

NEWSLETTER THIRTY ONE – DECEMBER 2020

December timetable sees evening trains re-introduced

GWR introduces its new timetable from the 13th December. For the TransWilts it will mean the return of the two evening trains which were withdrawn at the height of the virus. The 17:50 from Gloucester to Southampton Central (18:52 from Swindon) and the 20:06 Westbury to Cheltenham Spa will fill the mid-evening gap in services after the rush hour.

GWR and Network Rail are working to get engineering projects and driver training back on track after the disruption of the last few months. As a result trains in some areas will finish earlier on a Saturday night and start later on a Sunday morning. However following negotiations between GWR and TransWilts and other groups it has been possible to replace the first train on a Sunday from Warminster to Swindon with a bus. This will run all the way to Swindon and arrive before 10am. This is for an initial three month period after which it is hoped the train can be reintroduced.

Lessons Learned



In the early hours of Sunday 11th October Network Rail contractors working on the drainage at Melksham Station damaged a cable. Signalling records did not indicate the presence of the cable and it was thought it was no longer in use. However when the line was re-opened to trains just over 24 hours later it was discovered that some of the signalling was not working and services were disrupted.

Due to the lack of accurate records and fact the cable was damaged at several locations it took until the end of Wednesday 14th before repairs were completed. In the meantime some trains were diverted via Bathampton Junction (thus missing Melksham) or cancelled outright.

TransWilts has held talks with both GWR and Network Rail and a number of lessons have been learned should similar problems occur in the future. In particular an on call system has been introduced to alert TransWilts as soon as problems are anticipated. Several trains have been identified as key services which should be run if at all possible at times of disruption and better advertising of replacement road replacement.

The new plan was first tested at the end of last month. On the Sunday afternoon of 29th November GWR advised TransWilts that sickness meant the first round trip from Westbury to Swindon and back on the Monday morning would not run. A replacement bus was laid on and attention drawn to it via Twitter and Facebook on the Sunday evening.

Travelling at Christmas?

With the Government allowing greater freedom to meet and travel over Christmas, Network Rail and the train operators have been looking at planned engineering work and on board capacity.

On Christmas Eve a normal service will run on the TransWilts until early evening. Then the 18:52 from Swindon will only run as far as Westbury rather than Southampton Central while the 20:06 from Westbury will terminate at Gloucester and not Cheltenham Spa. No services will run on Christmas Day or the 26th December. Services resume on the 27th with a modified Sunday service. The 09:12 from Swindon to Westbury will not run but a Paddington to Plymouth service will call at Swindon (09:04), Chippenham (09:16) and Westbury (09:37). In addition the 17:45 from Swindon to Westbury will continue to Weymouth. Then between the 28th and 1st January there will be a near normal service except some early morning journeys will not run. Full details are now available from on line journey planners.

Further afield on the 27th December when services resume after Christmas the eastern approaches to Bristol Temple Meads will be closed with trains from Swindon and Chippenham terminating at Bath Spa.

Melksham Line on TV

The work behind the scenes to remove the commercial marquee which blew onto the single line in August mentioned in the last newsletter was featured on Channel 5's Paddington 24/7. If you missed it you can still see it on the channel's catch-up service.

In October the cable damage (see front page) contributed to most of the 37 cancellations recorded by the Melksham Rail Users Group during the month. They were among the 467 services due to run. Of the remainder 274 ran on time.

In November 353 of the 449 planned trains ran on time with only four cancellations.

Roger Newman – West Wilts Rail Users Group

The TransWilts was sorry to learn of the death of long time rail campaigner Roger Newman late last month. The 83 year old was a former chairman of the WWRUG and had a passion for local history in Trowbridge where he had lived since 1973. He organised the regular WWRUG meetings and was able to attract an impressive list of speakers over the years. He also edited their regular members' newsletter.

We send our condolences to his wife and son.

Still friends

A thank you to the many members who have renewed their friend's subscription which expired at the end of October. Your continued support is most welcome.

Melksham Hub Update



Work has continued on the Melksham Hub over the last two months but progress did slow down due to the bad weather and the latest lockdown.

Signage has arrived ready for placing on site and equipment has been sourced from the now closed Arts House Café in Melksham along with some volunteers who previously worked there. It is hoped the fitting out of the kitchen will be completed by the end of January.



In the car park the first of the charging points is now live with others to follow once the electrical work is complete.

Sadly no Santa Train

The current restrictions mean it is not possible to run our Santa event this year however it is hoped to circulate some Christmas Goodies to local schools.

Passenger numbers hit by second lockdown

The numbers using TransWilts services continued to rise in September and October reaching around 40 percent of those who were travelling this time last year. That compared with other local lines where the fall was marked.

As expected the second lockdown saw numbers fall back again to around 34% in the first fortnight of the new restrictions.

The lower numbers have helped those who are travelling to keep their distance from fellow passengers but capacity could become an issue at peak times when commuters travel alongside schoolchildren.

Poppies to Paddington



The TransWilts was enormously proud to be invited to take part in GWR's Poppies to Paddington event for Remembrance Day. With many ceremonies cancelled, GWR arranged for over 100 wreaths to be carried on their trains for a special service next to the war memorial on platform 1 at Paddington.

The service, which was livestreamed on Facebook, featured contributions from GWR interim MD Matthew Golton and video of some of the trains named as part of its VE Day 75 commemorations.

TW Chairman Paul Johnson hands over the TW wreath at Chippenham Station

Usage figures show the first effects of Covid

The Office of Rail and Road has published its annual survey of footfall at railway stations based on ticket sales.

The latest figures cover the period from 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020 and so include the first few weeks of the period when non-essential rail travel was discouraged. Despite that Westbury showed an annual rise of 1.65% and Melksham just over 1%. Swindon, Chippenham and Trowbridge all showed falls of less than 2%.

75,292 journeys started or ended at Melksham while at Swindon the figure was 3,713,738.

Mark Hopwood returns to GWR

After a year in temporary charge of South Western Railway, Mark Hopwood is to resume his job as Managing Director of GWR in January. Matthew Golton, who has been holding the reins in his absence will now be seconded to First Group headquarters to work on its future rail businesses.

Season's Greetings

At the end of a year like no other in most people's lives all at TransWilts would like to wish you season's greetings and a hope for a much better outlook in 2021.

The CIC stands ready to help encourage a return to rail as conditions allow and looks forward to welcoming you to the new Melksham Hub as soon as possible.



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