

# Railfuture Summer Conference 2008 Salisbury

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## Graham Ellis “Save the Train”

This is the presentation given to attendees of the *Railfuture* conference by Graham Ellis.

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### Rail is practical, modern, effective

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I travel in my work; last Monday and Tuesday, I was in Bristol. Wednesday I was in Melksham, Wiltshire. Thursday and Friday in Central London, today I'm in Salisbury and tomorrow evening I'll be making my way up to Cambridge.

10 years ago, I drove and I enjoyed driving. But things have changed - the enjoyment has been sucked out of driving by the congestion of roads, and a busying life cycle has lead me to resent the waste of time that's involved in sitting behind the wheel. I'm preparing this talk, at around twenty past seven on Thursday morning - seated in a train on my way from Hungerford into London; I'll arrive fresh, and having made productive use of my time too. Travel by train is practical, and it's a pleasure.

But it's also a problem.

### ... but you need an appropriate service.

I live in the town of Melksham - which has a population of around 24000 and is rapidly growing, and within walking distance of the station. But it's a station with few trains. Miss the 07:17 to Swindon in the morning, and your next service is at 19:50. Or miss the 06:15 from Swindon to come to Melksham and you'll have to wait for the 18:45. And your ticket to London will set you back 115 pounds for the day. I think they're calling that an "any time" ticket now - but I seriously question whether that is truthful under the advertising standards laws.

### An appropriate service can be provided and will be used

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It wasn't always like this - Melksham is the fifth largest population centre in Wiltshire, after the Swindon area, Salisbury (where I am presenting this talk), Chippenham and Trowbridge, and in 2001, Wessex Trains stepped up the minimal commuter service from West Wiltshire (that's Westbury, Trowbridge, Warminster and Frome as well as Melksham) to Swindon to five trains a day. And the trains carried on south to Salisbury, Romsey and Southampton providing a really useful series of links and connections. Of course, it takes time to change habits and (with a lack

of advertising) for people to even discover the new services but from a service that started carrying more fresh air than passengers in May 2001, we had stepped up to a service that I describe as "nesting" - nearly every seat taken - by November 2006.

Sound like a success story? Yes, it does / was. According to the Office of the Rail Regulator, their measure of traffic (they offered me ticket sales for journeys to / from Melksham, served only by the line) grew at 35% compound over five years. That works out as an increase of nearly ten-fold. But there was a problem.

## **But appropriate services can be meddled with**

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The line ran under a franchise that was due to expire, with a new franchisee starting on 1st April 2006.

Statistics on which the service from 2006 to 2015 was to be based were gathered years ahead - very shortly after the service changes of 2001 and before it had a chance to bed in. And a growth forecast of 0.8% per annum was assumed. And based on these figures (and against their own expert report which recommended a 2-hourly service), it was proposed to withdraw all the trains except a single 'peak' train into Swindon, a single 'peak' return, and one other journey each way that could be run at a time of the train operator's choice.

## **... and destroyed**

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This was hidden on page 52 of a specification of over 100 pages that didn't come to early general attention - and indeed the first I heard about it was in August 2005 - a letter in my local paper said "do you realise that you have MISSED the consultation on the First Great Western Franchise and that Melksham will lose most of its trains in December 2006"

And so it proved to be, in spite of a valiant rear-guard action.

Actually, what we have is much worse than the DfT's specification.

The "peak" definition used for this line was too wide - but not wide enough for the new Train Operating Company. So - after a lengthy consultation exercise in early 2006 where the local input suggested an in-specification arrival and departure from Swindon for the peak train, and a reverse service that really was time to be a service and not just a balancing movement, we got the opposite.

## **A Mad, bad service is no use at all**

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Have you ever heard of providing a train service without actually having a train to provide it? That's what First are doing on the "TransWilts". The morning train is so early that it uses a unit borrowed off the Stroud Valley line when it's not needed there. So hardy commuter from West Wilts arrive in Swindon and have completed their journey before the commuters from Swindon, Kemble, Stroud and Stonehose have even started theirs to Gloucester / Cheltenham. And in the evening, those commuters must wait until the commuters to the Stroud Valley from Gloucester

have got home and are sitting in front of their TVs before they can even start their journey home.

## **And the system encourages a mad, bad service**

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Was this allowed by the DfT's specification? No, it wasn't. But curiously, after all the consultations and after we had pointed out that the proposed service was out of specification ... the Specification changed. Is that DaFT or what?

Current service. From Swindon at 06:15 and 18:45. From Westbury at 07:00 and 19:35.

## **The major players don't look out for the user**

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"Save the Train" - a campaign group that's associated with the service on the "TransWilts" was set up too late in the day.

The SRA and the DfT had already sneaked in their cuts in the specification and the consultation time had elapsed before we got wind of the issue.

First had - whether intentionally or not - bid against a franchise specification that was quite simply wrong in terms of even the current traffic, let alone the growth forecast (you have only to look at how unstuck they came on other "West Fleet" lines for confirmation of this!

And the local transport authority - Wiltshire County Council - would scarcely even admit to having any rail responsibility - do you remember George Orwell's "Four legs good, two legs bad". How about "Rubber on Tarmac good, Steel on steel bad"?

## **So there's a need for users and wannabe users to say "hey"**

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What are the objectives of the campaign?

Firstly - to raise awareness of the TranWilts service, and issues involved in the provision of an appropriate service.

Second - to get that case reviewed by the professionals and experts to evaluate what would be an appropriate service.

Third - to work with all appropriate parties to step towards that appropriate service, should it turn out to be different to the current service.

# Some steps have been taken ...

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Where have we got?

1. This issues are, undoubtedly, much better known about now.
2. Evaluations by Wiltshire County Council, First Great Western, and discussions with senior civil servants at the Department for Transport have resulted in a consensus that the current service is woefully inadequate; an appropriate service is of the order of a train every hour or two, with especial attention needed to improving the timings of the service to meet certain key flows that it currently fails to serve adequately.
3. First Great Western have provided a draft timetable for a much improved service which could run from this coming December. The service has been validated by Network Rail, and endorsed by user groups. Over 500 people, including the parliamentary candidates for all three major parties for the new Chippenham / (incl. Melksham) seat, and around 80 other representatives, have signed up in support.

## But we hit the profit motive and other agendas

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But First want money. The Dft say it's up to the county. The county says trains are funded at a National Level and that they don't "do" trains financially - whilst at the same time coming up with the most frequent of the options as "appropriate" and spending more on a single official's salary that First asked for in February.

I was of the opinion that one of the roles of local government is to adjust the central policies, within laid down limits, to suit the local conditions. We see this in Devon. We see this in the Bristol area. But Wiltshire County Council has sat firm for three years.

## Cynical raising of prices to say "we really don't want to do this"

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And First change their mind over how much money they want too! In February it was 110k per annum - on 2006 traffic levels that would be a subsidy of less than a pound per passenger journey - or about 3p per passenger mile (and the government, elsewhere, has subsidised at over 40p per mile) . Then in May they put the price up to around 330k per annum ... and whilst the figure may be a sane one, the 300% price rise in 3 months is enough to scare off any potential payer - wondering just what they are getting in to.

## Delaying tactics

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We're now in the "dog days" of summer. I emailed my main contacts in the few days prior to this presentation to get an update on what's going on, and I have an impressive set of "out of

office" notices that I could show you. I have a very uneasy feeling that - come September - we're going to be reminded that it takes a long time to get things done in the rail industry, that we must be patient and try again next year. And I find myself becoming more and more of a conspiracy theorist.

## **The Occasional honesty about agendas ...**

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I'm reminded of the words of an office at the Government Office who described his job as "Managing Expectations".

## **... and two hidden agendas**

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I'm reminded of the words of the Regional Manager at First Great Western, telling me he had a "cunning plan" to deal with the TransWilts issue.

And I'm reminded that the County Council's cabinet member for transport is heavily supporting the case for a major bypass for her town (34 million pounds of taxpayer's money) on a road parallel to the "TransWilts" railway line - improvements on which would undoubtedly help to ease congestion and lessen her case.

## **REMEMBER - the case for the user and wannabe user**

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The TransWilts line links the five largest population centres in Wiltshire. Traffic grew, compound, 35% per annum from 2001 to 2006. There are six SSTC (strategically significant cities and towns) along the 40 mile route, slated to grow under government plans by up to 50% in size over the next 20 years.

The road network is already clogged, and the Wiltshire infrastructure such that journeys are slow. The "express" bus from Trowbridge - the county town - to Swindon, the largest population centre and a route on which progressively more journeys are made, takes 95 minutes. You'll take an hour to drive it. Or 35 minutes by train if you happen to want to travel at 07:06 or 19:41.

Common sense says that a train Swindon to West Wilts and then Salisbury every 2 to 3 hours would make sense. Technical evaluations by the experts confirm it. But we seem to have a mechanism and vested interests working in favour of road building, of maximising profit, and of repressing public demand.

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*Since I wrote this article, I have received the following email from Richard Rowland, First Great Western's Regional Manager for London and Thames Valley ...*

In Andrew Griffiths' absence I am looking after Wiltshire issues. We have put together a business case for an increase in services unfortunately it has a significant cost to it which is not covered by the revenue gained. We would also need to source a unit for the work which is not impossible but would have a lead time to it. As such this project is not currently being progressed further. We would be willing to review the business case if external funding support was available to fill the gap between costs and revenues but to date we have not been able to achieve this.

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