

RAILFUTURE WESSEX BRANCH

NEWSLETTER SUMMER 2014

Welcome to our summer 2014 Newsletter.

At national level Railfuture has some significant names with Christian Woolmer our president and Ian Brown and Chris Austin both with substantial railway experience and knowledge to the extent that Railfuture is considered to have a respected view on many aspects of the changing national railway and our views are often looked for in relation to franchising and potential re-openings of railways.

To be truly representative organisation we need more members especially females and young people so please do try to recruit friends, relations and anyone who is interested in improving the railways.

Locally, branch membership is over 100 and we have recruited two new committee members. Two longer term committee members, Stuart (IOW) and Brain (Gosport) have recently had major operations and it is good to report they are both making good recoveries. Your (small) committee recognises the need to find ways to be more active at a time when there is growing interest in the resurgence of railways as an effective way to move people and freight but we need your help to do it. Ideas will be welcome.

Joint Meeting with the Severnside Branch 5th July Trowbridge

We share a common northern boundary with the Severnside Branch and two groups of services cross the boundary (Cardiff to Portsmouth and Bristol to Weymouth). Severnside are the nominated branch for reviewing the Great Western group of services and we liaise with them. They therefore also have an interest in a third group of services, the Basingstoke to Reading stopping services that link to the Wessex area. As you may know, the tender process for renewing the First Great Western franchise was suspended last year and the existing franchise was extended. The DfT have now issued a consultation document to consider what to do next. We are working with the Severnside Branch to try and ensure that the groups of services crossing our mutual boundary reflect what our rail users want. As part of this exercise we plan to meet with Severnside on Saturday 5th July at Trowbridge and you are all welcome to attend and give your views. The meeting will start at 14.00 in Bridge House, immediately adjacent to the station.

Salisbury – Exeter The vital artery A possible campaign for doubling the track?

The commuter line ceases at Salisbury after which it becomes a leisure route albeit linking 11 towns to London and Exeter. The trains (class 159 DMUs) are nearly 25 years old. The franchise run by SWT will be up for renewal in 2019.

In the Beeching era sections of the line were singled (with some passing loops) between Wilton and Templecombe and most of it from Yeovil Junction to Exeter.

The alliance between Network Rail and SWT looks after the infrastructure, but west of Salisbury there has been little improvement and it looks tired. It appears work on this section has been delayed or cancelled. Signalling was however renewed in 2012/13.

Usage has increased by about 10% between 2011 and 2012 and still increases. 3 car trains struggle in the summer with luggage on seats and passenger disaffection. At least 6 car sets are required.

Railway resilience was tested last winter when Taunton and Devon were isolated, the Dawlish sea wall collapsed, flooding at Cowley Bridge and Whiteball Tunnel plus flooding of the Taunton – Castle Cary, and Taunton – Bridgewater routes.

FGW ran some trains (HST's) from Exeter St Davids via Axminster and Yeovil Junction to regain the main line at Castle Cary. Not easy for HST's with mainly single line working. Many SWT timetabled trains were amended to cope.

However doubling of the line, perhaps as phase 1 Yeovil Junction to Exeter and phase 2 Templecombe to Wilton (Outskirts of Salisbury) would give, better journey times, resilience for the FGW west line, further journey opportunities and hopefully a better integrated interchange with FGW trains at Salisbury. It may also improve the Devon access and resilience plan being carried out by Network Rail to mitigate the Dawlish sea wall issue. Plymouth to Waterloo and Brighton again?

Railfuture Wessex Branch along with Severnside are considering whether to promote a campaign to double this section and increase its profile.

What do you think?

Visit to SWT Train Maintenance Depot (TMD) Salisbury

To have a better understanding of how our trains are serviced and maintained, we plan to make a visit to the TMD at Salisbury. This depot has earned an enviable reputation for the high standards it achieves with what are now the quite elderly Class 159 fleet of diesel multiple units used on the West of England services between London and Exeter. With less need for them at weekends the Class 159 units are also being used by UK Railtours for excursions to such places as Swanage, Portsmouth (for the Isle of Wight) and Axminster (for the Seaton Tram).

We have asked SWT to facilitate an RfW Branch visit on an autumn Saturday and will provide details if/when we get approval.

David Brace
Chairman