

railfuture

Sevenside Branch Newsletter No. 41 Whitsun 2019

Contributions to the Newsletter are welcome and should be sent to the Branch Secretary, Nigel Bray.
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More information about campaigns is available on the Railfuture national website.

Railfuture Sevenside branch meeting near Bristol Parkway station – 10th June 2019

The next meeting will be on Monday 10th June at 7 pm in St. Michael's Church Centre, The Green, Stoke Gifford, Bristol BS34 8PD – see <https://www.stmichaelsbristol.org/>.

The venue is about five minutes' walk from Bristol Parkway station. If coming by train, turn left outside the station exit and walk past the bus shelters and the bicycle racks on your left. Cross over the zebra crossing to the opposite pavement and turn right into a footpath signposted Stoke Gifford through an ornamental gate, then walk through the churchyard. The Church Centre, a stone building with maroon signboards, is about 100 yards across a green.

The meeting will start planning our proposed regional recruiting leaflet, so please bring along ideas and photographs promoting recent successes and current campaigns. We hope this venue and evening meeting will be more convenient for people who have been unable to attend Saturday afternoon meetings.

Your chance to help Railfuture at the WSRA Steam Fayre, 3rd and 4th August 2019

The Sevenside branch is planning to have a stand at the West Somerset Railway Association (WSRA) Steam Fayre, at Norton Fitzwarren near Taunton, Saturday 3rd and Sunday 4th August. We need volunteers to spare an hour or two on either or both days. Please contact John Hassall on 07939 304406 or hassalls53@gmail.com if you are interested. We would be grateful if each of our affiliated groups could supply some of their own literature for display on the stand even if not able to help man it.

Future Railfuture Sevenside branch meetings

Saturday 7th September 2019, an informal meeting in the Strawberry Line Café, Yatton station, 2 to 4 pm, outside if weather is fine. Subjects for discussion will include station reopenings and bus/rail integration.

Don't forget the Railfuture National Conference on Saturday 21st September at St. Michael's Church Centre, booking details on the Railfuture website or in the next edition of Railwatch.

An opportunity to become Sevenside Branch Treasurer

Tony Lloyd, who has been our Treasurer since 2007, wishes to stand down because of other commitments and will do so before the 2020 branch AGM. He says, "I would be really happy for someone to take over from me. It is not an onerous job." If you are interested, please contact him on 0117 973 9855 or painsmore@hotmail.com.

Branch Meetings Officer

A new post on the Committee is proposed to arrange meeting venues and book speakers throughout the Branch. Anyone interested should contact Nigel Bray (details at top of Newsletter) or John Hassall (details on Steam Fayre paragraph above).

Report of Branch AGM at Dilton Marsh, 6th April 2019

Many of the audience braved replacement buses between Bath and Westbury to hear Graham Ellis' presentation. Unfortunately the Engineering work had not been announced when the hall was booked in January. It has since transpired that a leaflet, The Transformation of the Great Western Railway, listing the dates and location of Engineering work, is available on request from larger GWR stations.

Branch Chair John Hassall read John Betjeman's poem, Dilton Marsh Halt, written in 1974. The reading was suggested by Railfuture Thames Valley Branch Secretary Andrew McCallum, who is Vice-Chairman of the Betjeman Society.

Rail Development across wider Wiltshire

Graham began by describing Wiltshire as a county that long-distance travellers pass through, with London-orientated east-west train services reflecting the location of Government. The only north-south railway in Wiltshire never to have been closed was the Cardiff- Portsmouth route.

He contrasted the inconsistent treatment of Wiltshire's east-west and north-south rail services in the December 2019 GWR Timetable, which would improve the speed and frequency of InterCity London services via Swindon. Intermediate stations on the Berks & Hants (Reading- Westbury- Taunton) line would see a slight improvement but the gap in peak hour trains from Swindon to Chippenham would widen. The only enhancement to Cardiff- Portsmouth was the strengthening of trains to five cars.

The highly successful TransWilts (Swindon-Westbury via Melksham) service would lose one train in each direction from December, "a strange way to treat a line which has done so well." Connections were mentioned only once in DfT's Service Level Commitment document and none of these were in the Wiltshire Council area.

Graham pointed out that Dilton Marsh Halt, as it was called when built in 1937, was the most recent station to be opened (as distinct from reopened) in the county. Yet it currently enjoyed only "curious and perverse services" calling at widely spaced or illogical times of day, unrelated to demand, because historically this had been the cheapest way of meeting Service Level Commitments for stations or routes which did not make much money. Dilton Marsh received the tail end of Bristol commuter services, whereas in the Salisbury direction departures at 07.04 and 10.12, Mondays to Fridays, were too early and too late for normal office hours; the latter train involved a long wait at Warminster. There was a direct train from Frome calling at Dilton Marsh in the afternoon but nothing in the opposite direction. "Do we want more oddball trains? We should instead be encouraging more through journeys, e.g. Swindon- Southampton." Another anomaly were unnatural borders between stations on the same line, e.g. between Bedwyn and Pewsey, which ought to have regular services calling at both. He favoured extending all Bedwyn services to Exeter.

He advised against diluting services, e.g. a train every four hours to Bristol and every four

hours to Swindon, as this was likely to create yet more curious, perverse services. It would be better to have the core service at Dilton Marsh as two-hourly Swindon- Southampton and maximise connections at Westbury for Bath and Bristol. “If you want a new station or line, look at your flows and analyse who would use it. A coordinated view shared by locations is more likely to be listened to than separate differing views.”

An hourly Exeter- Paddington service would enable many aspirations to be met, e.g. westward travel from Bedwyn; the proposed Devizes Parkway station; and better connections at Westbury between Pewsey, Bath and Bristol. Another aspiration was Wilton Parkway, which was originally proposed to have platforms on the GW line only but was now envisaged as a four-platform station, although he admitted that “mission creep could substantially increase the cost.”

Graham said he believed the proposed Swindon- Southampton service to be currently in DfT’s “too difficult pile” owing to a shortage of timetable planners but might be achievable in 2020. “Railfuture and TravelWatch SouthWest must press for it.”

(Post-meeting note: Graham was elected to the Railfuture Board in the recent ballot, the result of which was announced at the National AGM in Cardiff on 18th May 2019.)

Report of TransWilts CIC Annual General Meeting at Trowbridge, 27th April 2019

At TransWilts Community Interest Company’s AGM in Trowbridge Civic Centre, Membership Secretary Bob Morrison said it had celebrated five years of the enhanced train service via Melksham in December. Class 16x Turbo trains had been working the route since January, which was just as well because previously the 17.36 Swindon- Westbury had often been carrying 120 passengers in a one-carriage Class 153 train seating only 75.

It had been a difficult year for the TransWilts line, which had suffered a greatly reduced service when the Berks & Hants line was closed for 60 days to extend electrification from Reading to Newbury. This had resulted in trains between London and the far South West being diverted via Melksham, reducing the TransWilts service to peak hours only, although even this limited service had sometimes failed to operate. The Turbo trains, cascaded from the London area, had arrived in the West of England later than planned, giving less time for staff training. There was a peak of cancellations in the summer of 2018. GWR had identified a 5.3% decrease in passenger numbers on the TransWilts service from 2017/18 to 2018/19, although the Severn Beach line had seen an 11.2% drop over the same period.

TW’s Melksham Masterplan, which would provide additional parking, waiting rooms, a Community Hub and bus interchange at Melksham station, was awaiting planning approval from Wiltshire Council.

Paul Johnson, Chair of TW CIC, said it was seeking retiming of the Swindon-Westbury service in December 2019 to prioritise connections at Westbury with the Cardiff- Portsmouth and Exeter- Paddington routes. Asked about reopening of Corsham station, he said it was in Phase 3 (2024 onwards) of TW’s campaign policy because at present there was no stopping train service which could call there. He believed it would depend on extension of East-West Rail.

Despite GWR’s posters showing the Famous Five riding around the network, he said TW believed young people needed more encouragement to travel by train. “The problem is that parents may travel less by train than the grandparents did. There are still people who don’t know that Melksham has a station. It shows how far we need to go.” He added that Sophie

Martin, TW Community Rail Officer, was working with schools and youth groups to increase awareness of rail travel. This included encouraging youngsters to travel by train to Swindon and on the Weymouth Wizard.

He summed up, saying, “to get the train services needed, we must impress people that Wiltshire is a north-south as well as an east-west corridor. We need to develop Westbury as the hub.”

A speaker from the audience criticised Westbury station as desolate with few facilities, far from shops and cafes. Another said it needed more cross-platform connections; too often platforming appeared to be influenced by operational convenience.

(Reinstatement of the fourth platform, to create two islands, is in Phase 1 of TW’s campaign programme- Ed.)

Cirencester Community Railway

In April 2019 I was approached by one of the promoters of a scheme to reopen the Kemble-Cirencester branch as a light railway. Whilst this does not envisage through running onto the main line at Kemble, the intention is to use the former bay platform to interchange with heavy rail trains. After an exchange of emails, in which I stressed the need to safeguard the former route in local authority Plans, I wrote the following letter to the promoters on behalf of the Railfuture Severnside branch:

“I wish to register Railfuture’s support in principle for the proposed light rail line between Kemble and Cirencester, for the following reasons:

1. Greatly improved connectivity between Cirencester and other parts of the UK.
2. It would improve the accessibility of the Royal Agricultural University and Cirencester College for staff, students and visitors.
3. It would reduce dependence on car transport for people moving into proposed new housing in the Chesterton area.
4. By encouraging people to visit Cirencester without the need for a car, it would reduce road congestion and improve the environment of the town. Some of these passengers may need onward transport, so the scheme may well also improve the economics of bus services between Cirencester and outlying areas.
5. Visitors arriving by public transport are more likely to buy food and drink in local shops because they cannot carry provisions on the scale which a car could accommodate.”

Nigel Bray

Next Railfuture Severnside newsletter will be number 42 in autumn 2019.

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