The Train at Platform 1

The Friends of Honiton Station Newsletter 77 - August 2026

Welcome to the August newsletter. As we go to press, the almost inevitable announcement has been made to tell passengers that an emergency timetable will be re-introduced on the West of England Line from Monday August 10th (the equivalent date to last year). The on-going saga of SMD, and its impact on our line, is a story that sadly we are going to have to get used to, perhaps for years to come. All we can ask for is that that the timetable is in operation for the shortest possible time, and that every effort continues to made to reduce the impact of SMD in the future.

Photo credit: SWR

Announcement of Temporary Timetable

South Western Railway and Network Rail Wessex have confirmed that they will introduce a temporary timetable on the West of England line from **Monday 10th August. Provisional details are in an Appendix on the last page of this newsletter.**

Following record-breaking temperatures and prolonged low rainfall, clay embankments supporting the railway between Salisbury and Exeter are drying out, affecting the stability of the track.

To keep customers safe, trains will run at reduced speeds between Tisbury in Wiltshire and Honiton in Devon, a 60-mile stretch of largely single-track railway which is particularly vulnerable to drought-like conditions.

With only six passing loops where trains can pass each other on the single-track, fewer services can run while these speed restrictions are in place. SWR says that the temporary timetable will limits further disruption and delays while providing a safe and reliable service for customers.

From Monday 10 August, until further notice:

- Services between London Waterloo and Salisbury will continue to run every 30 minutes;

- One train per hour will run between London Waterloo and Yeovil Junction;

- **Every two hours, the London Waterloo service will extend to run to and from Exeter St Davids**.

- Most journeys from London Waterloo to Yeovil Junction will take three minutes longer than usual, with journeys from Yeovil Junction to London Waterloo taking 13 minutes longer than usual.

- **Most journeys from London Waterloo to Exeter St Davids will take up to 24 minutes longer than usual, with journeys from Exeter St Davids to London Waterloo taking 27 minutes longer than usual.**

Lawrence Bowman, Managing Director of South Western Railway and Network Rail Wessex, said:

"The record-breaking heat of the last few months has had a significant impact on railways across the UK, and parts of our route are particularly vulnerable. Extreme weather events are becoming increasingly common, and this is the second year in a row that prolonged hot, dry weather has affected our network.

"Since last summer's intervention, we've invested in strengthening the route, carried out extensive work to the track and embankments, and developed a plan that customers can rely on. As a result of that careful planning, we've managed to reduce journey times in our amended timetable by around 30 minutes compared to last year, minimising the impact on our customers while also keeping them safe.

"We are sorry for the disruption these changes may cause. We will restore the regular timetable as soon as conditions allow."

Since last year, SWR and NR Wessex have continuously monitored more than 30 sites between Salisbury and Exeter, and strengthened the line by carrying out extensive tamping work, installing 5,000 tonnes of new ballast, and removing over 200 dead and diseased trees that suck in moisture and could further destabilise embankments.

SWR and NR Wessex are also working with the University of Southampton to develop longer-term measures to improve the resilience of the West of England line to the effects of climate change and extreme weather.

Long-term initiatives being explored by Network Rail include:

- Bio-cementation – injecting nutrients into the layer of soil below the track to create a calcium carbon skeleton, which provides more support when the clay soil shrinks;

- Injection grouting – injecting expanding polymer foam to fill any voids left by shrinking soil, strengthening the formation of the track;

- Self-adjusting sleepers – using sleepers that have a built-in reservoir of chippings, so that when the clay soil below shrinks and leaves voids, the chippings fill the void and prevent the sleepers from moving;

- Micro-piling – installing piles in the gap between the rails to provide extra support to the sleepers, which will stiffen the formation of the track and reduce its movement when soil shrinks.

In their July update on SMD, SWR stated:

"Parts of our railway are built on embankments containing clay soil, which normally contains a lot of water. When we experience high temperatures and dry conditions, typically in the summer, water is removed from the clay soil through heat radiation and nearby vegetation. This causes the clay soil to shrink, which disturbs the ground our tracks are built on.

"When railway embankments shift it affects track geometry - the precise positioning, alignment and measurements of our tracks. Sleepers can move out of position, shifting sideways or downwards, which affects the rails on top of them. Tracks need to be level for trains to run at full speeds, and if the levels, or 'track geometry', isn't right, temporary speed restrictions are put in place to ensure they run safely.

"The West of England Line, an important part of our network, is particularly vulnerable to SMD. The route serves a total of 21 stations over 120 miles and connects London with Exeter St Davids in Devon, Salisbury in Wiltshire and Yeovil Junction in Somerset.

"The line between Salisbury and Exeter is a predominantly single-track railway. Speed restrictions along long stretches of single-track can cause cumulative delays and disruption along the whole line, which can have a knock-on impact on other services across the network."

Ominously, but logically, SWR went on to say that in these instances, temporary timetable amendments can offer better reliability for customers on the West of England line. Unlike buckled rails or issues with signalling equipment, there is no quick fix for track affected by SMD.

It can take weeks or even months of rain for moisture levels to return to normal.

Latest Engineering Report

Saturday 12th and Sunday 13th September

The lines between Templecombe and Crewkerne will be closed all weekend due to maintenance work.

London Waterloo to Exeter St Davids services will terminate at Templecombe.

Buses will run between Templecombe and Crewkerne (non-stop).

Buses will also run between Templecombe, Sherborne, Yeovil Junction and Crewkerne.

A revised service will run between Crewkerne and Exeter St Davids.

Monday October 26th until 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."*

Details of the replacement service will be announced nearer the time. It is unlikely that there will be a shuttle train service between Honiton and Exeter during these works, as Network Rail may need access to the track from the rear car park at Honiton Station.

Community Live Meeting Brings SWR Station Adopters Together

Monday July 6th saw the latest meeting of Community Live, an online gathering of Station Adoption Leads from across the SWR network. Led and introduced by Paula Aldridge, SWR's Community Rail Manager, it is regularly attended by a range of colleagues from across the company. to provide useful updates on a range of issues.

This month, the meeting opened with an update from Andrew Ardley, Regional Development Manager West. He encouraged everyone to keep ideas coming in for the first stage of the process towards the timetable re-cast. Our Chairman praised SWR for arranging the meet the public sessions, including the one he attended at Salisbury.

Andrew said that a number of schemes continue to go through the design and planning stage for consideration for Access for All funding. (Fingers continue to be firmly crossed for Yeovil Junction). He said that the Railways Bill, setting up GBR, is now with the House of Lords.

Andrew reported that budgets are very tight, with in-year savings having to be made. He updated the meeting on the impact of the heatwaves on performance and timetables.

He said that the Soil Moisture Deficit situation is such that, while no decisions had been made at that point on a replacement timetable, options were under active consideration.

Matt Evans reported that the teams at SWR and Network Rail are now going through the process of integration. Each side is quickly learning about the world of their part of the railway. Press teams are learning about the wonderful world of signalling!

Agnieszka Moille gave a most useful update on Crime and Security issues on the SWR network. The team of 23 officers works closely with the BTP, patrol hotspots, work with the Revenue Protection Team and liaise with train crew. They can provide safeguarding support, and work with organisations like the Samaritans.

The most common issues they deal with is fare evasion leading to confrontations. Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) is another key problem. Volunteers are always advised to report ASB, perhaps using the text service See It Say It Sorted.

The team have helped with bike registration sessions at stations. Paula can arrange support for sessions at local stations if people are interested.

Georgia House talked about some sustainability issues. With budgets tight, funding for projects must be able to show clear impact.

There was much discussion of the latest changes to bins at some stations, with the single bins being replaced by three flimsy bins, which had caused no end of problems for staff at some local stations.

This change was forced by legislation not intended to affect the railway, on recycling practises. Solutions to these problems are still being sought.

One station raised the perennial (pun intended) problem of strimming teams arriving and cutting wildflower areas at stations. Signage is available to try to prevent these incidents.

Jenni Jones from Community Rail Network asked those applying for funds to give as much notice as possible, and re-iterated the need to give careful thought to the outcomes and impact of projects being planned. Online training is available to support this.

Paula Aldridge reminded members that the SWR Community Rail Conference is on October 7th in Portsmouth. She also noted that SWR has been shortlisted for the National Rail Awards for its work on Railway 200. She said that if SWR won, it would be a win for everyone, for all the stations and volunteers and teams that took part in this exciting year of activities.
Martin raised the issue of how best to make use of the wonderful interactive totem at the station. At present, it is mainly used to show SWR's posters.

We will continue to explore with SWR how local railway events could be promoted, to supplement what is on our poster board, and how we can all get the best out of this wonderful resource.

Cannington Viaduct Revisited

Our good friends at For The Love of a Railway have announced Revisit the Viaduct, a unique opportunity to experience Cannington Viaduct, the last surviving major structure of the magical Axminster to Lyme Regis Railway.

Closed to the public since the railway's final trains ran in 1965, the viaduct will reopen for one special heritage weekend.

In their announcement, they say:

"Whether you choose the guided walk to the viaduct itself or enjoy the films, displays and refreshments at Uplyme Village Hall, you'll discover the remarkable story of a railway that shaped our communities."

Over the weekend of Saturday 19th and Sunday 20th September, Cannington Viaduct will open to the public for the first time since the Axminster to Lyme Regis Railway closed in 1965.

Courtesy of the National Highways Historical Railways Estate, visitors will have a rare opportunity to walk onto this remarkable structure and enjoy spectacular views across the valley.

Visitors will be able to enjoy a guided walk onto the viaduct itself or, if they prefer, spend time at our heritage hub in Uplyme Village Hall, where a large-screen presentation, exhibition, displays and refreshments will bring the railway's remarkable story to life.

Admission is free, although advance booking is essential. Donations on the day will be appreciated to help cover the cost of the event.

For further details, including how to book, go to: fortheloveofarailway.co.uk/viaduct

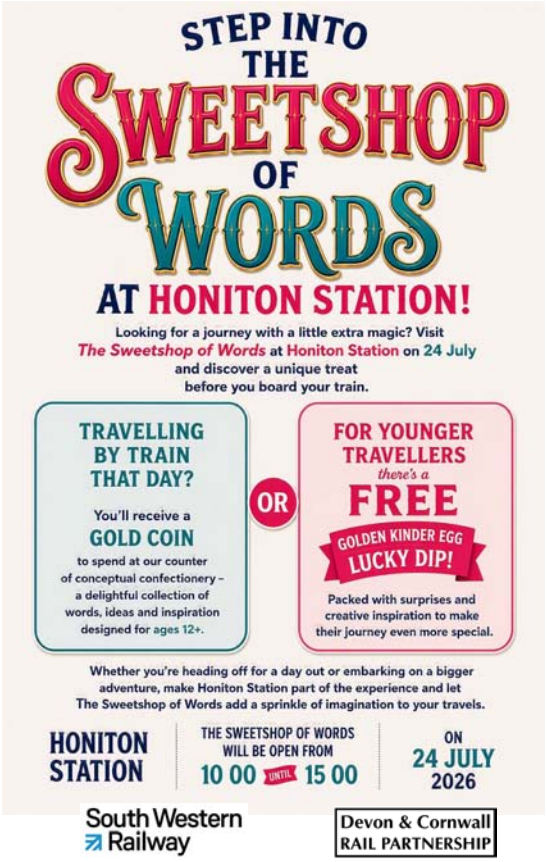
Step into The Sweetshop of Words

Passengers travelling through Honiton Station on 24th July were invited to discover a little extra magic on their journey with the arrival of The Sweetshop of Words, a unique pop-up experience for anyone travelling by train that day.

The event came at the start of one of the busiest weekends of the year on the railways, as the school holidays began in many parts of the country.

It also came at a time when an announcement was expected at any time of a temporary timetable on the West of England Line to deal with the problems caused by the Soil Moisture Deficit situation.

In that context, The Sweetshop of Words gave everyone a welcome opportunity to celebrate the joy of travelling by rail.



The Sweetshop of Words was described as a creative engagement experience that combined imagination, storytelling and travel, offering visitors the opportunity to explore a unique collection of words, ideas and creative prompts designed to spark curiosity and conversation.

Open from 10am to 3pm, train passengers aged 12 and over received a "gold" coin which could be exchanged at the Sweetshop counter for an item from a delightful collection of words, ideas and inspiration. These were described as "conceptual confectionery."

Younger travellers were also able to help themselves to a free Golden Egg Lucky Dip, filled with surprises and creative inspiration to make their rail journey even more memorable.

The event aimed to add a touch of wonder to everyday travel, encouraging passengers to engage with creativity while enjoying the experience of travelling by train.

Poet and creative Sally Crabtree who devised the Sweetshop of Words said:

"This pop-up event has the feel of a fairground stall and explores the notion of choice in our busy lives.

"We hope it brings a little joy to travellers on the East Devon Line."

Rebecca Catterall from the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership said:

"One of the joys of travelling by train is the opportunity to discover something new.

This pop-up event has been created to add an element of fun to an everyday journey, creating positive memories and giving passengers a unique experience they wouldn't normally expect."

Paula Aldridge Community Rail Manager for South Western Railway and Network Rail Wessex said:

"The Sweetshop of Words will give visitors to Honiton Station a chance to experience the wonder of words and ideas. We're honoured to be the hosts for this one-of-a-kind event and look forward to welcoming everyone on 24th July."

And talking of local events, why not support the youth of Honiton this summer by booking a ticket for Beats and Motion, a spectacular performance of song, dance and theatre at The Beehive on August 6th, 7th and 8th.

Presented by East Devon Dance Academy and Honiton Community Theatre Company Youth, it promises to be an evening to remember. Contact The Beehive Box Office for further details.

Art In The Station Project at Dorchester Station

Purbeck Community Rail Partnership (CRP) has partnered with the Arts Society for Dorset County for the 'art in the station' project at Dorchester South.

100 pieces of artwork were provided by three participating schools – Winterbourne Valley and Prince of Wales First Schools and St Mary's CE Middle School in Puddletown – and were installed as vinyl decals in the two waiting shelters on the London-bound platform.

The artworks celebrate everything from local Dorset attractions to iconic national scenery and different modes of active travel, and formed part of the CRP's wider activities under the Railway 200 banner.

Readers will recognise the technique of decorating station shelters in this way from the work done here at Honiton and Axminster, pioneered by our own Jenny Brown and by the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership.

To celebrate the project and the achievements of the young people, Purbeck CRP hosted a launch event on Wednesday 17 June, attended by students and teachers from the three schools, as well as representatives from the Arts Society, South Western Railway, and Friends of Dorchester South and West Stations.

The project was funded by South Western Railway with match funding provided by the Arts Society for Dorset County.

Steven Booth, Purbeck CRP officer, said:

"What was so enjoyable about this project was the enthusiasm and collaboration from the local schools, and the coordination from the Arts Society to bring the teachers and other key personnel together to deliver the artwork.

"Community involvement in stations is actively encouraged and helps local people take a sense of pride and ownership with their contributions.

This was a true community project making a difference to the local station environment and providing a legacy for all to see."

Community Rail Network Responds to New PM Appointment

It was all change at the head of Government last month, with Andy Burnham taking over from Sir Keir Starmer as Prime Minister. It is unclear what difference, if any, this will make to Government priorities when it comes to transport, and especially to rail.

Jeremy Whitaker, the Chair of Community Rail Network, of which we are a member, said:

"I'd like to offer my warmest congratulations to Andy Burnham on his appointment as Prime Minister. Andy has long been a strong supporter of community rail, and during his time as Mayor of Greater Manchester he championed the role that integrated public transport can play in connecting people, supporting communities and driving inclusive growth.

"His commitment to making transport work better for people and places has been clear, and it is fantastic to now have such a strong community rail champion at the heart of government.

Jeremy went on to say:

"I would also like to welcome the decision for Heidi Alexander to remain as Secretary of State for Transport. Her continued leadership provides welcome certainty as we navigate a period of significant rail reform, and she has consistently demonstrated a belief in the importance of railways as a public good – something that aligns strongly with the values and ambitions of our movement."

As ever, the proof of the transport pudding will be in the eating. Or maybe in the funding!

Enjoy a Summer Family Day Out By Rail

Publicly owned train operators across Britain, including South Western Railway, are offering significant discounts this summer, helping families to create memories together.

The offers come alongside the government's campaign, Great British Summer Savings, a targeted scheme to reduce the costs of children's meals in restaurants, children's tickets for theatres and cinemas as well as tickets for everyone for theme parks and adventure centres. The scheme is targeted to help families enjoy a day out for less.

The Government says:

"The holidays can put an extra strain on cost of living pressures for many households and these summer discounts are designed to help make planning days out a little bit easier. Available on operators running services across the country, discounts include fares for as little as £1, cut price family tickets and on-board activities to keep everyone entertained.

"Building a new economy where we make life's essentials affordable again is central to the government's mission to deliver the greatest rail reform in a generation. Many fares have been frozen until March next year to save passengers £600 million."

Alongside discounted rail travel, kids can now travel free on buses this August and from January, the government will cap single bus fares at £2 in England outside the capital.

Together, these offers could significantly cut the cost of family days out, allowing parents to combine cheaper train fares with free bus travel for children to get where they need to go for less.

Community Rail Network's director of policy and communications, Chris Birks, said:

"Rail journeys are all about making memories, discovering new places and connecting with communities. These summer offers are a fantastic opportunity for more families to explore the amazing destinations on their doorstep and beyond by train.

"We'd encourage our community rail partnerships and station friends groups to make the most of this opportunity by showcasing the brilliant experiences that can be reached by rail this summer."

Transport Secretary, Heidi Alexander, said:

"We know that the cost of living and weighing up whether you can have a day out is a real worry for families across the country, especially over summer. That's why we're cutting the cost of making memories with deals on train journeys across all services in public ownership, helping more families make the most of time off together.

"Great British Summer Savings means more people can get out and about this summer for less, whether it's seeing a discounted trip to the seaside, one of our historic castles, the Natural History Museum, or falling asleep on the train home after a day riding rollercoasters at Legoland, there are options for everyone.

"It's all part of our plan to create a fairer Britain, starting with a publicly owned railway that truly works for people – a simpler, more reliable and affordable network that puts passengers first."

As an example of how the scheme will work, GWR has introduced for its new Family Day Out ticket for the Summer holidays. This provides same-day return travel for up to two adults and four children for either £49 or £59 – depending on the journey – for the whole group.

Friends and family railcard holders can make an additional £10 saving on qualifying journeys.

Available for weekday travel until Friday 4th September, the ticket covers a wide range of destinations across the GWR network, stretching from South Wales and Somerset to Devon and the English Riviera.

GWR Commercial and Marketing Director, Amanda Burns, said:

"More families are choosing to explore the UK by rail this summer, whether that means discovering one of our historic cities, enjoying a day beside the sea or escaping to South Wales or the West Country.

"Our new Family Day Out ticket responds directly to that growing demand, making it simpler and more affordable for families to enjoy a 'railcation' together.

"For as little as £49 for the whole group, families can leave the car behind, relax and spend more of their time making memories at some of the fantastic destinations served by the Great Western network."

Go to train operator websites, including South Western Railway, for full details of offers in their area. All offers are for the duration of the school holidays only.

The Train That Rarely Runs?

We are grateful to Dave Tozer for his daily log of delays and cancellations on the West of England Line. It is an invaluable tool to everyone at SERUG and beyond, in keeping a more than close eye on the progress or otherwise of the train service in our area.

Last month, he shared the latest figures on the infamous 1818 train from Honiton to Axminster operated by GWR, which has a well-deserved reputation for rarely operating. He noted that, over the 8-week period from June 1st, the service ran as follows:

Week beginning June 1st	Ran all 5 days	Week beginning June 29th	Ran on 1 day
Week beginning June 8th	Ran on 3 days	Week beginning July 6th	Ran on 2 days
Week beginning June 15th	Ran on 2 days	Week beginning July 13th	Ran on 1 day
Week beginning June 22nd	Did not operate	Week beginning July 20th	Ran on 2 days

Therefore, over the 8-week period in question, the GWR service from Exeter to Axminster ran 16 times out of a possible 40 times.

That is to say that the service was cancelled 60% of the time.

On The Other Hand: The Trains We need to Run…

Here is a quick look at the **PROVISIONAL** weekday timetable from August 10th. There is a different service pattern for weekends. **I am presently querying one departure from Honiton to Exeter, that is scheduled to sit at the platform for 25 minutes.**

Keep an eye on Journey Planner for updates on this timetable. **Previous experience is that there are tweaks both before and after the timetable starts.**

Mondays to Fridays

0608 London Waterloo

0609 Exeter St Davids

0828 Exeter St Davids

0830 London Waterloo

1031 London Waterloo

1037 Exeter St Davids

1231 London Waterloo

1237 Exeter St Davids

1431 London Waterloo

1437 Exeter St Davids

1631 London Waterloo

1652 Exeter St Davids
(This is being checked. No obvious reason why the train sits at Honiton from 1627 until 1652!)

1818 Axminster (Operated by GWR)

1842 London Waterloo

1843 Exeter St Davids

2034 London Waterloo

2037 Exeter St Davids

2234 Salisbury

2338 Exeter St Davids

2338 Yeovil Junction