

*Mike's Message*



**Welcome to the Spring edition of our Newsletter for Wessex Members.** My thanks to our committee and ‘friends’ for their efforts and contributions.

I’ll begin with my usual plea we could do so much more if we had more help from our many members and indeed if every member could recruit at least one extra member. Numbers count when you’re campaigning for change - representing 200 members and users has more impact than 100!

This is one of the issues which came across from some work centred on “Attracting New Members” I volunteered to do for the Railfuture Board to try to improve membership numbers. It became clear the branches with the best success in recruitment were those who had achieved some level of success in campaigning. It always comes back to the fact that we need more effort to be successful.

Many aspects of our “Attracting New Members” report are still being discussed. We concentrated on a combination of reviewing what the organisation does, how it works with branches and user groups and what can we do to make membership more attractive, such as introducing a new ‘e subscription’ package (don’t worry - the old paper one will continue). It also became clear from this work that the board itself is not immune from limited resources and needs some help – so I volunteered to be co-opted to the board for eighteen months. Ironically, I have gone from resigning as Chair of this branch to not only continuing here but stepping up as well.

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It was not entirely unexpected that rail didn’t figure highly on recent announcements from the Government. However, there was support for major infrastructure projects such as East West Rail, Cambridge to Oxford. The Board is drawing up a response to consultations about the future of rail and the proposed Great British Railways. I encourage members to look at the various campaigns on the Railfuture website: <https://www.railfuture.org.uk/Campaigns>

At Wessex Branch, we no longer have formal AGMs. We don’t have sufficient resources to organise these, although we have had occasional committee and friends social afternoons. We are planning our next one for the afternoon of Thursday 5th June at a venue in the Southampton area, and members would be welcome to join us. Please let us know if interested and we will send you details of time and venue nearer the date – *see last page for contact details.*

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## News from around the TOCs



More rolling stock to be cascaded for services in our region: GWR have recently confirmed additional class 175 rolling stock for their services in Devon and Cornwall. This should release additional class 158s to increase the capacity on our GWR lines. This should help to meet the commitment they have made that most services on the Cardiff to Portsmouth line should be made up of a minimum of four coaches.

I recently attended one of GWR's Travel Forum zoom sessions. The mood was very positive. They recognise the shortcomings with the aged rolling stock running on principal services in our area, namely Basingstoke to Reading, Portsmouth to Cardiff and the Heart of Wessex line. Their long-term solution appears to be electric/battery bi modes, but that is some way off.



More rolling stock and capacity good news. From the May timetable there will be an additional 8,200 seats each week between Birmingham, Reading and Bournemouth/Southampton and another 2,400 between Reading and Birmingham. I have been told that everything to/from Bournemouth should now be minimum of five cars or double sets. We have been campaigning for this increase for some time. We continue to raise the issue of additional stops at Brockenhurst especially early morning and evenings, and direct services to the North East. At one stage we had heard that one direct service was being introduced from Southampton to the North East at 07:55. We have now been told this is not possible at this stage. CrossCountry Trains have told us their aspiration remains to extend more trains from the North East to at least Reading. We will continue to push for these to come further south.



Unfortunately, not much to report. The reality is not much is going to change until details are announced of the new management structure. Recent comments to SWR have attracted a redirect to the DfT. Although, we continue to pursue our key message about restoring connectivity, including services to smaller stations who appear to have been worst affected by the post pandemic timetable. There are still rolling stock issues created by the late introduction of the Arterio fleet which has impacted on services in this area, notably more use of nine coach trains (class 450 + 444 formations).

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When travelling back from London recently on the 18:35, a service I used regularly for over twenty years as a commuter, I reflected how my experiences of this train have changed.

When I first started in 1987 it was just after the class 442s Wessex Electrics had been introduced. What luxury from the previous 4REPs and 4TCs: a smooth ride, air conditioning, comfortable seats, a luggage area and a buffet car with a snug area. Nonstop Waterloo to Winchester, full and standing with commuters on their way home.

Compare this to the current 18:35 class 444 which now stops at Basingstoke. No buffet car or trolley, no snug bar and that friendly camaraderie has gone ... along with the many commuters as travelling patterns change. The train now has plenty of spare seating notably on a Friday, although many seats are now occupied by luggage as there are no large bag storage available.

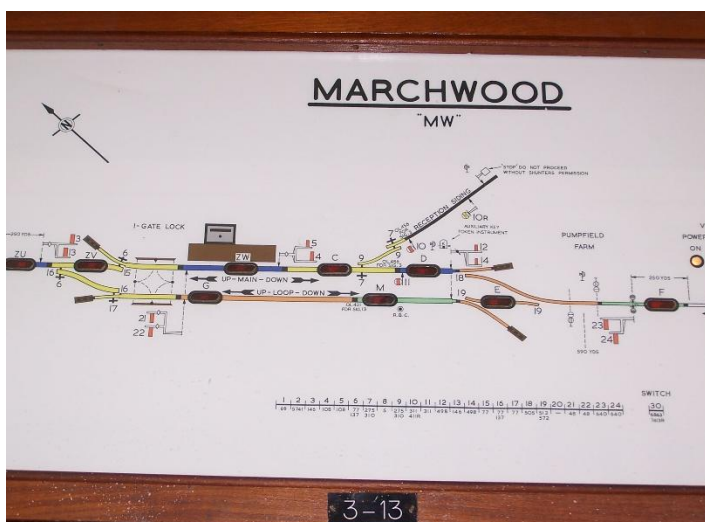
SWR does not appear to have reacted to changed travelling patterns from commuting to more leisure travel. Despite increase off peak passenger numbers we still have fewer off-peak services

than 2019, resulting in lost connections or extended waiting times. We have long suggested that the time is due to rip up the timetable and start again reflecting changed needs, business developments and housing changes. It's not all about London; there is a huge local market opportunity. Yet you can't get a train from Sway to Poole, or St Denys to Winchester without a lengthy and inconvenient change.

The bus market seems to have reacted to this much more favourably. Bluestar has just acquired a whole new bus fleet for its Winchester to Southampton service improving regularity including weekend night buses. Sadly, due to power constraints at the depot these are not yet electric. However, their colleagues on the Isle of Wight and elsewhere are introducing electric buses. Why can't rail react in a similar market led way?

We have also observed that many of the car parks expanded just before the pandemic are now significantly underutilised. Yet the rail company appear to disregard the opportunities to promote off-peak rail travel by reducing parking charges especially for out-of-town stations like Southampton parkway.

## Waterside Line



Part of the illuminated track diagram in Marchwood Signal Box  
Photo: Stuart George

Restoring a passenger services on the Waterside Line (Totton-Marchwood-Hythe) has been top of our priority list ever since I joined Railfuture. The logic seems overpowering, an existing in-use railway line, an area with traffic congestion and poor bus services.

The efforts to restore passenger services championed by Nick Farthing and his Three Rivers CRP group have hit many on/off hurdles. The latest was the decision to cease the Restoring Your Railway scheme, which meant the Waterside Line was once again heading for the buffers.

Many of us had felt that perhaps the problem was the cost and perhaps over spec of the proposed infrastructure changes. I often suggested running a more limited service using the existing infrastructure perhaps terminating at Marchwood to assess demand. Open Access operator Alliance Rail had a similar idea, see <https://www.granduniontrains.co.uk/waterside-line/>. We have spoken with them, given their proposals our support and made some suggestions which may further improve the services they are offering.

It's an exciting and interesting proposal and will meet some of our concerns about regional connectivity as well as providing a service to the Waterside area with plans to go further. If you look at the website you will see more information ...and please note their proposed rolling stock has large luggage storage! The proposal must go through a number of stages with the Office of Rail & Road (ORR) but we await the outcome and reaction of other operators to these proposals.

*Mike Southgate*

## Proposed Mayoral Authority

The Government set out its plans for devolution in England in a White Paper dated Dec 24. One of the areas that successfully applied to be become a Mayoral Combined County Authority was Hampshire and the Solent, an area encompassing four local authorities: Hampshire, Portsmouth, Southampton and the Isle of Wight.

The new authority would have powers in areas that include public transport, and could there-

fore have a beneficial impact on the railway network. For that reason, the Wessex Branch committee considered it appropriate to give the proposal our support in the public consultation that was launched in February.

In our response we thought the new authority could drive forward some of the stalled rail schemes in our area such as the new station for Welborne and the restoration of a passenger service on the Waterside line, especially as mayoral authorities elsewhere had a good track record of unlocking funding for similar projects. There are many quick wins to be had, for example simpler ticketing and better bus-rail (and ferry-rail) integration.

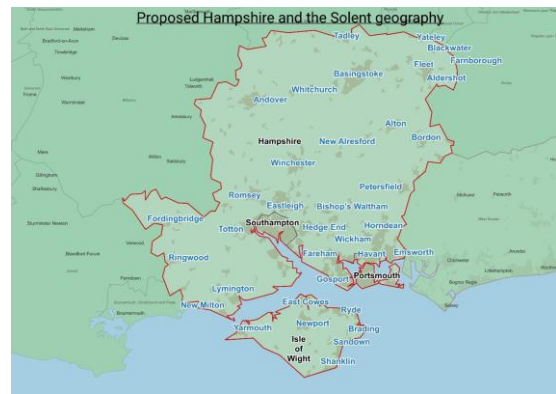
We pointed out that the mayor should have adequate financial resources to bring about real improvements, otherwise the devolution project would soon lack any credibility. We also expressed concern that rural parts of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight might not feel any benefits if the newly-created body is too urban focussed.

## Access for All

The Labour Government has yet to release funding to restart the *Access for All* programme, which would see step-free access being introduced at a further tranche of stations across the network. Among the 50 stations announced by the previous administration in May 2024 for “initial feasibility work” are four in the Wessex area: Dorchester South, Hedge End, Swanwick and Yeovil Junction.

Pokesdown station does not appear on the *Access for All* wish list. This is because the scheme to install lifts at the station (which lies in a deep cutting) was a commitment from First/MTR when they took on the South Western Railway franchise in 2017. Local residents are rightly angry that the Pokesdown project remains stuck at the design phase and are anxious that it may tumble off the end of Boscombe pier when SWR is taken back into public ownership in May 2025. They’ve obviously been giving the new Labour MP for Bournemouth East, Tom Hayes, earache about the issue because he’s taken the trouble to produce a short video assuring everyone that the project is secure and that nationalisation will not impede progress.

Meanwhile in Portsmouth, local MP Stephen Morgan continues to drive forward his campaign to improve access to transport in the city. Earlier this year, Mr Morgan brought together disability activists and leading figures from local transport operators to agree on actions to be taken to tackle the everyday barriers those with disabilities face when travelling. Issues including difficult-to-access ticket machines, steep inclines, limited ticket office opening hours and lack of audio information were identified during the visit. Mr Morgan said “I am determined to continue doing everything I can to bring about improvements in our city to ensure everyone can live their lives without these barriers.”



Map from the consultation page on gov.uk

## West of England Line Study

A new study compiled by transport consultants Greengauge 21 recommends improving the West of England railway line through Salisbury "in the absence of a plan based on road widening". It comes after the proposed A303 road tunnel under Stonehenge was scrapped in July 2024. The report concludes: "It is a railway that fails the most basic tests of meeting passenger needs of service reliability and the ability to get a seat."

The study endorses proposals by Network Rail and South Western Railway to replace life-expired diesel trains with discontinuous electrification. It also favours expanding the line from single to double track between Axminster and Exeter to support more frequent local services. This would also help provide capacity for Great Western Railway services and freight trains to divert from the route between Westbury and Taunton, which is increasingly prone to winter flooding.



Photo: SERUG

At Honiton (*pictured*) extension of the station loop is required to integrate more-frequent "Devon Metro" services into the timetable

The Salisbury to Exeter Rail Users Group (SERUG) says passenger numbers are now far higher than before the Covid pandemic. But spokesman Nick Hurrell observed: "Performance is appalling. There's a target of 90% of trains to run on time. That target has been hit on just one day in the last four months. Over half the trains run late on this line."

## Western Gateway work streams

Western Gateway, the sub-national transport body covering local authority areas from Gloucestershire down to Dorset, has three work streams of interest to us in Railfuture Wessex:



1. They're assessing the feasibility of introducing a 2 trains/hour, all-stations service between Yeovil Junction and Salisbury, alongside performance improvements around Tisbury. This may involve extending the Tisbury Loop by six miles towards Wilton or adding a new platform and extending the loop at Tisbury. The Strategic Outline Business Case is due to be published early Summer 2025.
2. Network Rail has already investigated the potential for an enhanced 1 train/hour service along the Heart of Wessex line between Bristol and Weymouth. Western Gateway is now looking to take the project to Full Business Case.
3. Western Gateway is also exploring, jointly with Dorset Council, options for additional rail services between Wareham and Brockenhurst: an 'all stations' service and/or a 'limited stop' service. This may require interventions such as new platforms, track, and footbridge works at Bournemouth. The Strategic Outline Business Case is due to be published late Spring 2025.

Wessex Branch member Alastair Smith, who is also Chair of the Friends of Sway Station, comments: "Journeys to Poole are awkward and tedious now that the stopping service terminates at Bournemouth instead of running on to Poole. The previous 35 min journey time is now around 50 - 55 minutes. Cross-conurbation connectivity for the Bournemouth area certainly needs improving."

## *Island Line trains return to Pier Head*

The Island Line will reopen in full from Ryde Pier Head to Shanklin on Friday 2 May 2025 with the same 40 minute interval timetable as last summer. It had been a 30 minute interval timetable between Ryde Esplanade and Shanklin since October for work to be completed on the Ryde Rail Pier. There will be a shutdown of the entire line from 26 April to 1 May before the full reopening on 2 May.

The 40 minute interval service from May has the big advantages of reliability and a through service, but the big disadvantages of at least half the Island Line trains failing to make good connections with the either the hourly FastCat service or the half-hourly bus service between Shanklin and Ventnor.

Island Line users continue to press for a reversion to the 60MPH speed limit which applied previously between Brading and Smallbrook Jn, which would allow a 30 minute interval service. Network Rail allowed the speed limit to be reduced to 45MPH in contravention of their contract.

## *Welborne Station update*

SLC Rail Ltd advised Fareham Borough Council last year that best value for money would be achieved if a rail halt at Welborne opened in the 2030s rather than 2020s, given the location allocated is in the south west corner of Welborne, which is likely to be developed for housing late in the development. The consultants also advised that any station built should initially use a single-track solution, implementing a station platform constructed in such a way as to be easily moved out should a second track be deemed important at a later date.

Railfuture Wessex committee member (and Fareham resident) Alan Mayes says "I would have preferred to have the new railway station early in the development but I've always thought that it would be easier in a few years from now as the site will be more developed so the need for the new railway station will be clearer."

## *Wareham Pedestrian Crossing update*

The electrically-operated gates protecting the pedestrian level crossing just east of Wareham station continue to be operated by Dorset Council personnel from a small cabin alongside, seven days a week during railway service hours. The Council was pressing for closure of the crossing, to be mitigated by the addition of long ramps to the existing brick footbridge, but the new Lib Dem administration has altered its stance to one of neutrality in the face of vociferous protests from the community. Network Rail had been threatening closure of the crossing on safety grounds by 2038 (when a right-of-way agreement expires), but have now relented and proposed a rolling agreement with the Council to keep it open.

Wessex Branch secretary, Tony Smale, says: "That's all well and good, but the £120,000 annual cost of paying for staff to operate the gates remains. And it presents a further obstacle to the Swanage Railway achieving its objective of running a regular shuttle service on to the main line at Wareham. SR trains cannot access the turnback siding on the "up" side of the pedestrian crossing without a safety case from NR, which they will not grant until the crossing is closed or made safe!"

Further up the line at Poole High Street, there's another pedestrian crossing threatened with closure on safety grounds. It's unclear why this far busier crossing is allowed to operate without someone on duty to oversee the crowds of people passing over, as at Wareham. A long-term solution here involves extensive remodelling of the shopping centre which would include a high-level walkway. Proposals come and go, but there are never sufficient funds to get things moving.

## Robin's Freight Roundup

Robin Attwood sends us the latest news of freight movements around our area...

Hamworthy branch (*pictured*) - remains Out of Use.

Ludgershall MoD - nothing observed.

Marchwood MoD - busy at times with Ministry of Defence traffic, engineers' traffic and the odd traffic to/from London Gateway and Southampton Western Docks via Eastleigh East yard.

Southampton Eastern Docks -regular automotive traffic, Morris Cowley MAT and return.

Container traffic remains steady with twice weekly Barry Docks Dow Chemicals to/from Southampton Western Docks and occasional trains from Portbury Auto Terminal.

Aggregate traffic remains steady with services to/from Mendip quarries/Westbury to Fareham, Botley, Eastleigh Aggregates, Southampton Up yard and Woking.



Renewing the crossover onto the Hamworthy branch in May 2022

*photo: Jeff Yeoman*

## Other News in Brief

Representatives from the Campaign for Better Transport were in **Bournemouth** in January, meeting up with BCP council officers to look at potential routes for a tramway. Their purpose was to assess the opportunities for a tram system as well as the barriers which need to be overcome. The CBT press release says: "with a new Integrated National Transport Strategy on the horizon, could this succeed where previous attempts failed? Is it now time for trams?" The associated policy paper can be found on the CBT website: <https://bettertransport.org.uk/resources/policy/>

Celebrations took place at **Dorchester South** station early in April to mark the completion of improvement works which included new platform shelters, an enlarged waiting room and a remodelled frontage with wheelchair-friendly access ramp. Among the VIPs at the unveiling was the MP for West Dorset, Edward Morello, who made his mark by planting a shrub in the station's new flower bed. (*All very welcome but, as mentioned above, the project to install a new footbridge with lifts remains on hold until Access for All funding is forthcoming - Ed*).

Local authorities have rejected pleas to help fund the work needed to reinstate the **Hythe-Southampton ferry service**, which has been suspended since last August. A mooring pontoon at the end of Hythe Pier needs to be replaced with a new structure that would cost £250,000. Hythe county councillor Malcolm Wade has written to councils and MPs on both sides of Southampton Water in a bid to raise some of the revenue needed to fund the project. But Southampton City Council and New Forest District Council have both declined to make a contribution. (*We believe that the perfect solution for Waterside is a combination of the reopened railway line integrated with a good bus and ferry service, serving different localities and with passenger needs dependent on the final destination*).

At the Community Rail Network's **2025 Community Rail Awards** ceremony in Newcastle on 13 Mar, only one prize (3<sup>rd</sup> prize in the Tourism & Leisure category) came to station adopters in the Wessex area: the Blackmore Vale Line CRP who teamed up with others on the Salisbury-Exeter line to produce a new Rail Ale Trail. Although unlucky, the Friends of Brockenhurst Station were shortlisted for an award in the Influencing Positive Change category with their Lymington Hospital Connectivity Study.

South Western Railway has teamed up with the nationwide luggage-carrying company Sherpr to offer a door-to-door luggage service which they've branded **SWR Luggage Buddy**: "With prices starting at £22, your luggage will be collected from home by a courier and delivered directly to your chosen destination. Domestic deliveries are next-day, and international deliveries take a little longer as they must clear customs."

New research from the **Department for Transport** shows that leisure is now the most common reason for travelling by train. 54% of respondents said they were travelling for leisure, 30% were commuting for work or education and 15% were travelling for business. Furthermore 61% said they travelled by rail for leisure at least once a month.

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*.

### *Branch Contacts*

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