The Train at Platform 1

The Friends of Honiton Station Newsletter 79 - October 2026

Welcome to the October newsletter. Over the last few weeks, we have had to get used to the temporary timetable and its impact on how we plan our journeys. It has proved a challenge for many, not least those passengers who still turn up at the station with advance tickets for trains that, at the moment, do not exist. Looking ahead, this month we note SWR's new plan "Improving Your Railway", hoping that it will generate real change and ambition, and not just end up as more warm words. The new leadership at SWR/Network Rail Wessex give us cause for some optimism.

Newly refurbished Class 159 Unit makes a visit to Honiton in September

SWR and Network Rail Wessex Launch New Improvement Plan

September saw the official launch of SWR's new customer-facing plan, which a spokesperson for the company said:

"Sets out everything we are doing as an integrated team to improve the railway our customers rely on.

"This incorporates much of what we have discussed recently with partners like you in meetings and correspondence, bringing them together in a single public-facing document which we can share with our customers, colleagues and communities.

"The document is an honest appraisal of the challenges we face and sets out a coherent and exciting plan to improve customer journeys, to build trust and confidence in our integrated railway as we step towards Great British Railways (GBR)."

SWR's new Improving Your Railway campaign explains how their plans centre around fixing the fundamentals, which they call the Four Ts:

Trains – delays in rolling out the brand new £1bn fleet of Arterio trains, left us with a complex fleet to manage and a shortage of trains on our busiest services;

Tracks & Signals – ageing infrastructure on key routes has failed too regularly and needs to be renewed;

Timetable – the complexity of our timetable, and the operating plan that sits behind it, has meant that when something goes wrong, it takes too long to get back on track;

Team – an historic efficiency programme reduced the number of drivers and guards available to adequately meet training requirements and deliver a reliable train service .

Our plan at a glance

Trains

Delivering a simpler, more reliable and more comfortable fleet

New Arterio trains rolling out across suburban routes, generating very positive feedback from customers

50% more capacity than the trains they replace

Air conditioning, at-seat charging, accessible toilets and Wi-Fi as standard on every suburban service

West of England fleet refurbishment under way to improve reliability and customer comfort

Tracks & Signals

Investing in our infrastructure across the network

Investing over £250m to replace ageing infrastructure and upgrade signalling across our key route to Portsmouth

Junction and points renewals outside London Waterloo and at Woking, removing speed restrictions and improving reliability

Thermal imaging technology, deployed on trains and drones, identifying faults before they cause disruption

Timetable

Introducing a more resilient timetable that works for you

Delivering incremental timetable improvements every six months through 2027 and beyond

Improvements already delivered include late-night services extended to Reading and extra stops added for schools and commuters

Simplifying our operating plan so the network is more resilient and we give you faster recovery and better information when things do go wrong

Consulting this year on a full refresh of the timetable

Team

Recruiting more drivers and guards to operate your trains

Maximising recruitment and training to strengthen driver availability

144 new drivers recruited this year and 120 more in 2027/28

Driver and guard related cancellations already significantly reduced and to stay below 1%

More drivers will simplify the rosters and make it easier to match a train, driver and guard to your service during disruption

Alongside the 'Four Ts' – SWR says that the plan outlines:

- How we're improving reliability
- How we're improving service recovery
- How we're improving your experience
- How we're improving your safety

The spokesperson for SWR went on:

"We have also kicked off a series of more immediate projects to deal with the sources of your frustration, including a new Major Disruption Task Force dedicated to getting services moving more quickly and keeping you better informed when things go wrong; working with our partners to tackle the increasing trend of trespass and fatalities on the railway; and a whole railway approach to delivering a high-performing, consistent 'metro-style' service on our critical corridor (the section of line between Woking and London Waterloo)."

"Virtually every service across South Western converges on the section of track between Woking and London Waterloo, the 'Critical Corridor' Any fault or delay there can impact services across all corners of our network. Preventing, identifying and fixing issues in this corridor is critical to improving the reliability of your journeys."

As for the West of England Line, the plan has this to say:

"With the Arterios mostly in service, we are now upgrading the ageing diesel trains that serve the West of England line stations down to Exeter St Davids.

"We are developing longer-term plans for a replacement fleet, but this will take time. In the meantime, we are carrying out a major overhaul of the existing Class 158 and 159 trains, improving their reliability and delivering real upgrades to your on-board experience.

"The refresh programme will deliver key improvements, including:

- *At-seat power throughout Standard Class for the first time (above-table 3-pin and USB sockets);*
- *Improved on-board information systems;*
- *A refreshed interior including a full repaint, new panels, standardised tables and updated seat covers;*
- *An improved First Class experience with new curtains and renewed tables.*

"Alongside the refresh, we are working hard with our supply chain to tackle and improve the wheelset and engine issues that have too often led to shorter, more crowded trains over the last few years.

"But the line faces a range of other long-term challenges, including the long sections of single-track West of Salisbury, which make it harder to recover when things go wrong, and its vulnerability to extreme weather, particularly drought.

"There are no easy fixes for this route, but we are finding ways to minimise the disruption to your journeys.

"For example, this year's drought and safety restrictions mean we have to alter your service west of Yeovil until enough rain falls to restore the embankments.

"While we recognise how disruptive this is, the work of teams from across track and train over the past year has reduced the increase in journey times to Exeter by 30 minutes.

“We understand and share the frustration many regular West of England line customers share with us about the reliability of the services and are doing everything we can to make improvements.

“This includes bringing together all our various local partners with customer, economic and political interests along the route to develop options for the long-term future of the route. By working together, we can build a case to secure the significant backing needed to improve the line and help the region grow and thrive.

“We want you to be part of that journey and are committed to keeping you engaged as our plans progress.”

You can read more on SWR’s website, where you can also watch an introductory video from the Managing Director Lawrence Bowman, and read the whole document.

Introducing this new webpage, SWR says:

“We’re fixing the fundamentals to deliver a more reliable railway. Since transferring to public ownership in May 2025, South Western is now a single, integrated business responsible for both the trains you travel on and the tracks they run on.

“By bringing track and train together, we can work as one team, with one objective: delivering a better railway for you. We know that the reliability of our services matters, and as we transition to becoming Great British Railways (GBR), we are focused on fixing the fundamentals to deliver a railway you can rely on to get you where you need to be every day.”

The document concludes, by adding a note about the imminent arrival of Great British Railways:

“Everything in this document sits within a bigger picture. In late 2025, South Western became one of the first integrated track and train organisations in Britain, bringing together South Western Railway and Network Rail Wessex under a single leadership team. This integration is already delivering faster decisions and clearer accountability, because the same people are now responsible for both the trains and the tracks they run on.

“During 2027, South Western will become part of Great British Railways (GBR), which will bring together 17 organisations currently responsible for running and maintaining Britain’s railways into a single body. For customers, GBR will mean simpler fares, more consistent standards across the country, and a system able to make decisions with the whole network in mind, rather than passing responsibility between organisations.

“We are not waiting for GBR to make improvements though. Much of the work described in this document is happening now. Behind it is a team of 7,500 colleagues across track and train, now working as one organisation for the first time, with more energy focused on what matters: delivering a better railway for you.

“We are also committed to doing this sustainably, improving our resilience to extreme weather, reducing our carbon footprint, and investing in the communities our stations serve.

“We hope from reading this you learnt a bit about where South Western is now, where we want to be, and what we are doing to get there.

“Thank you for travelling with us on that journey. “

That's The Plan: How Is It Going?

If the big news this month was the launch of South Western Railway's Improving Your Railway Plan (see above), how is it going around here?

The Summer and the start of Autumn have put ever more pressure on everyone at SWR, in trying to maintain the best possible level of service. As we move into October, what is the verdict?

First impressions of the use of additional buses to support Exeter College students have been positive. A 100-seater bus has been placed at Axminster, to be on standby to provide emergency cover or extra capacity on the return journey from Exeter in the evening.

Three other buses have been used regularly, with 2 double-deckers and a single-decker providing the published timetable of one fast service serving Honiton and Axminster, and the other serving the other stations.

During the first week, full capacity was not reached, with the buses able to cope well with the numbers of students travelling.

The only problem continued to be the dangerous conditions in the front car park when trains are due, particularly at 1630. On one day observed, two cars were parked in the yellow hatched area, 2 against the side wall of Bradfords next to the bus stop (on double yellow lines), and two actually parked in the bus stop. And then the number 9 bus arrived… Chaos ensued as cars scattered in all directions at once. Inconsiderate and selfish parking like this has only one possible result: sooner or later there will be a serious accident.

The temporary timetable was tweaked on September 1st, with the 0828/0830 services moving to 0812, to accommodate the needs of Exeter College students wishing to reach Exeter by 0900. This could have some positive long-term consequences, as we have been told for some time that such a departure time was not possible, due to congestion at Exeter St Davids. Now we have seen it done, perhaps the idea of two trains from Honiton at about 0745 and 0810 as proposed by SWR in 2020 before Covid might re-emerge in the ongoing timetable review.

One disappointing aspect of the temporary timetable has been some surprisingly poor timekeeping. Trains from Exeter have sometimes struggled to keep to published times, despite trains sometimes having what appear quite generous time allowances.

Westbound trains have also struggled with the extensive range of speed restrictions, but have usually, but not always, got back on time due to the extended dwell time at Honiton, not least the now infamous 29-minute layover of the 1652 departure from Honiton.

The weekend of September 12th and 13th saw a line closure, requiring buses to operate between Crewkerne and Templecombe. Or at least that was the plan. In the event, from late on, Saturday buses ran to Gillingham instead, due to problems turning and parking at Templecombe Station. What is disappointing is that this issue was highlighted weeks in advance by local SWR staff, having seen it tried and failed on a previous occasion. Was this another example of why it is so important to listen to staff with local knowledge, rather than assume that those at the centre always know best.

That weekend, the plan called for three carriage trains to operate between Exeter and Crewkerne. Sadly, on the Saturday one of these turned out to be a two-carriage train, shuttling back and forth all day, very full every time.

And talking of short-formed trains, the first full day of the Exeter College students travelling on September 7th saw the 10137 from Honiton to Exeter, and the return journey, being operated with only three carriages. Unsurprisingly, the train was very busy indeed… Thankfully, things were back to normal on the following day.

It is also disappointing to note that even a month after the temporary timetable started, passengers were still arriving to catch non-existent trains, especially the 1055 to Waterloo, completed with luggage. The main (but not the only) culprit is still Trainline not telling their advance ticket customers of the new timetable. They have promised (again) to put this right, but they have made this promise before.

In addition, SWR continue only to update Journey Planner 2 weeks in advance, with services beyond that shown as operating to the original full timetable, and no indication that they could be subject to change. We have raised this issue repeatedly with the company.

One point of discussion since the introduction of the temporary timetable has been the use of accessible platforms. With one or two exceptions, trains using Axminster have used the accessible platform, avoiding the need to use the lifts or footbridge. At Honiton, most trains are scheduled to pass, requiring London-bound trains to use Platform 2. However, when Down trains are seriously delayed, Waterloo services have sometimes been re-directed to Platform 1.

Some local station staff prefer this arrangement, while others are concerned that passengers who have already made their way to Platform 2 then have to be re-directed, often with heavy luggage, back to Platform 1. There is no simple answer to this, that is acceptable to everyone. Thus far it has depended on decisions and requests made by staff either at the station or at Basingstoke on the day. That is probably for the best… let local voices decide whenever possible.

However, recently it is appeared that the default position has now returned to using Platform 2 whatever the circumstances, which has the advantage of consistency.

By September 16th there was still no sign of an updated timetable poster, despite a promise that it was on the way.

And talking of notices, it might be helpful to have some notices behind the three new colour-coded waste bins on each platform, explaining what each should be used for. Signs such as these can be seen at Sherborne Station, for instance (see photograph left).

The month ended with a Sunday when the service more or less collapsed, as a succession of trains were cancelled. The Real Time Trains website said that services were cancelled due to a fault with onboard safety systems. As we went to print, there was no explanation as to what that meant.

There is, of course, no word at this stage how long the temporary timetable might be needed for. It would be prudent to continue to prepare for the timetable lasting at least as long as last year, when normal services were not re-instated until mid-November. See November's newsletter for the latest news.

Remember that a new timetable began across the rest of SWR's network in late September. This is essentially the "leaves on the line" amendment, with trains being retimed slightly to allow for poor track condition associated with Autumn, longer stopping distances and the risk of wheels slipping.

In conclusion, these continue to be difficult days for the West of England Line. Everyone at SWR and Network Rail Wessex are doing their best to keep the service going. Local campaigners and MPs are understandably continuing to put pressure on SWR to deliver a better service they. As the Improving Your Railway plan shows, the commitment is there. But, as the saying goes, actions really do speak louder than words.

Engineering Report for October and November

Saturday 10th and Sunday 11th October

The lines in the Salisbury area will be closed all weekend due to maintenance work. Great Western Railway services will also be affected by this work. Please see their publicity for more information.

Saturday

London Waterloo to Exeter services will start from Gillingham.

Buses will run between Andover and Gillingham via Salisbury.

Sunday

London Waterloo to Exeter services will start from Gillingham.

Additional services will run between London Waterloo and Basingstoke.

A revised train service will run between Basingstoke and Andover.

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

Buses will run between Andover and Gillingham via Salisbury.

Sunday 18th October

The lines between Salisbury and Yeovil Junction will be closed all day due to maintenance work.

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

Buses will run between Salisbury and Yeovil Junction (non-stop). Buses will also run between Salisbury and Yeovil Junction via Gillingham.

A revised service will run between Yeovil Junction and Exeter St Davids.

Sunday 25th October

Planned maintenance work between Yeovil Junction and Honiton has now been cancelled.

Monday October 26th until Sunday November 1st

Planned engineering work was due to be taking place around Honiton Tunnel.

This work has also been postponed.

Saturday 31st October and Sunday 1st November

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

Saturday

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

Buses will run between Exeter Central and Exeter St Davids.

Sunday

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

Buses will run between Yeovil Junction and Exeter St Davids.

Saturday 7th and Sunday 8th November

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

Saturday

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

Passengers travelling from London Waterloo should travel on services to Guildford to connect with the replacement buses to Basingstoke. Buses will run between Woking, Guildford and Basingstoke.

Sunday

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

Passengers travelling from London Waterloo should travel on services to Guildford to connect with the replacement buses to Andover.

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

Saturday 21st and Sunday 22nd November

Due to maintenance work in the Yeovil Junction area, some late night services on Saturday and morning services on Sunday will be cancelled or replaced by buses for all or part of their journey.

Sunday 29th November

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

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

Buses will run between Andover and Gillingham (non-stop). Buses will also run between Salisbury, Tisbury and Gillingham.

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

In addition, the 0946 Yeovil Junction to Salisbury via Westbury South Western Railway service will not run.

GWR Launches New Travel Companion: Another PR Coup

GWR's new legendary travel companion has been unveiled. Meet Brunella, the cutest dragon ever.

The quest is complete. Following thousands of imaginative entries from customers, young adventurers and dragon fans, Great Western Railway's newest legendary travel companion finally has a name.

The limited-edition plushie dragon, inspired by GWR's Famous Five and the Dragon Quest campaign, received its new name following a social media competition, with the winning entry chosen by railway historian and broadcaster Tim Dunn.

From fiery and fearsome to magical and marvellous, entries poured in from across the South West and South Wales, making Tim's decision no easy task….

Now officially named, Brunella is ready to accompany families on adventures across the network, from seaside escapes in Cornwall to city breaks in Cardiff and everywhere in between.
Tim Dunn said:

"Choosing just one winner was incredibly difficult. There were so many inventive and imaginative entries.

"Brunella stood out as a name perfectly suited to this dragon. Referencing Brunel, one of the legendary figures of GWR's past, perhaps it'll introduce curious young minds to the extraordinary stories of Brunella's namesake too. It's an absolutely ace name for a little dragon who's destined for many great adventures."

GWR Head of Marketing, Helen da Costa, said:

"We were blown away by the response to our competition. The creativity, imagination and enthusiasm shown was fantastic and it was wonderful to see so many people getting involved.

"There were lots of brilliant suggestions and we're delighted to officially welcome Brunella into the GWR family. We look forward to our young adventurers capturing pictures of Brunella at some of the fantastic destinations on our network."

If you cannot get enough of Brunella, the limited edition dragon is available from the GWR Souvenir Shop, priced £32.

SWR Take Action to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls

South Western Railway and Network Rail Wessex are now White Ribbon accredited for their commitment to tackling violence against women and girls. A three-year plan will see action to prevent and combat gender-based abuse across the South Western Railway and Network Rail Wessex network.

The railway industry's wider strategy will improve reporting and victim support and create a culture where unacceptable behaviour is consistently challenged.

As part of the accreditation programme, SWR and White Ribbon UK will develop and deliver a three-year action plan to prevent and combat gender-based abuse on trains, at stations and elsewhere on the railway.

By becoming White Ribbon accredited, the train operator joined its integrated infrastructure counterpart Network Rail Wessex (NR Wessex), which is already accredited as part of Network Rail.

For White Ribbon Day (25th November) last year, SWR and NR Wessex joined other publicly owned railways in the 'Race the Dark' event. Colleagues joined a service at stations between Weymouth and London Waterloo to raise awareness of gender-based abuse.

Angela Prescott, Health, Safety, Security and Environment Director of South Western Railway and Network Rail Wessex, said:

“While we have supported White Ribbon UK for the past four years, it is an important recognition of our commitment to ending violence against women and girls to become White Ribbon accredited.

“We are determined to work with the wider industry and our partners to prevent and combat gender-based abuse and challenge unacceptable behaviour wherever it is found on our network. “We encourage everyone to join us in supporting the White Ribbon campaign. By tackling this urgent issue together, we can create a safer railway and society for all.”

Lynne Elliot, Chief Executive of White Ribbon UK, said:

“We’re really pleased to see South Western Railway demonstrating its commitment to preventing violence against women and girls through its White Ribbon accreditation.

"Accreditation is about creating lasting change across an organisation, from the policies, culture and support provided to employees, to the role it can play in challenging harmful attitudes and behaviours more widely. It’s encouraging to see South Western Railway making that commitment both for its colleagues and for the millions of people who use its network.

"Everyone has a role to play in challenging the attitudes and behaviours that contribute to violence against women and girls, and we look forward to working with South Western Railway as it delivers its three-year action plan.”

Initiatives to enhance the safety of women and girls include providing safe spaces for anyone who is feeling vulnerable to seek support at stations like London Waterloo and Richmond and the appointment and training of colleague safeguarding champions.

Under public ownership, SWR and NR Wessex will be the first integrated business to apply for the new Safer Railway Scheme accreditation, which is succeeding the Safeguarding on Rail Scheme.

Special Sunflower Train Brings Communities Together

Community groups, rail industry partners, local volunteers and passengers shared a unique journey at the end of this long hot summer on board a special ‘Sunflower Train’ celebrating connection, creativity, and community along the Severn Beach line in Bristol.

The event, led by Network Rail in partnership with Great Western Railway (GWR), Siemens, Severnside Community Rail Partnership and local volunteers, builds on the legacy of the Railway 200 celebrations, when visitors to the Inspiration Train at Bristol Temple Meads in March sowed sunflower seeds in planters on Platform 1. Since then, staff and volunteers from each organisation have visited stations along the Severn Beach line to plant more seeds in community rail gardens, creating a "sunflower line" across the route.

The initiative is inspired by Sunflower Theory, which suggests that during the day sunflowers face the sun to soak up its rays, but when sunlight fades at night, instead of wilting in the dark, they turn towards one another for support. This sense of connection, hope, and community spirit is reflected throughout the project.

To mark the next stage of the initiative, participants travelled on board a specially designated ‘Sunflower Train’ between Bristol Temple Meads and Severn Beach, taking part in creative activities during the journey. The artwork produced on the train is set to be transformed into permanent displays for the station planters at Bristol Temple Meads. Passengers and visitors also enjoyed sunflower-themed cupcakes and commemorative sunflower pins as part of the event.

The journey coincided with the reopening of the Severn Beach line following 12 days of vital engineering work, providing an opportunity to welcome people back to the railway and celebrate the importance of the route to local communities.

Calum Mackay, Stations Transformation Programme Manager for Network Rail’s Great Western Route, said:

“The Sunflower Train was a wonderful way to bring people together and celebrate the communities that make the Severn Beach line special. What started with a handful of sunflower seeds planted during Railway 200 has grown into a project that stretches along the line and spreads a message of hope and resilience across Bristol. Our ambition is for this to be the first of many annual community events that continue to brighten stations and bring people together.”

Network Rail hopes this year's project will be the first step towards creating permanent sunflower gardens at Bristol Temple Meads and stations along the Severn Beach line, leaving a lasting legacy from Railway 200 while continuing to bring communities together.

Photographs of Brunella and Sunflowers: GWR

Heather Cullimore of Severnside Community Rail Partnership said:

“Collaborating in the community and bringing the train to life along the Severn Beach line has helped to signpost people toward how they can benefit from supportive agencies and teach them a bit about the Sunflower Theory.”

Excited For Autumn? SWR Were. Local Customers Less So….

New research commissioned for SWR reveals the nation is more excited for autumn than ever before, with 74% saying this summer made them appreciate chillier weather more.

With that in mind, South Western Railway took the opportunity to celebrate the arrival of cooler temperatures and autumnal days (at last) with an Autumn ticket promotion, with prices starting from just £3. Tickets were available to purchase between Wednesday 2nd and Sunday 6th September directly from the SWR website, for travel between Wednesday 9th September and Friday 23rd October.

However, passengers buying advance tickets on the West of England Line would have had to negotiate the problem, raised elsewhere in this newsletter, that SWR's website does not contain details of the temporary timetable more than two weeks in advance, making using this offer a potential minefield, as the website showed trains that would not, in the end, be operating.

As part of the ticket promotion, and to inspire people to make the most of the change in season, broadcaster and autumn-enthusiast, Helen Skelton, shared with SWR her favourite things about exploring the UK in autumn.

Helen, broadcaster, former Strictly star and lover of the British outdoors, said:

"Autumn is one of my favourite times of year to get outdoors. After the heat of summer, there's something really refreshing about cooler days, crisp air and seeing the landscape start to change. It's a brilliant time for walking, exploring somewhere new and making a proper day of it — especially if there's a cosy pub and a roast waiting at the end.

"I think we sometimes assume the best time to get out and explore is during the summer, but autumn has so much to offer. The temperatures can be far more comfortable for a long walk or day trip, the colours are incredible, and places often feel a little calmer once the summer rush has passed.

"For me, some of the best days are the simple ones: getting outside, discovering a new stretch of countryside or coastline and spending time with friends or family. You don't always need a big holiday or complicated plans — sometimes jumping on a train and exploring somewhere different for the day is exactly what you need."

Day trips, UK staycations and long walks - just some of the activities the nation pressed pause on during this summer's hot weather. Three quarters (74%) reported recent high temperatures have made them appreciate chillier weather more as two in five (40%) Brits say they're more excited than ever before for autumn to arrive.

After months of hot, dry weather, it appears the cooler temperatures and autumn colours can't come soon enough, with going for a long walk (43%), taking a day trip (28%), visiting a town or city (24%) and going sightseeing (22%) listed among the activities Brits didn't embrace this summer, new data from South Western Railway has revealed.

After a summer spent seeking shade, one in four Brits say that they're ready for 'cosy season', with countryside walks (33%), Sunday roasts (30%), and day trips (14%) featuring in the top ten list for activities that are simply better to do in autumn instead of the summer.

The formula for the perfect autumn day in the UK includes a cosy pub, a delicious roast, and a countryside walk, as three in ten (31%) named autumn as the perfect season to explore the UK. In fact, South Western Railway found that over half (53%) are already planning to take a UK-based trip this autumn, with two in five (39%) saying they're more likely to go on a staycation or day trip in the autumn instead of the summer.

Visiting the coast (36%) topped the list of places the nation wants to catch a train to this cosy season, followed by the countryside (29%) and cities (24%). 15% said they wanted to visit somewhere they'd never visited before, while for one in ten (13%), food and drink destinations are on their bucket lists.

According to SWR's research, the nation's all-time top ten favourite autumn activities are:

- Countryside walks - 41%
- Visiting a pub - 34%
- Sunday roasts - 33%
- Woodland walks - 33%
- Coastal walks - 31%
- Day trips - 26%
- Visiting friends or family - 24%
- A walk and a Sunday roast - 21%
- Exploring a historic town or city - 19%
- Visiting new places - 19%

While this research is admirable and fascinating, the problem with actually booking Advance Tickets on our line means that it is debatable how many local passengers were able to take advantage of this seasonal offer.

The issue of the website not being updated that far in advance regarding the temporary timetable is one that we have raised several times with SWR, as noted above. As a starting point, we asked that where the future timetable on Journey Planner still shows the original times, it should have a warning triangle against the departure times, as is usually the case when services are disrupted, with a note that services are subject to alteration.

Do We Always Say Well Done When Something Like This Happens?

We are never afraid to raise issues when things go wrong (see above). So it is only fair that we should always try to draw attention to it when SWR and their staff do things very well indeed.

On September 21st, I was travelling on the 1031 departure from Honiton towards Waterloo when I became aware that there was a medical incident further up the train. A passenger was unwell, and would need an ambulance. Thankfully, the passenger was well enough to leave the train with some aid at Axminster, and a member of SWR's train crew (presumably on his way to begin duty) stayed with him to await the arrival of the ambulance and check on his condition in the meanwhile.

The guard, several SWR managers and train crew who happened to be on the train worked as a team, supported by a medically-qualified passenger, to deal with the incident, which they did with calmness and professionalism. When the train was able to resume its journey, the manager on board thanked the passenger who had helped and gave them a First Class upgrade for their journey (and their return the following day) as a token of SWR's thanks.

It is easy to take good service and excellent work for granted. But we really should not do so. When I left the train at Yeovil Junction, I made a point of telling the manager that I had noticed what had happened, and as a member of the travelling public congratulated the team on all that they had done.

A Murder is Announced on the 4.50 From Paddington

Fans of the BBC “cosy crime” series Beyond Paradise may remember the episode partially filmed on the South Devon Railway around Buckfastleigh. In the episode, a rehearsal takes place on a train for a murder mystery special to take place the following weekend on the heritage steam train. During the rehearsal, an actual murder takes place, right under the noses of the local police who, for complicated reasons, were acting in the dress rehearsal.

I mention this because clearly the idea of hosting a murder mystery on a train is one that others find attractive, although hopefully in this case no-one actually died!

Great Western Railway held their own murder mystery on an IET express service from Paddington to celebrate the birthday of Agatha Christie… and of course to gather some excellent publicity.

The service was a nod to Christie’s classic ‘4.50 from Paddington’ novel - just one of her 66 detective novels which has marked her as the best-selling novelist of all time, and embodied the thrill of classic British crime fiction.

Guests on board experienced an immersive murder mystery performance by the ‘Murder Mystery Collective’ and heard from Agatha Christie historian and speaker - Dr Mark Aldridge, who said:

“Agatha Christie’s works shaped the modern crime genre as we know it today, but as time passes, every generation needs its own entry point into her world.

“While Gen Z might be discovering books through platforms like TikTok, Christie’s twists and plots are as sharp now as they were nearly a century ago, so it’s great to hear that appetite for her works lives on. It’s wonderful to see GWR celebrating her legacy through this immersive experience.”

Photograph: GWR

September Honiton Station Updates

Once again, Honiton Station hosted a banner promoting the work of Fairtrade Honiton, as we celebrated Fairtrade Fortnight, which ends on October 4th.

As in previous years, Station Manager Ben Stephenson agreed on behalf of SWR that we could place a series of banners to promote community events happening over the summer in the town. These included another very successful Gate to Plate festival of food and drink which drew the crowds to Honiton in August.

We are grateful to SWR for their ongoing support, as we continue to promote local community groups, charities and events, through our planters, through seasonal banners like these and through our community noticeboard.

After literally years of asking, recently the bus information screen at Honiton Station was finally updated, to show only those buses that actually stop in the station forecourt. The screen also now shows a clear message about where to board other buses, such as the 367 Town Circular and Service 44/44A. The temporary A4 notice attached to the bus stop has now been removed.

Thanks go to everyone at Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership and to Gary Shipp at Community Rail Network who worked to get this information screen altered.

Now if only those who operate the screen could get it serviced, so that the waxy white film that seems to be coating the inside of the screen surface, making it hard to read, can be cleaned off.

ORR Issues New Figures on Violence on Railways

At the end of September, the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) released figures that show a worrying increase in reports of violent incidents and harassment on rail services.

Assaults, which include verbal attacks, increased by 36% in the year ending inMarch. It was reported that there were 13,464 assaults against passengers and members of the public on Britain's mainline railway, the highest number since ORR began to collate these figures in 2004.

The ORR said that harassment also increased by 52% and common assaults by 30%. They also stated that reports of violent incidents had been rising for five years.

The figures also show that there were 11,289 reported assaults against members of the workforce on the mainline railway, a rise of 12% compared with the previous year. Of those, 2,487 were physical assaults, while more than half (6,390 incidents) involved verbal abuse.

Richard Hines, the ORR's Chief Inspector of Railways said:

"We're working with industry and our trade union colleagues to address work-related violence and harassment. This includes understanding where the risks are, putting effective controls in place, encouraging staff to report incidents and providing appropriate support afterwards."

A spokesperson for Network Rail and the Train Operating Companies said:

"All operators are working to reduce risk and prevent harm by sharing information, improving reporting processes and deploying body-worn cameras. Keeping passengers and colleagues safe is at the heart of everything we do. Violence, abuse and intimidation directed at passengers or staff are completely unacceptable. The rail industry works closely with British Transport Police to investigate incidents, support victims and bring offenders to justice."

The RMT union, which represents rail industry workers, said the statistics were aligned with their own figures, which show that two-thirds of its members had experienced violence at work.

The figures on violent incidents were part of a wider statistical release from ORR. Other worrying statistics reported include the fact that 11 members of the public died at mainline level crossings in the year to March, six more than the previous year. Eight were pedestrians and the others were road vehicle users.

Coffee and Conversation

Our next meet up for members of The Friends of Honiton Station is due to be in the cafe at The Beehive at 11 a.m. on Monday November 2nd.

I do hope that as many members as possible will be able to join us on that occasion. As well as our usual updates on the railway and our work, we may have some idea by then of how long the temporary timetable is likely to last.

This is also our annual opportunity for me to ask you if you are happy for me to continue as your Chairman.