateful that we chose to be represented at this key event, and encouraged everyone to take the opportunity to make their views known during this initial phase of the process. The formal public consultation will take place during the Autumn.

Feedback can be sent to FREEPOST: SWR Customer Relations, emailed to info@southwesterntimetable.com or by phone on 0345 6000 650 (charged at local call rates).

Among the topics I discussed with SWR were:

- The rumours heard by some members of SWR's own staff that they were not fully committed to Exeter as a destination. The staff in attendance were surprised to hear this, and said they were were solidly behind the western arm of the line.

- Whether alternatives to an hourly through service were on the table (there have long been rumours that long-term the line might see passengers required to change, if another part of GBR took over the western arm).

- The need to consider the long-term West of England Modernisation Plan in shaping this timetable, even though many elements of this might take 10 years to come about.

- Support for village stations, principally Feniton and Whimple.

- The impact of the 10-minute protocol, when down trains are held at Honiton if running 10 minutes late or more. SWR were fully behind this, by the way, as the only way of stopping the timetable drifting further and further off during the day.

- Additional peak local services, especially the previous plan that was never implemented of having an extra Exeter-bound service between the 0753 student special and the 0916 from Honiton. This led to a discussion of the key impact of Exeter College students as a determinant of peak time loadings. It would be important as part of the timetable refresh to hold discussions with the College about its projections of numbers and the times of peak movements. Would an 0853 train serve any purpose now?

The in-person event came at a time when the state of the West of England Line was once again in the spotlight, with a large proportion of trains that week being operated with only three carriages, due to ongoing problems with engines and other faults.

I can vouch for how difficult this situation is – having travelled back from the event on such a train, which arrived at Salisbury from Waterloo already full and standing, and was even more so afterwards, with me required to stand until Yeovil Junction.

Despite this difficult journey, the in-person event was clearly a good idea, although it did not appear to be well attended in the early afternoon, despite the station being quite busy. A few 'tannoy' announcements that they were there in the corner of Platform 4 might have helped!

But you can't fault SWR for trying to engage with the public in this way. We wish them well as the review process continues.

Engineering Work This Summer: And SMD Timetable on its Way?

At present, there are no reports of any planned engineering work on our line in July and August. Depending on the state of the line and the Soil Moisture Deficit situation, this may well change.

At the end of June, indications coming out of SWR were that it is likely to be necessary to impose an Emergency Timetable from the end of July (or even sooner).

We know that SWR are looking closely at options for the timetable that may need to be introduced. This could very well mean another year of a long-term temporary timetable, of the kind we saw last year, which lasted until the Autumn rains were well established.

During the two-day Heat Wave Timetable, SWR experimented with an hourly all stations (but slowed down) Exeter to Salisbury service, rather than a two-hourly Waterloo service. However, whether this is a longer term option for the emergency timetable remains to be seen.

In their recent newsletter, SERUG had this to say on the situation:

"It's very likely that we will see timetable reductions again, assuming hot weather as the summer progresses.

"The track is in a similar condition to the same period last year. We have had more rainfall this spring than last year (despite the short heatwave in late May) but further rain is needed.

"Network Rail have removed "thirsty" trees along some 5km of track, but they have no current powers to remove vegetation not on railway land.

"The timetabling team are preparing various options, should SMD restrictions be necessary. Whilst overall journey times will again be extended, it is hoped these will be less than last year.

"Staffing levels at both Salisbury and Yeovil Junction are improved, which will also help crew scheduling. One thing is (almost) certain.... services west of Yeovil will be reduced to 2 hourly again if an SMD timetable is implemented."

Keep an eye on SWR's website and our own website for further announcements.

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."

SERUG Members Meeting: A Reminder

On Tuesday July 7th. 4.30 p.m. to 7 pm. at Yeovil Railway Centre there will be a SERUG Members' only event.

This is a chance for members of SERUG to have their say on the state of our line and on the future.

As with last year's meeting, there will be a series of discussions groups. The key conversations will include:

- SWR/NR and the new team plus our/stakeholder policy for lobbying.
- GBR and national policy for new rolling stock.
- West of England Line development and SERUG's Vision Document.

Introducing the Member Event, the Chairman of SWEEUG, Bruce Duncan said:

"The recent performance on this line has been very poor. Despite politicians' promises for a better railway, there is no doubt that performance is deteriorating. As we have said many times before, with 75% single track between Salisbury and Exeter, there is no room for making up time once trains have started running late. We need investment.

"The excuses are varied, so there is no single issue to remedy. We need money to re-double track at a minimum of two locations, provide new signaling and axle counters (replacing the existing track circuits), remove lineside vegetation and reduce incidents of Soil Moisture Deficit (SMD). Strategically the critical matter is for a decision to be made for the replacement of rolling stock. Those trains need to have power other than diesel, and we need to know what that is – only then can we (ie SWR) plan for the future - Government must make a decision.

"Our mailbox has been inundated with examples of disrupted journeys and lack of accurate or timely information from SWR. We have recommended that they create a dedicated West of England Line web page on their website advising passengers of likely disruption and, more importantly, advice on current disruption – especially those services which will be short formed (see below) where that information will normally be available at least a day or so in advance.

"Our "Vision" for the improvements to the line was published in our last Newsletter (No.25 - February 2026) – it highlights all that needs to be done and is available in the Publications page on our website.

"Also on our website is a letter published in the June edition of Modern Railways, summarising the need for action. That can be viewed on the News page of our website: www.serug.co.uk"

Please let SERUG know (email: contact@serug.co.uk) if you would like to attend the meeting at Yeovil Railway Centre. Members attend for free. Non-members can join in for £8, which includes a subscription to the end of 2026.

Tea/drinks, light bites, etc, will be available.

Details of the meeting have been sent out directly to all Salisbury to Exeter Rail User Group members.

Hot June Weather Leads to Travel Warnings

The extreme weather warnings issued toward the end of last month led SWR to issue urgent travel advice, including urging passengers only to use its trains for absolutely essential journeys.

The West of England Line, including services through Honiton, were changed to an emergency timetable, with amended timings, details of which made available on Journey Planner the afternoon before.

This followed the Met Office declaring a highly unusual Red Extreme Heat Warning for large parts of Southern England and parts of Wales, for Wednesday 24th Thursday 25th June, with forecasters warning that June's all-time daily temperature record could be broken.

Customers who were booked to travel on Tuesday 23rd to Friday 26th June were told that they could travel on any alternative SWR service. On Tuesday, they were advised to travel earlier in the day, preferably before 12 Noon, when it was likely to be cooler.

As the week went on, the Met Office Red Warning was extended to cover part of the region on Friday, meaning that reduced services were extended for a third day.

Customers were advised to travel only for essential journeys on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. There were planned alterations to some services and, as a result, some services across the network did not run. Others were subject to alteration.

Trains were expected to be busier and journeys to take longer than normal, with trains having to run at reduced speeds over large parts of the network.

High temperatures can have a significant impact on railway tracks, signals and embankments.

Customers were advised to visit the South Western Railway website for the latest travel advice and ticket information before setting off.

While the amended timetable was designed to help ensure scheduled trains run as planned, services were still subject to some further short notice changes and cancellations.

Stuart Meek, Chief Operating Officer of South Western Railway and Network Rail Wessex, said:

"While we'll be working hard to keep customers moving, the Met Office's Red Extreme Heat Warning means an amended timetable will be in place with fewer trains.

"In line with national travel advice, customers should check before travelling on Tuesday and only travel if essential on Wednesday and Thursday" (later extended to Friday).

"We're sorry for the disruption this extreme heatwave may cause your journey and thank you for your patience as we respond to these record-breaking conditions."

Amended timetables also affected travel on the GWR network in areas covered by the Red Extreme Heat Warning, especially in the Thames Valley. The company reported less serious disruption in Devon and Cornwall.

A Summer at Honiton

A reminder of some of the main events in and around the town this summer.

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.

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.

Honiton Market Charter Day has been celebrated in many ways over the last 18 years.

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 15th, Boston Tea Party, Honiton High Street

Honiton Pride II

Celebrate diversity and inclusion in our community, including its LGBTQ+ members, at this second annual Pride event. For further details, contact the organiser, Duncan Sheridan-Shaw at Honiton Tesco.

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.

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.

Bedford Train Crash

Our thoughts go out to everyone affected by the rail crash near Bedford on Friday June 19th. Two trains operated by East Midlands Trains, both bound for St Pancras, collided in this incident, in which the driver of one of the trains was killed. Over 100 passengers were injured in the collision, 9 of them critically.

It is believed that one of the trains was stationary at the time of the crash. The Rail Accident Investigation Branch (RAIB) and the British Transport Police are investigating the circumstances surrounding the collision, principally how two trains came to be on the same section of line at the same time. In their initial findings, RAIB reported that the second train passed a signal at Danger just before the collision. The RAIB report noted:

The Rail Accident Investigation Branch has provided an update into the collision between two passenger trains last week in Bedfordshire. They said:

At around 17:15, 1H46, the 16:40 East Midlands Railway Corby to London St Pancras service, collided with 1B67, the 15:50 Nottingham to London St Pancras service.

Sadly, the driver of 1H46 died as a result of the accident, with 162 people being injured, and at the time of writing, 8 people remain in a critical condition.

Photo Credit: RAIB

The On Train Data Recorders, which are similar to a plane's black boxes, have now been recovered, though some of the recorders were located within damaged parts of the train and could only be recovered once recovery had started.

The collision took place on the Up Fast line between Bedford and Flitwick station. The collision involved a Class 360 unit and a Class 810 train.

The Class 810, which was forming 1B67, was standing at signal WH152, which had come to an unexpected stop due to a fault with its AWS equipment, which caused the brakes to apply.

Railway systems have shown that the track circuit for the section of track was showing that the section in which 1B67 was standing was occupied, which means that the signalling system would have changed the signal behind to be at danger (red).

WH154 is a four-aspect signal and means it displays the signal automatically. It is fitted with AWS equipment, which provides audible and visual warnings to train drivers.

When a signal is at danger, it sounds a horn to alert the driver of the speed change or signal. The driver must acknowledge this by pressing a button in the cab, and a visual reminder is lit up. If the warning is not cancelled, the emergency brakes are applied.

The RAIB says that 1H46 left Bedford at 17:10 on the up slow, and CCTV shows that the train passed through a yellow, which means that the driver can continue but be prepared to stop. 1H46 then headed to Bedford South Junction, where it crossed over onto the Up Fast Line; the signal protecting the junction also displayed a yellow aspect as it passed through.

The train then approached signal WH154, and CCTV footage from the train shows that this was at danger (red) before the train then passed it.

Data from the OTDR is still being analysed, so it is not yet possible to say whether the driver received warnings from the AWS equipment, and how they responded.

The rear unit of 1H46 has had its OTDR recovered and downloaded. This doesn't show AWS activity as it was the rear unit. However, it does show speed and braking.

Preliminary analysis of the data shows that there was a brake activation around 9 seconds before the collision.

The train was travelling at 76 mph, and the train was doing around 49mph at the point of impact.

The RAIB's full investigation will look into:

- the actions of those involved and any factors that may have influenced them;
- the status and performance of the braking, AWS and other safety systems on train 1H46
- the reason train 1B67 stopped;
- the status of signal WH154 and its AWS equipment, as well as its positioning, visibility, and conspicuity;
- the crashworthiness performance of both trains during the collision;
- the emergency response to the accident ;
- the processes used to assess the risk of overrun at this location, and the effectiveness of any control measures intended to address this ;
- any relevant underlying factors, including any actions taken in response to previous relevant safety recommendations.

Network Rail issued a media statement following the Rail Accident Investigation Branch's (RAIB) interim statement. Ellie Burrows, Regional Managing Director, Network Rail Eastern, said:

"Following the publication of the investigation update from the Rail Accident Investigation Branch (RAIB), we are fully committed to working as an industry to support the continuing investigation to understand exactly what happened.

"We are deeply sorry that this has happened on our railway, and our thoughts remain with all those affected, particularly those passengers who were badly injured and the loved ones of driver Shaun Burton, who so tragically lost his life.

"Incidents like this are extremely rare on Britain's railways which remain among the safest in the world but, when they do happen, we are determined to fully understand why.

"We will continue to work alongside East Midlands Railway and all our industry partners to support the investigation and ensure the railway continues to operate safely.

"We are cooperating fully with RAIB and the Office of Rail and Road (ORR), and will carefully consider any findings as they emerge - acting quickly on any lessons and sharing learning across the industry."

Works at Honiton Station

Several items of maintenance have been carried out at Honiton Station recently, or are under way. For instance, a section of wooden fence on platform 1, near the green "art shed", has been repaired and partially replaced, after it began to lean alarmingly, due to a broken bracket.

Some of the drainage from the footbridge is not working properly, due to a blockage. Contractors have investigated, done some initial work, and assessed the problem. They have said that further work is required to stop the puddling that has been seen in recent times.

Some work may require scaffolding to be erected to access the affected area. That can only happen when the line is closed, either overnight or during a planned line closure.

For reasons best known to SWR, they have continued to attempt to paint the old bench seating on Platform 1, rather than replace the benches in a similar style to the others which were replaced a couple of years ago.

Our thanks go to the station staff at Honiton who have been doing such sterling work watering the plants. Paul has also kindly been helping out, keeping the plants watered when the station staff have been unable to do any watering due to other urgent duties.

If any other members would be willing to help out with some watering from time to time, especially during hot weather and at busy times, please get in touch. Watering needs to take place during normal Ticket Office opening hours, as volunteers need to collect a key to open the box which protects the external tap on the back wall of the Waiting Room.

Two of our younger potential passengers make their debut at the station, as Mr. and Mrs. C. Gull welcome two youngsters to their nest on the roof of the waiting room. The local diet is clearly very good as the young gulls quickly put on weight and started to spread their wings - literally - with one youngster venturing down off the roof before it was fully ready to fly the nest. We were relieved to see it survived its "fall" before exploring Platform 1.

A Round Up of Photographs of Visitors, Captured by Dave Tozer.

Sir Nigel Gresley passes Marsh Barton on May 30th.

Observation Carriage Caroline visits Devon on June 11th

Western locomotive D1015 at Marsh Barton

An unusual visitor to the area, passing Marsh Barton Station on Saturday June 20th. Previous experience suggests the locals probably heard the lead unit, known affectionately as a "Thumper", from some distance away.

Remember we are always delighted to receive photographs from our members on railway subjects. Perhaps you have recently visited a heritage line, witnessed an unusual or historic locomotive or train, or been on a railway-themed holiday. We are also delighted to publish articles about your railway adventures. Don't forget to include at least one photograph to illustrate the story.

Richard Burningham: This month's "Explainer"

Something a little different this month, as we mark the official retirement of our great friend Richard Burningham of Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership, with a copy of an article published by Community Rail Network (CRN) to mark the occasion. Richard is a former Chairman of CRN.

A long time stalwart of Devon and Cornwall's branch lines has retired after 28 years.

Richard Burningham MBE started as Manager of the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership, based at the University of Plymouth, in April 1998, working with his small team to promote use of the branch lines and the places they serve, improve train services and station facilities and to link the community and the railway.

The many initiatives Richard has led include the expansion of Sunday services on a number of branch lines, starting in 2001 with the first Winter Sunday Tamar Valley Line trains since the 1960s, the establishment of Rail Ale Trails, the Tamar Valley Line Carnets and the EU Interreg Citizens' Rail project which introduced two trains an hour in Torbay and saw major improvements at Exeter St Thomas and Torre stations.

He also was pivotal in making the Devon & Cornwall Railcard available to buy online and have on a mobile phone, the first regional railcard to be available in this way.

Richard and his team have conducted waves of rail promotion over the years, including significant activity to promote Cornwall Council and Devon County Council backed and led improvements such as the passing loop at Penryn and the doubling of the Maritime Line service, the opening of the Dartmoor Line between Exeter and Okehampton, new stations at Newcourt, Cranbrook and Marsh Barton and, most recently, the doubling of Newquay's train service in the first phase of Mid Cornwall Metro.

The service improvements and promotion have led to huge increases in the number of journeys being made on Devon and Cornwall's branch lines. In 2001, the Partnership worked on five lines (Tarka, Tamar Valley, Looe Valley, Newquay and Maritime/Falmouth). That year, the earliest for which figures are available, a total of 603,295 journeys were made on these five lines. The total for the same five lines last year, 2025, was 2,155,232, a 257% increase. The biggest increases were seen on the Tarka and Maritime (Falmouth) Lines, 360% and 330% respectively.

Under Richard's leadership, the Partnership has won several awards for its marketing and community projects and activity.

Part of the promotional activity has included celebrating the history and heritage of the local rail network. He played a major role in celebrating significant anniversaries on a number of lines including the centenary of the line to Gunnislake in 2008, 150 years of trains to Looe in 2010 and the Maritime Line (Falmouth) in 2013 and 150th anniversary of the railway arriving in Okehampton which fell in 2021 as the line was being prepared for reopening.

Indeed on the Tarka Line, as well as the 150th anniversary in 2004, he helped Barnstaple celebrate the 170th in 2024. Just last year, he led the project which saw new heritage displays created at Crediton and Yeoford stations. He also led projects on the Looe Valley Line which included creating a heritage centre at Liskeard station and a dedicated Looe Rail Heritage app.

At Okehampton, for the Dartmoor Line reopening, he organised all the heritage signage, a recreated 1950s booking office and a period waiting room and arranged the funding for the Dartmoor Information Centre and the Dartmoor Railway Association shop.

Last year, for Railway 200, he led the Partnership's Fantastic Facts project and the creation of the Devon & Cornwall Railway 200 Stamp Trail.

Richard said:

"This has been a fabulous job and I am really pleased that my colleagues and I have made a real difference, particularly on the branch lines, thanks to the strong support of our Partners. None of it would have been possible without that, likewise the dedicated work of my colleagues over the years for which I thank them.

"Back in 2000, no Cornish branch line had an all year round Sunday service. They tended to be one Bank Holiday Sunday in May and then July and August.

"Now all bar one line has an all year Sunday service and even that one, the Looe Valley Line, has Sunday trains from Easter to the beginning of November.

"Today each of the branch lines has their best ever train service and all are well used. I am proud of the part I have played in getting our local railways to this position. More and more people are finding the train works for them as a great way to get around and long may that continue."

Professor Jon Shaw, Chair of the Partnership and Head of the School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences at the University of Plymouth, said:

"It is difficult to over-estimate the impact Richard has had on the branch lines of the far south west. His leadership in the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership has been outstanding, and stands as a testament to what can be achieved when key stakeholders come together in pursuit of a goal that benefits us all.

"I wish Richard well for his retirement and look forward to a very bright future for the Devon and Cornwall's railways that in no small measure will be thanks to Richard's sterling work over the best part of the last three decades."

GWR Business Assurance Director Joe Graham said:

"Richard is one of those rare people who has quietly and consistently made the railway better for everyone, over nearly three decades.

"The branch lines of Devon and Cornwall are genuinely transformed from where they were when Richard took on his role in 1998. Sunday services that simply didn't exist, new stations, doubled frequencies, award-winning community projects and heritage celebrations that have brought the railway's story to life for a whole new generation. That is an extraordinary legacy, and Richard's fingerprints are on all of it.

"We have been proud partners of the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership throughout that journey, and we are grateful for everything Richard has contributed, not just to the railway, but to the communities and places these lines serve. We wish him a very well-earned and happy retirement."

The Partnership is a non-profit one between local authorities including Cornwall Council and Devon County Council, the rail industry, including GWR, South Western Railway and CrossCountry Trains and the University of Plymouth. It is the longest established of the 75 Community Rail Partnerships across the country and covers seven branch lines from the Exeter – Barnstaple "Tarka Line" in the east to the St Ives Bay Line in the west. It also includes the East Devon Line, the Axminster – Exeter section of South Western Railway's London Waterloo route.

Before joining the Partnership, Richard spent fifteen years with British Rail, starting in the ticket office at Leatherhead in Surrey at a young age. He managed the Travel Centres at Barnstaple and Bath Spa, was a press officer for the Southern Region and spent six years as Public Relations Officer for the South West Division of Network SouthEast, now South Western Railway.

He has long been a supporter of and involved with the national membership body for Community Rail Partnerships, the Community Rail Network, formerly the Association of Community Rail Partnerships. He was the organisation's first Vice Chair, served as Chair between 2018 and 2022 and remains a member of the Board.

Richard was awarded the MBE for "Services to the rail industry in the South West" in the 2010 New Year Honours.

Taking the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership into its next chapter is Rebecca Catterall, the Partnership's new Director, who brings long-standing experience having been part of the Partnership team since 2005. The team is completed by Mike Parker-Bray, Marketing & Finance Manager, and Betsy Saunders, Marketing Officer.