TransWilts Connecting Wiltshire's Communities

incorporating TransWilts Community Rail Partnership

NEWSLETTER FIFTY FIVE – DECEMBER 2024

SEE BACK PAGE FOR NEWS OF EXTENSIVE FORTHCOMING ENGINEERING WORK

More Chippenham station improvements underway

After delays, new contractors for the improvement project on the south side of Chippenham Station have been appointed. Work is due to be completed over the next six months. The end product will include better sited bus stops, improved pedestrian access, a cycle hub and more blue badge parking. This follows the improvements made to the north side in 2022 which saw a new lift installed to connect with the existing overbridge.

Go ahead given for new Swindon to Taunton service

The rail regulator has given approval for a new service linking Swindon, Weston-super-Mare and Taunton via Melksham, in competition with GWR.

For more than ten years, Go-op has been looking to start a service in the mid west with various terminal points. The Office of Rail and Road (ORR) has consulted with other industry partners and has agreed to offer them a contract subject to assurances on the provision of rolling stock and raising the finance for the necessary improvements to a number of level crossings on the route.

Go-op hopes to start services in 12 months' time and have permission to run 11 return journeys each weekday over all or part of the route between Taunton and Swindon with eight return trips at weekends. Between Swindon and Westbury they would share space on the single line through Melksham with GWR, who opposed the application over concerns about capacity and revenue abstraction. Go-op were also unable to agree track access with Network Rail but the ORR has over-ruled these concerns subject to the level crossing improvements and some minor timetable changes.

The group plans to use single carriage class 153 units – which were used on the Swindon to Westbury service when it was first enhanced in December 2013. Maintenance would be carried out at a new facility at Thingley Junction near Chippenham.

TransWilts Chair, Paddy Bradley, has welcomed the news saying: "I look forward to working with the company and entering into future discussions. It is good to see new travel opportunities being offered to people in Wiltshire and TransWilts hopes to receive more details in due course."

Plans unveiled to revamp Swindon station area

Swindon Borough Council has announced details to redevelop around 100 acres of land around the town's railway station.

The inaugural meeting of the Swindon Knowledge Central scheme was chaired by Swindon South MP Heidi Alexander and talked about ways to redevelop the unused land into a new commercial, educational and residential area. It is hoped this will create many new jobs and an estate of new homes.

Partners include the Council, Network Rail, LCR Property, GWR, UK Research and Innovation, University of Bath, Business West, Homes England, Department for Business and Trade, and Western Gateway.

Cllr Jim Robbins, Leader of Swindon Borough Council said "The Board is determined to seize this huge opportunity to transform the area around Swindon station which has the potential to create new high quality jobs and homes within the Heart of Swindon. There is real momentum after the completion of the first phase which saw the Council's co-investment with the Universities of Oxford and Bath in a new national R&D centre in green technologies at the Carriage Works. This project is just one of the ways that private and public sector partners are collaborating on a shared vision to create a vibrant future for Swindon town centre." The plan supports the government's economic growth focus and housing and development agenda and is also one of the propositions within the council's Vision for the Heart of Swindon.

Long standing Severnside Community Rail Partnership Chair to step down

Keith Walton, the chair of the Severnside Community Rail Partnership has announced his retirement after 20 years of leading the organisation.

After a spell at the Department for Transport he was the inaugural chair of the Partnership which promotes the use of rail in the Bristol area. Along with the TransWilts, it is one of 70 such organisations around the country.

One of the biggest successes during his tenure has been the increase in passengers on the Severn Beach line. Frequency has risen to half hourly for much of the day and usage has been boosted by more than 300% to 1,800,000 a year.

He was awarded the MBE in the last New Years Honours list for services to Urban Rail in Bristol.

Reacting to the news Paddy Bradley, chair of TransWilts, said "The area has gained from Keith's interest and knowledge of rail and public travel in general."

His influence will not be lost as he intends to remain as a director going forward.

TransWilts joins GWR Remembrance Event

For the fifth year Great Western Railway (GWR) has staged its Poppies to Paddington event to mark the sacrifices made by so many in the two World Wars and other conflicts and again TransWilts was honoured to be asked to take part.

Justin Bishop from the Swindon Station Adoption Group joined the town's two MPs, Borough Mayor, the Lord-Lieutenant of Wiltshire and other dignitaries to put wreaths on board a train bound for London on Armistice Day.

A total of ten trains, including the Night Riviera sleeper service from Penzance, brought hundreds of wreaths from across the GWR network ahead of a special service around the 11am silence on Platform 1 at Paddington.

The service also marked the 80th anniversary of D-Day and the bi-centenary of the RNLI, whose lifeboat volunteers helped carry wreaths onto the trains at many of the 90 stations where ceremonies were held.

Swindon scouts smarten up town's railway station.

Members of the 12th Swindon (Old Town) Scouts braved the wintery temperatures to give the front of Swindon railway station a spruce-up.

For an hour, with temperatures hovering around freezing point, they cheerfully worked around the forecourt and car parks picking up litter and fallen leaves.

At the end of the evening they had filled half a dozen bin bags with things that had been discarded around the place. It included 167 cigarette ends – we know, Rufus counted them!

Siemens wins approval for new Chippenham base

TransWilts volunteer partner Siemens Mobility has been granted planning permission for a £100 million manufacturing, research and development centre at Southpoint Business Park south of Chippenham. It is hoped construction will be completed by 2026.

The complex will also include testing facilities for new railway signalling technology and replace their existing base in the town's Langley Park. The company says it needs to move as the constraints of the current buildings prevent it expanding and remaining economically viable.

Siemens Mobility Joint CEO Rob Morris said: "This £100 million investment is a strong commitment to Chippenham and our country. Siemens Mobility's Chippenham site, along with our 30 sites across the country, has been transforming rail travel and transport in Britain – and it will continue to do so with cloud-based rail technology connecting the real and the digital worlds, digitalizing rail."

Over the last 12 months Siemens Mobility has been part of Community Rail Network's volunteering project and has provided staff locally for a number of initiatives including a TransWilts organised litter pick at Trowbridge in February. TransWilts is very pleased to have representation from Siemens Mobility on its Board.

TransWilts welcomes Network Rail study

TransWilts Community Rail Partnership (TWCRP) is pleased to see the publication of the first stage in developing a strategic plan for rail in Wiltshire.

The Wiltshire Rail Strategic Study, developed by Network Rail and key stakeholders, including TWCRP, outlines a set of proposals to form the basis of strategic rail planning in Wiltshire. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0j8p2d85ndo The next stage in this work is to test out the proposals before identifying the most feasible projects to take forward backed by robust business cases.

We are delighted the report is highlighting the need to enhance local services on the TransWilts route via Melksham and to upgrade track and signalling infrastructure, such as in Westbury and Melksham to accommodate more services and improve connections at Westbury. We are committed to increasing the number of people using rail and other means of public transport and so the inclusion of existing proposals to build new stations at Devizes and Corsham is very welcome. Whilst building stations is a costly business, we support both stations to assist the economic gains to be had from population growth and business interest in those areas as well as the environmental benefits in reducing carbon emissions.

TransWilts and its partners will continue to contribute to the work to create a deliverable strategic plan for rail in Wiltshire. We welcome this first stage and its proposals to improve connectivity and transport links both within Wiltshire and to key locations beyond the County.

Thanks for renewing

TransWilts would like to thank all those who have renewed their memberships over the past few weeks. If you have received a reminder and have yet to send your cheque we would be grateful if you could so as soon as possible to avoid additional administration.

TW President remembered

Former TransWilts President Peter Blackburn and his wife Margaret were remembered in a simple ceremony in Melksham on 25th October 2024.

Organised by the Melksham Transport Users' Group, a bench was unveiled in the King George V Playing fields in a ceremony attended by family and friends. Peter and Margaret, who passed away within five months of each other in 2022, were very much involved in the local community. Peter was a board member and President of TransWilts, Chairman of the Melksham Railway Development Group, supported local hockey and a Chairman of the local Federation of Small Businesses to name a few. Margaret supported him in those roles as well as working at the local Tourist Information Centre and local Women's Institute.

Peter always had time to stop and talk with people on any subject you could imagine, so it is appropriate he will be remembered with a bench inviting people to be "Happy to Chat".

The bench is a stone's throw from Peter and Margaret's final home in Melksham. It invites people to sit a while and talk, either amongst friends or with strangers.

(Pictured: Richard and Mike Blackburn remembering their parents)

Passenger numbers rise in Wiltshire

An extra 830,000 people travelled in and out of Wiltshire's 13 railway stations between April 2023 and March 2024 according to figures published by the Office for Rail and Road. (ORR)

Additional services calling at Dilton Marsh saw its usage rise by almost 60% to 19,300 passengers.

All areas were affected by industrial action during the year but the continuing reliability problems resulting in cancellations depressed the figures for Melksham. It was the only station locally to see a fall, down from 64,206 to 63,350 – a drop of just over 1%.

Swindon remains the most used station in the historic country of Wiltshire, with over 2.8 million – an increase of just over 9%.

In separate figures compiled by GWR figures for October show nearly 20,000 people used TransWilts trains. That is a rise of 11 percent on the same month last year. In 2023 services were hit by industrial action on a number of days while this year cancellations had a similar effect on the number of trains running.

Despite the encouraging rise, the numbers are still down on passenger numbers recorded before the pandemic.

ENGINEERING ROUND UP

Extensive work by Network Rail will affect GWR services throughout December and January.

Among the proposed works…..

TransWilts services - Tuesday 10th to Thursday 12th December

The line between Newbury and Westbury will be closed for improvement work with long distance trains to and from the West Country being diverted via Melksham. As a result the usual Swindon to Westbury service will be severely affected. A morning train will run from Westbury in the morning and back in the evening. All other trains on the three days will be replaced by buses between Westbury and Chippenham with rail connections from there to Swindon.

London Paddington – Friday 27th December to Sunday 29th December

Construction work for HS2 at Old Oak Common in West London means no trains will be able to reach London Paddington for three days immediately after Christmas. Most long distance trains will only run to and from Reading. A limited number of trains to and from South Wales and the West Country will run to and from London Euston. These will require seat reservations and will not call at Reading.

Services to Cheltenham Spa will all start from Swindon.

Westbury – Friday 27th December to Thursday 23rd January 2025

As mentioned in past newsletters the Westbury station area will be closed for four weeks after Christmas.

On the TransWilts route a weekday morning service will run from Trowbridge to Swindon and run back from Swindon in the evening. For the rest of the day. and at weekends, buses will run between Chippenham and Westbury via Melksham.

North/south services between Cardiff and Portsmouth will terminate at Trowbridge and resume at Salisbury with buses running between the two. Trains to Weymouth will run to and from Frome. Long distance trains which normally call at Westbury will also use Frome instead.

Buses will also replace trains on the TransWilts all day on Saturday and Sunday 1st and 2nd February.

Elsewhere

Track work on Sunday 15th December means buses will replace trains between Warminster and Westbury.

Meanwhile on the weekend of the 25th and 26th January no direct trains will run from Bristol or London to South Wales. Buses will from from Bristol Parkway to Newport and Cardiff Central. There will also be Cross Country and Transport for Wales trains from Cheltenham Spa and Gloucester and South Wales.