Autumn 2026 Newsletter
from Railfuture Wessex Branch



Chairman's Message

I hope you are well and have survived the joys of the hottest summer for some time …if not for ever. It certainly made travelling an interesting experience and hopefully lessons will have been learned for the future. More of that in this edition.

Since the last Wessex newsletter you will have read in Railwatch that I have now agreed to take over from Chris Page as Railfuture Chair, job sharing with Neil Middleton. We continue to look for a new Chair for the Wessex branch but for the time being I'm job sharing that as well. Which is good as it keeps me closer to the grass roots of what is happening on the ground.

Railfuture nationally is hosting another reception for MPs and other interested parties at the House of Commons in November. As usual its effectiveness depends on who turns up. Thanks to anyone who has nominated their local MP. The principal subjects we aim to cover are devolution, the impact of GBR, reliability, investment and fares. It's a good opportunity for us to talk directly to MPs or their advisors.

I recently did one of my rare media interviews: - with Mark Ovenden for his travel show on Vectis Radio which is a community station on the Isle of Wight. Mark has kindly said I can distribute the link, so if you want to listen to 22 minutes of me and our Vice-Chair Stuart George you can catch it here: https://www.vectisradio.com/podcasts/catch-cast/episode/catchcast-74-railfuture-improving-train-services/. We're very pleased that Mark, a renowned book author and speaker on railway topics, has recently joined Railfuture Wessex.

Cross Country

Ironically one of my subjects in the radio interview was the overcrowding on Cross Country Trains which we have regularly raised with Cross Country, especially as spare units from Avanti are still in sidings. A few days later I received an email from Cross Country announcing that the DfT had agreed to make a further eight five-coach, ex-Avanti Voyagers available to Cross Country. The XC statement included references to new journey opportunities between Reading and Newcastle and to Southampton, and more seats on the Manchester service. I wonder whether they will also sort out the crewing problems for the second unit when a pair of units run in tandem? – we've seen the rear unit being locked out of use due to lack of the extra crew member.

It was reported that a number of Cross Country rail services were cancelled on Sunday 6th Sept due to a shortage of train drivers, affecting services to Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Reading, Bristol, Paignton and Bournemouth.

SWR Timetable

We are still awaiting details from SWR about their proposed timetable change but, in a discussion I had recently at a meeting, I think it will now be refresh rather than significant change. Watch the dedicated website for updates and a chance to have your say: https://www.southwesterntimetable.com/

Re-instating Direct Trains

As a result of references in the radio interview to direct train services that have now been cut, the Wessex branch has been reviewing all the direct service which ran pre- and post-privatisation. These were deemed unnecessary duplication and it was claimed that connecting services were better. Which of course they are not. Perhaps growing a bigger and better railway could include re-instating these. Here's the list to date:

Brighton to Cardiff/ West of England. Waterloo to Bristol, Central Wales and at times even Manchester. Reading/Basingstoke to Brighton/Littlehampton. Portsmouth to the Northwest.	Basingstoke to Ipswich. Southampton to the Northeast. Waterloo to Plymouth/Paignton. Reading to Portsmouth/Southampton.

Open Access Bid

The open access bid to reopen the Waterside line rumbles on and we continue to support Alliance Rail. I am told by local sources that, following the ceasing of the Hythe Ferry and the number of roadworks in that area, reliable public transport is an "interesting challenge". All the time a largely unused railway line sits there!

The official line from the ORR (in their Sept 2026 document *Monitoring Open Access*) is this: "In June 2026, we rejected an application from Alliance Rail for track access rights to operate services between Marchwood and London Waterloo. At the time of publication, Alliance Rail has submitted a new application to operate services between Marchwood and London Waterloo, which we are currently consulting on with Network Rail."

Alternatives during Engineering Works

My experience as a regular user of weekend railway services is that we do seem to have a fair number of engineering work disruptions with little or no attempt to maintain some form of rail service. For example, when the Romsey to Eastleigh via Chandlers Ford route is closed, replacement buses are used to serve St Denys and Swaythling rather than putting additional stops on the Southampton to Winchester services.

If any engineering works take place east of Chichester, Southern's Southampton-Brighton Sunday services are diverted to and from Portsmouth. You then have to catch a bus running from Southampton to Havant to pick up a train to Chichester then another bus to Littlehampton to pick up another train. Hardly a great service! We are seeking an explanation from Southern.

At the same time if you were attempting to get to Gatwick Airport, there were no trains via Clapham Junction, so instead you had to go up to Waterloo and then across to London Bridge (no option via Guildford and Redhill - engineering works there as well).

… and finally …

Ticket checks on the train have been conspicuous by their absence. Zero. Given the concern about ticket fraud and miss use of railcards, regular on-train ticket checks are the obvious solution. We hear the promise "I will be walking through the train during the journey" but it rarely happens.

- Mike Southgate

West of England Line

Once again, trains between Waterloo and Exeter have been running to an emergency timetable since 10th August due to the "soil moisture deficit" that affects embankment stability. There is a small improvement on the situation we had last summer in that trains can run at 50mph over affected sections instead of 40mph, resulting in an end-to-end journey time improvement of some 30 minutes. This is because of measures to stabilise the track coupled with an improved understanding of the track dynamics. Fewer trains and slower speeds has, at least, resulted in improved reliability with cancellations down to under 2% in September.

There are also problems with availability of the class 159 (and some 158) diesel units used on the line. Spare parts for the 35-year-old trains are becoming difficult to source so that, when there's a need to swap out a defective engine or wheelset, there is no serviceable replacement unit to hand which means that several trains may be out of service at any one time.

Notwithstanding these problems, SWR has embarked on a "C6" overhaul complete with interior refresh to be carried out at Bournemouth West depot, which should extend the life of the trains for a further 8 to 10 years. So far, two of the class 159s have undergone the refresh and are back in service. The estimate for the interior refresh of all units is put at £16m; add to that any work needed on engines, doors etc. Of course, the cost of this overhaul work could have been avoided if a decision had been made five years ago about replacing the entire fleet. - *based on SERUG news*

Island Line

In a good example of integrated transport, buses approaching Island Line stations now display the next few trains from the nearest station on their Next Stop announcements.



Photo: Mike Southgate

On the last weekend in September with both the roadway and the walkway closed for repairs, the only access to Ryde pier was via Island Line, and they ran extra trains between Ryde Pier Head and Ryde St.John's Road to meet every FastCat, avoiding the need for passengers to wait up to 25 mins at the Pier Head station. This trial is currently being evaluated and, if considered successful, it's hoped to introduce extra trains next summer to connect with the half-hourly weekend FastCat service. - *Stuart George*

Western Gateway Plans

The Western Gateway Sub-National Transport Body, covering an area from Bristol and Gloucester down to Dorset including the Bournemouth conurbation, has just updated its Strategic Investment Plan; see https://westerngatewaystb.org.uk/strategic-investment-plan/. The plan stretches out to 2050 and covers all modes of transport, including rail.

Of particular interest are the rail schemes for our area that are included in their top ten priorities for the period to 2030. These are:

- Improvement of gateline capacity and customer facilities at **Bournemouth station**. The scheme involves relocating the gateline and ticket office, creating new and improved waiting rooms on both platforms, upgrading toilets, providing a new footbridge with lifts, and creating extra spaces for operational staff and commercial lettings.

- **Heart of Wessex Line** service enhancement. The aim is to facilitate an hourly train service by adding a passing loop between Yeovil Pen Mill and Castle Cary.
- Port of Poole Expansion, reopening of **Hamworthy Branch Line** and supporting access improvements. Some work has already been carried out on the Hamworthy Branch to allow freight trains to reach the Port of Poole, but further progress awaits a viable proposal for regular freight traffic.

Western Gateway STB has also been looking into bringing the disused platform at **Westbury** back into use and says it's technically feasible, with platform widening and upgrading required. They point out that new track and signalling will add significantly to the costs, with a total cost between £28.4m and £37.9m. "The benefits are far reaching, with resilience, reliability, performance and capacity benefits for services to and from London, Gloucester, Bristol, Salisbury and Exeter. This greatly supports our aspirations for hourly services on the Heart of Wessex Line."

Toilets at railway stations and onboard trains

The Government has published the Great British Railways rolling stock and infrastructure strategy and this can be downloaded from the following Government webpage…

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rolling-stock-and-infrastructure-strategy

The document includes on pages 10 to 11 four paragraphs with the title "Toilets as a core component of attractive rail travel".

The first three sentences state: "GBR recognises that functioning, reliable and hygienic toilets are a core requirement of the modern rail passenger experience. All too often, passengers' experience of train toilets is inconsistent, which can lead to discomfort, embarrassment and even distress. GBR will therefore establish clearer and more consistent expectations for toilet provision."

The document also states "Having a fully integrated railway will allow GBR to look at toilet provision on trains and stations holistically so that passengers will have access to facilities at a variety of points during journeys."

In the Railfuture Wessex Branch area, all trains except the Class 484 trains on the Island Line have onboard toilets but there are sometimes problems which cause them to be out of use. Staffed railway stations usually have toilets but when the station is staffed only part of the time the toilets may be closed. For instance, on the Island Line Ryde Pier Head Station is always staffed by Wightlink, and Ryde Esplanade Station has a ticket office which is staffed during the day, so these stations have toilets available all day. Shanklin Station also has toilets but these are only available when the ticket office is open, which is not all day. The availability of toilets at stations is therefore one reason why it is useful to have staff at stations and for as many hours each day as possible.

At Southampton, the toilet on platform 1 is out of order and has been for some time. Then, to make matters worse, so is the lift to get to the alternative toilet on platform 4.

If you think the provision of toilets at a railway station or on a train service requires improvement, don't hesitate to complain to the appropriate authority. There are instances of toilets being brought back into use (eg Weymouth) where passengers have persistently voiced their dissatisfaction. *- Alan Mayes*

Summer of 2026: How did the Railway Cope?

As I write this the sky is grey and steady rain is filling the water butt in the garden, so that's all right then! In truth Britain's weather has always been notoriously variable and whilst we must recognise that our climate is becoming more extreme, it does not mean that all summers will be scorchers, or all winters very wet. So how did our railway respond to the hottest summer since 1976 and what lessons can the industry learn?

Most rail users take safety for granted and the summer weather in media terms was dominated by two passenger train derailments, one near Lewes in East Sussex and one near Wickford in Essex. Fortunately, nobody was killed, although several people were seriously injured in the Lewes derailment.

Whilst it would be wrong to speculate about the underlying causes in advance of the publication of a final report by RAIB, there is no doubt that a combination of high rail temperatures and soil moisture deficit in the earthworks were factors in both accidents. These two issues were also the cause of significant train service delays nationwide with many emergency speed restrictions and long term train service reductions, as for example on the West of England line west of Yeovil, where the train service has been reduced by 50%.

Similar issues have been experienced on the line north of Cambridge to Kings Lynn and on C2C services out of Fenchurch Street. In day to day terms, points failures and other signalling issues caused significant delays, often with passengers stuck on boiling hot trains for long periods and there were many reports of air conditioning on trains simply not being able to cope. These are of course potential safety issues, particularly for the very young or old and passengers with underlying medical conditions.

So how did the railways cope overall?

We can all point to individual horror stories, but on balance I believe the answer is probably 7 out of 10. Most lines operated on most days and we must give credit to rail staff who just got on with the day job, despite the extreme conditions. As ever with these things, there will be calls for massive spending to deal with this issue, without any recognition of where the money is going to come from, or whether it represents value for money compared to other spending priorities.

It is my view that if we want a more resilient railway the industry needs to focus on the things that can be done both cheaply (relatively speaking) and easily, not have grand plans that will never happen because there is no funding. We must also not fixate about just very hot weather; landslides caused by excessive rain have resulted in a number of serious accidents in recent years and flooding has caused major disruption, often lasting days.

So here are my suggested top “weather mitigation” actions:

1. Better management of lineside vegetation. In simple terms, cut down all the trees within the railway boundary. This will not only reduce the soil moisture deficit in summer, but will also reduce the issue of low adhesion during leaf fall in autumn and the blockage of lines caused by fallen trees in high winds.
2. Focus on better maintenance/reliability of air conditioning on passenger rolling stock.
3. Develop contingency timetables for extreme weather, both hot, cold and wind, that minimise use of points, particularly switch diamonds, and have those plans ready for use at 24 hours’ notice.
4. Make sure there are plenty of supplies of bottled water available at key locations to distribute to passengers.
5. Drainage management must improve, clearing ditches of debris and vegetation, making sure culverts are clear, rodding of track drains etc.
6. Embankment and cutting stabilisation works. Focus on the key routes and high risk areas. Much has been done in this area, but a Victorian infrastructure, much of it built “on the cheap” is now showing serious signs of age both in very hot dry weather and wet conditions.

We have to be realistic about what can be achieved in terms of maintaining normal operations in all extreme weather situations. Focus on these basic needs will not produce a perfect railway in extreme weather, but it will minimise the disruption caused by our increasingly fickle climate.

- *Stewart Palmer.*



Photo: Alastair Smith

☜ **Southern can make adequate provision for luggage, so why not on South Western services?**

We've tackled SWR's management several times about lack of luggage space on their longer-distance class 444 units. As part of the mid-life refurbishment around 8 years ago, additional seats were crammed in to tackle overcrowding. It's a pity the opportunity to add luggage racks was not taken. Well, times have changed! There's less commuting and more passengers with bulky suitcases, many heading for cruise ships at Southampton. *- Alastair Smith*

Heritage Line Passenger Services

You may have seen the news that the **Severn Valley Railway** in association with the West Midlands Railway Executive has just completed an 8-week trial running their heritage diesel unit between Bewdley and Kidderminster at times to suit commuters. Through ticketing onto main line services was offered and people from Bewdley were able to get to Birmingham and other destinations with just one change at Kidderminster. Early indications are that the trial was a success.

Could regular services such as this operate on one of our heritage lines in the South?

Back in the noughties, the **Mid Hants Railway** actively considered running a shuttle service from Alresford, connecting into South West Trains services at Alton. Hampshire County Council supported the initiative and conducted a survey at Alton station during the morning peak to see how many commuters were driving up from Alresford and asking them if they would use a regular train service instead. Your secretary was one of the team that had to get out of bed at an ungodly hour, whizz up to Alton, don a hi-vis vest and hand out survey forms! The results were very positive and showed that a commuter train on the Mid Hants line would be popular. But alas the funding to get the project started wasn't forthcoming.

Probably you're more familiar with **Swanage Railway**'s trial service in 2023 using their own heritage diesel unit running from the branch line into Wareham station on the South Western main line, following a similar trial in 2017 using hired-in rolling stock. The service began each time with ceremony and speeches, proved very popular locally and left many believing that the time had at last come to reconnect Swanage with the national rail network. Sadly this wasn't to be - the heritage line totted up its losses after the 2023 trial and made the painful decision that a regular service would be simply unaffordable.

There was hope that South Western Railway would run regular trains onto the Swanage branch line after their summer Saturday service to Corfe Castle in 2018 and 2019 using Class 159 diesel units. Railfuture argued that if the service became a franchise commitment, then its future would be assured. But when we approached SWR managers about repeating their through service for future years, the answer was always a firm "NO"! To be fair, the journeys onto the Swanage branch were effectively extensions of SWR's Salisbury-Yeovil-Weymouth service which by then had ceased to operate.

Well, we'll see if the Severn Valley Railway scheme proves sustainable. An 8-week trial period for a game-changing train service really isn't long enough to build patronage and make business decisions about the future. But it will at least prove that it can be done, and the trial may inspire locals to campaign for the service to be properly funded so that it can continue. *- Tony Smale*

Let's Go a-Roving

A reminder that the **Freedom of Severn and Solent Rover** ticket entitles you to free travel on any 3 days in a 7-day period for £79.50 per adult. For travel on any 8 days in 15, the cost is £107.50. The ticket is cheaper for railcard holders and is half price for children aged 5-15.

The area extends from Great Malvern and Worcester in the north to Weymouth and Portsmouth in the south and from Cardiff, Tiverton Parkway and Axminster in the west to Swindon in the east and encompasses Bristol, Salisbury and Southampton.

Other Rover tickets for our area include the Isle of Wight Day Ranger, the Heart of Wessex Day Ranger and Southern Railway's Daysave. All these tickets are explained on the Rail Rover website http://www.railrover.org/, or ask at any railway ticket office.

We pointed out to Southern that constantly deploying **Gatwick Express** liveried trains on their Southampton – Brighton service must cause confusion for passengers. Until June 2024, hourly Southern trains from Southampton ran via the airport to Victoria, so there's a strong impression that they still do.

The reply from Customer Relations said "… your feedback regarding the livery and your concerns about Gatwick Express has been logged and passed on for consideration."



Recent photo at Southampton: Alastair Smith

Other News in Brief

➢ **Hampshire County Council** recently approved £600,000 for improvements at bus stations and bus hubs, with a further £350,000 earmarked for projects designed to make it easier to switch between buses and trains. That work will include better passenger information, improved signs between railway stations and nearby bus stops, and upgrades to waiting areas. Stations set to benefit include Winchester, Havant, Fareham, Brockenhurst, New Milton, Chandler's Ford, Portchester and Basingstoke. The funding comes from the government's local authority bus grant programme.

➢ Preparatory work for the construction of a new footbridge next to **Havant station** has just begun. The new footbridge will be twice as wide as the existing structure and features gentler ramps. When construction begins, the existing footbridge will close and temporary pedestrian diversions via nearby roads will be in place for the duration of the works.

➢ Tom Hayes, the Labour MP for Bournemouth East, has urged South Western Railway to reintroduce faster weekday trains between **Bournemouth and London Waterloo**, reducing travel times to around 1h35, similar to those in the 1980s. Today's fastest journeys take approximately 1h50.

➢ On 16th October, work to install new lifts at **Pokesdown station** near Bournemouth finally got underway with a ground breaking ceremony (using a special GBR-branded spade) attended by community representatives and the local MP. It's almost ten years since First/MTR agreed to install passenger lifts at the start of their tenure of the South Western Railway franchise (now ended). SWR and NR Wessex are contributing £4.6m, with the Government providing the remaining £2.6m for the overall project, which includes improvements to the booking hall and better access to the nearby Bournemouth AFC stadium.

➢ The latest iteration of a joint local transport plan between ***BCP and Dorset Council** proposes a series of upgrades to the rail network, including an additional hourly shuttle service between Wareham and Brockenhurst, along with other improvements to the Weymouth to London Waterloo service. Central to the plan is a proposed 'Dorset Metro', designed to deliver a 'turn-up and go' rail service across the BCP region. The proposals also call for accessibility improvements at various stations and major investment at Poole to improve the station and the nearby pedestrian crossing in the busy shopping area. The plan period runs to 2041. *Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole

➢ Most of the walking route between **Dorchester South** and **Dorchester West** stations was pedestrianised in 2024 making it much safer for pedestrians. The council has now embarked on a second phase of work that will add trees, planters, seating and cycle stands as well as address some of the drainage issues in the area. These further improvements are part funded by a grant from Great Western Railway's Customer and Community Improvement Fund.

➢ **Great Western Railway** will transfer into public ownership on 13th December 2026. In our area, GWR runs services between Bristol and Weymouth, Cardiff and Portsmouth, and on the North Downs Line from Reading to Guildford, Redhill and Gatwick Airport.

➢ Cutting-edge drone technology developed by Southampton-based company SkyBound is helping to protect lines into **Waterloo Station**. The system is being trialled by South Western Railway and Network Rail in a bid to tackle trespass, identify infrastructure problems and reduce delays. The automated drone is operated remotely from a high-tech control centre in Woolston, almost 80 miles away. Trespassing is one of the biggest causes of disruption on the South Western network, with incidents and fatalities accounting for almost 14% of cancellations.

➢ Eligibility for the **Disabled Persons Railcard** has been expanded. From Oct 26, people with a long-term impairment, health condition or neurodivergence that has lasted or is expected to last at least 12 months and significantly affects their ability to use rail services will be able to apply for the railcard and get 1/3 off ticket prices. An accompanying adult gets 1/3 off their ticket too.

= = = Fantasy News Item = = =

The original Derby-built trams ordered for the hugely-popular **South Hants Rapid Transit** linking Portsmouth with Gosport and Fareham are now due for mid-life refurbishment. The later tranche of 10-axle trams built in Valencia, Spain for the Waterlooville and Whiteley extensions are not expected to need major overhaul until the early 2030s.

Well, that's the news story we would like to be reporting. The Railway Development Society (now Railfuture) gave evidence supporting the SHRT scheme at a public inquiry held at Portsmouth Civic Offices in 1999, and a Transport & Works Act order was granted two years later.

The tram project was finally shelved in 2005 when Transport Secretary Alistair Darling withdrew funding. A staggering £10m had been spent by promoters on detailed design work only to be followed by a dastardly act of betrayal. "Shelved" but not forgotten!

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