

Chairman's Message

As a committee, we continue to have regular Zoom meetings with constructive discussions. As a result, policies and campaign plans are evolving about where we need to concentrate our efforts. You don't have to be a committee member to join one of these calls - just let us know that you are interested (contact details at end of newsletter). I hope this newsletter gives you a good insight into the hard work the group undertakes on your behalf to build a bigger and better railway. The strength of our lobbying efforts is improved by the more members we have and can draw upon. Please pass the word around to encourage others to join our group!

I and other committee members attended the online session for representatives of Railfuture's Branches and Groups on 14th Oct. It was a well thought out piece pulled together by Ian Brown, provoking a lot of good discussion. For example, we discussed what we wanted to see from the Chancellor's Autumn Statement, and you can read the resulting press release on the home page of the Railfuture website here: <https://www.railfuture.org.uk/Press%20release%2026th%20October%202021>

To update you on Wessex Branch matters: our principal focus has been on the current and proposed timetables. We are taking issue with both SWR and CrossCountry Trains about their service reductions which I am now pursuing with MPs and local authorities. One combined consequence of the SWR and XC cuts is to reduce services between Winchester and Basingstoke, two major centres, from 4 tph to 2 tph. This would seem to suggest as with the SWR/GWR cuts on the Salisbury to Bristol line that there has been little coordination of the combined impacts. It was most frustrating on a recent return business visit from Basingstoke to Winchester to find I had just missed the 13.00 train and a nine coach pretty empty XC Voyager arrived for its 13.12 departure south through Winchester but not actually stopping. A fifty minute wait for the next train – I may go by car to the next meeting!

We are delighted to report the reopening of the Waterside Line is getting ever closer and we continue to support Nick Farthing and his team to achieve this.

Two other major issues are creeping up our list. Firstly, Freight: as a result of the change in infrastructure in Southampton, freight trains up to half a mile in length with one driver trundle past my garden a few times every hour. Just imagine a few more half miles removed from the busy A34? When are we going to make more of rail freight during the current shortage of lorry drivers and when are we going to electrify the missing sections of the railway between here and the Midlands? Secondly, on my list of new campaigns is the Portsmouth to Cardiff route which is about to have services reduced by both GWR and SWR. This should be a golden opportunity for rail, exploiting the leisure market and connecting the University cities of Cardiff, Bristol, Salisbury, Southampton and Portsmouth ...and with no real motorway competition!

We're working with neighbouring Railfuture branches over both CrossCountry issues and service reductions on the Portsmouth-Cardiff route. There's an online petition opposing the withdrawal of SWR's Waterloo-Bristol service here: <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/598397>

Like many of you I have started to return to using rail with a degree of trepidation. Sadly, I feel even less of a customer than I did pre pandemic. Many of the fares have changed and have new titles and ever confusing restrictions. Sunday Singles and Evening Out Returns (which actually start at midday), and Super Off Peak to London now switched from post 12.00 to post 14.00 arrivals. All with no explanation of the new restrictions when you buy a ticket from a TVM as there used to be. Elsewhere in this newsletter we talk about TVM's, but all this change has converted me to the benefit of the telephone ticket app. It's a bit clunky to start with but if you put in your travelling time it tells you the best fare and downloads the ticket in less time than it takes to fuss around with a TVM. Try it - it's the future, whether we like it or not.

One other aspect is: the daftness of the railways shows no sign of easing. In a recent journey to Southampton on a Sunday during engineering works, trains were terminating at Winchester. For some

reason the Portsmouth and Poole sections were still combining and separating at Eastleigh to make a 10 coach train. What is the logic of this for five miles? On the return journey due to a signalling problem they decided to combine at Southampton. This delayed the Poole service due to the inbound delay to the Portsmouth section. The Portsmouth guard, who then took over the combined service, was not supposed to be routed this way, so Southampton Parkway was then removed from the stops apparently as he wasn't due to stop there! At least I got my delay repay!

On another train recently which was running 11 minutes late - within the delay repay threshold - Control decided to remove the stops at Fleet and Farnborough to get back on time advising passengers for these stations to change at Basingstoke. Just as we arrived the stopping service for these stations left, significantly inconveniencing a number of passengers and triggering unnecessary Delay Repay claims.

Which brings me onto my final point: the human factor. There are some great and helpful members of staff but equally some are not! I am particularly concerned that, for most passengers, the first human contact with the railway is the ticket gate line. This should be the “welcome to our railway, thank you for travelling with us” moment. Is this most passenger’s experience?

- Chair, Mike Southgate.

West of England Line

Wessex Branch committee member, Bruce Duncan, reports that the Salisbury-Exeter Rail Users’ Group (of which he is chair) has secured a meeting with relevant MPs at the House of Commons on 2nd November 2021. Bruce, accompanied by SERUG secretary Nick Hurrell, will present an update to the MPs who have constituencies along the line (three of whom sit on the Transport Select Committee). This follows previous meetings with MPs and the Rail Minister in 2018 which helped to generate momentum to develop the CMSP (ie the formal Infrastructure proposal by Network Rail) that was finally completed in 2020.

Very little has happened since then (primarily due to Covid of course) and the time is now right to provide an update on what needs to happen. SERUG appreciates that Treasury money will be tight, but the fact remains that the West of England has seen virtually no investment in track or trains since the 1980s. The timetable remains unstable and rail travel to all parts of the West Country will continue to suffer regular disruption unless infrastructure is improved.

SERUG will be pointing out to MPs that, with the Okehampton line re-opening in the next few weeks, services could run through from Okehampton or Barnstaple to Axminster/Honiton. This would give Exeter better connections from east and west – the first steps towards the County Council’s “Devon Metro”. But to enable this to happen, the track and signal infrastructure improvements identified in the CMSP report would have to be enacted.

Meanwhile, there have been some modest access and safety improvements in the depot area alongside Yeovil Junction station (pictured, right) which will make life better for train crews ...but it’s still not the changes that SERUG were hoping for. The group has been calling for “permissive working” at the station which would allow units to be split and joined. That would mean longer trains venturing further west than Salisbury, where units are currently separated.



Photo: Dave Tozer

The Covid crisis has seen an unprecedented reduction in passenger train services in Britain. In normal times such a timetable reduction would have caused an outcry, but in truth there has been surprisingly little coverage of these changes at both national and local level.

Whilst nobody would argue that during lockdown there was little point in transporting fresh air, the Country is now in the process of a slow recovery to normality. Despite this, South Western Railway, Cross Country and Great Western are all proposing permanent reductions to services both from December 2021 and from December 2022. Railfuture has been involved in a vigorous campaign with others to prevent these cuts and to argue that service reductions are fundamentally the wrong approach.

The present timetables in operation have made rail a less attractive choice. Many former through journeys now require a change en route. This not only lengthens the journey, but causes inconvenience and worry about making connections. The overall frequency of services has been seriously reduced on some routes. For example, Southampton to Birmingham, 2 major cities and transport interchanges had 3 through trains every 2 hours pre Covid. There is now one. Frequency is key driver of modal choice.

Many stations in the Wessex Area have seen a 50% reduction in service frequency. The irony of the present and proposed timetables is that the smallest stations with the lowest passenger numbers have on the whole had their services preserved, and the cuts have fallen where the potential to recover the business are greatest. No sensible business would ever operate like this.

Many long journeys that used to have on board catering now have none. Exeter to Waterloo and Weymouth to Waterloo now have no service on journeys of about 3 hours.

There is an increasing tendency for Network Rail to plan engineering work (sorry, “Improvement Work”!) on weekdays as well as weekends. This may well save Network Rail money, but the impact on the key driver of getting the economy back on its feet is being ignored. Substitute bus services for commuters and school/college students will just make people find other ways, usually by car.

We will never get passenger numbers back to pre Covid levels unless the product is attractive to potential users. It is remarkable how road traffic has returned to (above in some cases) pre Covid levels, yet rail is still only at about 66% of the pre covid levels and in terms of journeys to work this figure is much lower.

Why does this matter?

It matters for 3 reasons:

1. If the Country is to deliver on its carbon reduction targets, it must get both passengers and freight off the roads and on to lower carbon forms of transport, including rail.
2. The economic recovery of our major cities is dependent on getting people back there for work, educational and leisure activity. Only public transport can deliver this in a safe and cost-effective way.
3. The present arrangements will cost taxpayers dearly. Fixed costs on railways are very high, the marginal costs of running more services are relatively low. The long-term loss of revenue will only be bridged by more subsidy. There is a real risk of a spiral of decline on railways as we saw in Britain in the 1960's and 1970's as the Government grapples with many spending priorities. In truth there are not many votes in railways!

What can you do?

Simple: get active and support Railfuture in its campaigns to protect our railway for the long term good of the Country.

- Stewart Palmer, Railfuture Board member and Wessex Branch liaison

If you received this newsletter by post and have since acquired an internet connection, please let us know your email address as this will help us to reduce the cost of sending out newsletters – thanks.

Freight Group report

The freight group in Railfuture recently had a committee meeting at which the acknowledged expert on freight in the UK, Julian Worth, gave a fascinating talk. This covered freight developments in the Solent area and the freight corridor north to the Midlands.

This corridor links Southampton Docks to Birmingham, the “golden triangle” of regional distribution centres in the East and West Midlands, and further north to Doncaster and Merseyside; it’s the second busiest port after Felixstowe to be linked to distribution centres. In a count back in February, some 50 trains ran in 24 hours on this corridor and this is likely to increase. With the Covid lockdown the number of passenger trains has reduced enabling more freight trains to run and with much less delay.

At the Southampton end, sidings have been lengthened to 775m and this results in even more containers being carried on each train. Julian advised us that, as a result of the shortage of HGV drivers, road hauliers are coming to rail to ask for help, particularly on trunk haulage. He also suggested the building of local supply centres near major towns & cities where consumer goods could be distributed by small electric vans or freight bikes. The local supply centres would be fed with the goods from the regional supply centres (many of which are in the “golden triangle” in the East and West Midlands).

All this results in pressure on capacity and there are a number of constraints that will have to be resolved...

- 1) Southampton Central to Eastleigh The solution would be to route more trains via Romsey & Salisbury
- 2) Basingstoke This is a major constraint with the flat junction, and all freight trains have to pass through the station. Network Rail has outline plans for a flyover from the Reading line over the SW mainline before the station. This would be very costly and is unlikely to happen. An alternative is to restore the former GWR/SR link north of the station to the west yard and then by high-speed crossovers to the down Southampton lines.
- 3) Basingstoke to Reading There are three stations on the two-track route to Reading (with a fourth to open in 2022) also the Bramley level crossing and four flat junctions before reaching the GWR mainline relief roads. No easy solutions! The level crossing could be closed if a bypass was provided. Re-signalling to full 4 aspect could create a little more capacity and freight loop near Southcote Junction would also allow fast trains to pass.

One of the key issues with freight is motive power. Despite being the lowest emitter of atmospheric pollution for transport, the government wants the railways to phase out diesels (and the diesel part of bi-modes) and wants to see the use of hydrogen or batteries. Whilst possibly suitable for passenger trains in rural and remote locations, they are totally unsuited for the high power needed to pull freight - only 25 kVac from overhead catenary wires would be suitable. However, less than 50% of our network is electrified, and often it is only the “first or last mile” into and out of depots that needs wiring. For the moment, our freight operators are sticking in the main to diesels. However the Class 66 diesels, widely used on freight, are reaching their half life and will require replacement.

If only some infill electrification was carried out (c400 miles), 85% of our freight could switch to electric traction. In our area the following would achieve the objective:

- 1) Electrify at 25 kVac from Reading West to Basingstoke and at 25 kVac or 750 Vdc west to Salisbury, Romsey and Southampton.
- 2) Use dual voltage (25kVac/750Vdc) for trains direct to Southampton.
- 3) Electrify from Didcot to Oxford (withdrawn by Government from the GWR electrification project).
- 4) Electrify the Oxford-Cambridge line currently being built (again funding was withdrawn by Government). At Bletchley, Bedford and the ECML this would link with already electrified mainlines to the north.
- 5) Electrify from Oxford via Banbury to Coventry & Birmingham.

The Autumn Budget statement fails to indicate the Government’s support for rail’s wish for a programme of electrification and, instead proposes more road schemes and a reduction in domestic airline fuel tax.

- David Brace

Robin's Freight Roundup

Committee member Robin Attwood keeps abreast of freight movements in our area and reports that...

- Freight traffic to/from the Southampton Docks remains steady but only Morris Cowley automotive traffic is regularly using Southampton Eastern Docks.
- Traffic to Marchwood MoD is irregular with Ludgershall being more so.
- There is departmental working which sometimes takes in the Waterside Line as far as the refinery gate.
- There is regular aggregate traffic from Whatley to Eastleigh, Botley and Fareham.
- Micheldever Oil Sidings sees the occasional departmental service.
- Hamworthy branch remains out of use although there are talks between NR and Poole Harbour Commissioners to revive traffic.

The scheme to expand freight capacity at Southampton Maritime Terminal has been awarded Project of the Year at the recent Rail Freight Group awards. It was hailed as a shining example of cross-industry collaboration to increase train lengths, speed of access and terminal handling capacity, all on a restricted site alongside an intensive passenger operation.

Community Rail

The **Purbeck Community Rail Partnership** has announced it will be expanding its territory to take on Dorchester South, where it will be supporting a new station adoption team – there's already a community orchard on Network Rail land close to the station.

The **Purbeck CRP** also reports that there's pressure from residents of Swanage to get the regular passenger service to Wareham up and running in order to address traffic problems on the A351, which can only get worse as new housing comes on stream. The Swanage Railway is close to securing the Operator's Licence needed if their trains are to run into Wareham Station; also they are in the process of submitting their "Restoring Your Railways" bid to the Dept. for Transport. All being well, a further trial of a regular diesel shuttle service between Wareham and Swanage will begin next May.

Just before the pandemic struck, a decision was made to wind up the **Heart of Wessex CRP**, the partnership covering the Weymouth-Bristol line. All stakeholders agreed it was logical for Severnside CRP and TransWilts CRP to be responsible for all the lines within their respective areas, including the relevant sections of the Heart of Wessex Line. There was then a need to set up a new CRP to cover the part of the Heart of Wessex Line running south of Westbury to Weymouth. It was agreed the new partnership will be called **South Wessex CRP**.

Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) Council is working on its *Mind The Gap* project which aims to increase community engagement with the seven stations in the borough from Christchurch to Hamworthy, as well as to promote rail travel and reduce social isolation. The massive mural that runs the length of Pokesdown station has been repainted with a new design, and a large artwork panel has been created at Hamworthy. There have also been music and dance events along the line.

Ticket Machines

We've noticed that SWR is taking out of service all their newer Ticket Vending Machines featuring the "Virtual Ticket Office" function (the light-blue machine in the picture). The official line from the company is: "We are making some changes to our ticket machine fleet. While we make these changes, our Virtual Ticket machines will not be available, however, we are working to enable similar functionality on other ticket machines to restore the service".

Needless to say we will be keeping an eye on the situation as a reduction in the number of TVMs could lead to long queues for tickets at busy stations. If you experience difficulties buying a ticket, or with any other aspect of your journey (overcrowding, frequent cancellations or whatever) please let us know.



Reopenings Review

It's to be regretted that our Branch area has seen only a small number of station or line reopenings in the past 40 years.

A couple of basic platforms have been added to the Island Line: **Lake** in 1987 and **Smallbrook Junction** in 1991. In Hampshire, **Hedge End** station between Botley and Eastleigh opened in 1990 and a passenger service was restored over the line between Eastleigh and Romsey in 2003, with a new station at **Chandler's Ford**. That's about it!

Campaigns and reports urging further rail reopenings come and go, all to no avail. Meanwhile housing and commercial developments continue to spring up with the inevitable result that the trunk road network in the South long ago reached saturation point.

Therefore the news that a dedicated project team is forging ahead with the detailed design and business case for passenger services on the **Waterside Line** is music to our ears. On top of that, the Government announced £7m of extra funding for the project in the Chancellor's Autumn Statement. Restoring a service between Hythe and Southampton over a line that already exists surely represents a "quick win" for the Government with its declared aim of restoring railways.

Two other schemes in our area were awarded Restoring Your Railways funding to help develop a business case. One involves extending the Island Line to **Newport** and **Ventnor**, and this awaits a decision on further funding from the Dept for Transport. Well, at least the existing Island Line should have trains running again by the time you read this article! The other aims to fulfill the long-held ambition of the Swanage Railway to operate a regular passenger service to **Wareham**. This latter study is a rework of the plan put forward by SR in 2008, taking into account lessons from running experimental diesel services.

Planning permission for the major housing and commercial development at **Welborne** to the north of Fareham has just been granted by Fareham Borough Council. Although there's no mention of a new station in the development summary, there is a measure to "safeguard and not develop Knowle Rail Halt land" in the Section 106 Schedule attached to the planning documents. We can take some credit for getting this safeguarding measure introduced into the Schedule. We've also established top-level contacts with the developer and Fareham Borough Council which will enable us to press the case for the new station as the Welborne development proceeds.

When plans for **Whitehill-Bordon** new town in East Hampshire were being drawn up, we put forward credible proposals for a rail connection. Alas, what was supposed to be an eco town has turned into another car town. Predictably, bus services that were introduced have been shunned by residents.

The branch line to **Ludgershall** near Andover could once again see passenger trains to serve new housing developments, and strong arguments have been made for restoring a rail connection to **Ringwood** from the main line at Brockenhurst – again, new housing would be the key to securing funding.

New stations have been proposed for **Chineham** near Basingstoke, **Paulsgrove** west of Havant and **Wilton** in Wiltshire, to name but a few. There's considerable political momentum behind the Wilton proposal, although the cost of a 4-platform station at the junction of two routes may prove to be prohibitive. Also we worry that longer distance passengers would be inconvenienced by adding a further station call.

Residents to the north of Dorchester are campaigning for the restoration of a simple platform at **Bradford Peverell** and, just recently, a new campaign was launched at **Grimstone** (both stations closed in 1966). You can understand their grievance: trains speed past their villages, but call on request at three equally miniscule communities further up the line towards Yeovil!

In conclusion: While we would all like to see rail services restored to many more towns and villages in the South, we recognize that reopenings may not represent best value for money. If there is cash for rail infrastructure, it needs to be firstly directed at densely populated areas such as the South Hampshire conurbation. Network Rail's recent [Solent Connectivity](#) study confirms our long-held view: that the slow and infrequent rail service between Portsmouth and Southampton compares very unfavourably with train services between comparable city pairs elsewhere in Britain. Money spent on this line would probably benefit the highest number of people!

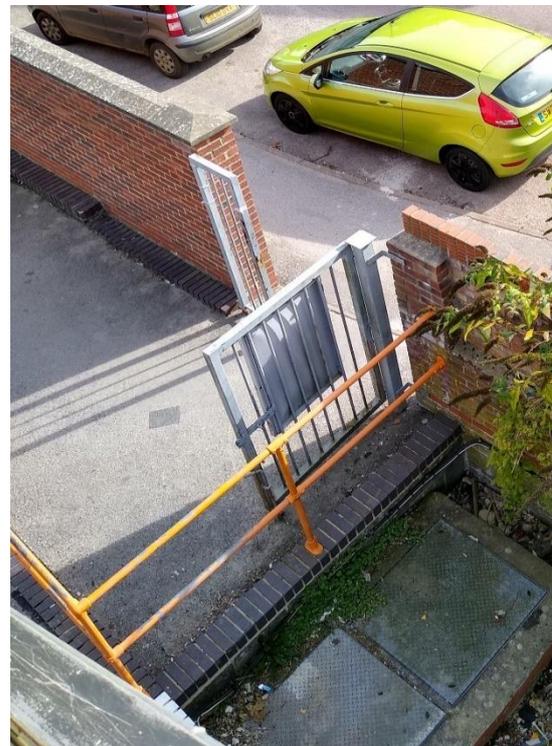
- Tony Smale, Secretary



Dorchester, despite being the County Town, is a small place. Unusually it has two stations, Dorchester South and Dorchester West.

Both are owned by Network Rail, but operated by two different operating companies, South Western Railway and Great Western. The West Station has now finally, after 20 years of talking, DDA-compliant access to both platforms. Left is a picture of the newly completed access to the Yeovil-bound platform. The ramp is handy for those attending Dorset County Hospital, just across the road.

The official opening, with invited dignitaries, was on 22nd Oct. Finished at last! - albeit after two decades of inaction.



But what about Dorchester South?

Technically, both platforms are DDA accessible. The problem is that the Weymouth-bound platform enables you to leave the station via a gateway to be deposited in a residential road on the wrong side of the tracks for the town centre (see picture on right).

A £1m scheme to give the station a facelift has just been announced, with £750,000 towards the cost coming from the Government’s Access for All funding. We’re told this will include improvements to paths, toilets and the booking office, but there’s still no plan to install a DDA-compliant footbridge, ie one with lifts or ramps.

Dorchester South Station has almost five times the number of entrances and exits per annum as Dorchester West (ORR statistics for 2019/20: 451,102 and 93,662 respectively) so how come the busier station is still waiting for a proper access to platforms? A DDA-compliant footbridge would cost some £1.5m, but this high cost should not be an excuse to do nothing. At the very least, there should be a dedicated set down/pick up bay outside the gate shown in the picture, with a means of summoning a taxi.

We would like to see a focus on the needs of rail users, not a slavish adherence to a DfT imposed ranking of stations for DDA funding.

- Stewart Palmer (photos by the author)

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