TransWilts

Connecting Wiltshire's Communities

incorporating TransWilts Community Rail Partnership

NEWSLETTER FIFTY SIX – FEBRUARY 2025

Westbury re-opens

After four weeks of intensive work by Network Rail, Westbury station reopened on time on the 24th January.

Since Christmas Eve over 200 pieces of track were replaced and 17 tonnes of stones were used as ballast to support the rails and ensure a smoother ride. Many of the points in the station area were reaching the end of their working life and it is hoped their replacement will offer greater day to day reliability.

While the work was being carried out there was a large replacement bus operation in place with passengers being ferried to Frome, Salisbury, Chippenham, Trowbridge and other intermediate stations.

The TransWilts service did see two trains operate a day – to Swindon in the mornings and back to Trowbridge in the evening. Over the four weeks every train ran – bar the last one! The 17:35 on the 23rd January was cancelled after the train developed a fault.

As well as working in the track in the station area, other contractors were working on the fabric of the station with areas being painted and new signage installed.

The opportunity was also taken to make permanent repairs to the roof damaged in December's storms.

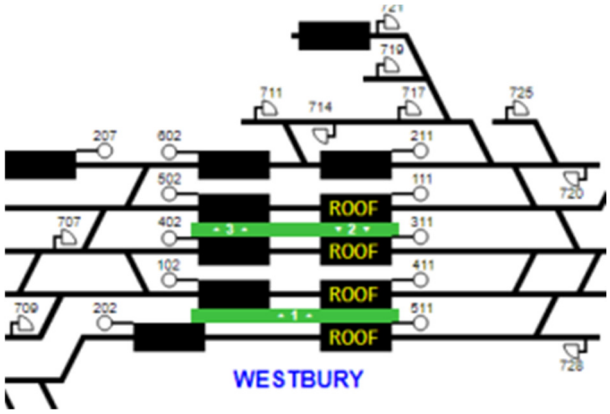
Engineering Round-up

After the month long closure of Westbury there are two more weekends of work to compete the project. On the 1st and 2nd February and again on the 8th and 9th March no trains will call at Westbury. All trains on the TransWilts line will be replaced by buses between Frome and Chippenham. Long distance trains to the South West will call at Frome rather than Westbury on those four days. Meanwhile on the 15th and 16th March track replacement work on the Melksham single line will see buses replace trains between Chippenham and Trowbridge.

The line between Swindon and Chippenham will be closed on the 1st and 2nd March. Some trains from London to Bristol will be diverted and not call at Didcot Parkway, Swindon or Chippenham while a few will call at Swindon but then use an alternative route missing out Chippenham and Bath Spa. TransWilts services will only run between Chippenham and Westbury. Buses will replace trains between Swindon and Chippenham. Trains to Cheltenham and South Wales will run as normal from Swindon with minor timing changes.

Further work in the Didcot area means changes on the last two weekends of March. This will see trains to and from Bristol and South Wales diverted and not call at Didcot Parkway, Swindon and Chippenham. TransWilts trains will terminate and start back to Westbury at Chippenham with bus connections to Swindon.

Storm Darragh hits Wiltshire stations



(Signallers' map of Westbury from Open Train Times)

The roof over platforms 2 and 3 at Westbury was lifted by the high winds forcing all services through the station to be cancelled at the height of storm Darrah on Saturday 7th December. Meanwhile staff were also sent to Chippenham station after damage to the roof there. Initially trains were allowed to pass through at slow speed but it was later decided the structure was not safe and all trains were terminated at either Bath Spa or Bristol Temple Meads. Contractors worked through the weekend and both stations fully reopened on Monday 9th December.

Date announced for 2025 Imber Bus Day

The organisers of the annual charity bus running day to the abandoned village of Imber on Salisbury Plain have announced this year's event will be on the 16th August. Ex-London Routemaster buses will run from Warminster station. More details will be announced soon.

TransWilts Chair Paddy Bradley looks to reliable travel in 2025

In my Chair of TransWilts role, my abiding memory of 2024 is travel disruption. The TransWilts service has experienced delays and cancellations. Necessary repair and maintenance tasks have led to the closure of lines and latterly Westbury station. It is good to see the station back up and running again with work completed within the planned timescale.

So, my first thought for 2025 is that we can have a rail service operating in our area upon which passengers can rely. At the moment, reliability is what we need our Train Operating Companies to focus on. It is more important to us than taking five or ten minutes off a journey time. We need passengers to know that they will be able to get to their destination within an acceptable time period, but knowing the service is going to operate is what counts. To achieve this, we need a national resolution to the issue of staffing trains on a Sunday and efficient and timely repair and maintenance projects.

This is an important time for transport strategy. Wiltshire Council has just closed its consultation on their fourth local transport plan. The Western Gateway Sub-National Transport Body is consulting on its strategic investment plan and Network Rail has produced an initial strategy document for rail provision in Wiltshire. The TransWilts Community Rail Partnership is contributing responses to all of these plans and proposals. Our priorities for strategic development in our area are:

- the installation of the loop around Melksham to improve passenger and freight services travelling north and south in Wiltshire;
- the opening of a fourth platform at Westbury to increase service provision and also be an essential element for services to the east; and,
- the creation of funded plans to build new stations at Corsham and Devizes.

We will maintain our campaign throughout 2025 and beyond, to keep these priorities in the development plans of our partners.

We are continuing our programme of trips and visits for people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds to experience rail travel. For many it will be the first time they have ever been on a train. For others it may be the first time in this country after travelling to this country from areas of conflict, destruction and destitution. We are proud of our service to the community and intend to increase our offer when opportunities arise.

Finally, we want our message to reach more people so that we keep public transport options to the forefront of people's minds. We are initiating projects to improve our communication reach across a range of media and platforms. Let us see how we do!

TransWilts passenger numbers hit by Westbury Closure

The work which closed Westbury for the last week of December contributed to a 7.8% drop in passenger numbers on the Swindon to Westbury route, compared to last year. Numbers to Weymouth and on the Cardiff Portsmouth route, which also pass through Westbury fell by exactly the same percentage.

Longer term TransWilts is still failing to get back to the levels seen before Covid. At 21.3% down it trails the South Wales to Bristol route which is seeing numbers more than 22% up on pre-pandemic levels. There is no doubt the un-reliability of the service coupled with engineering work is hitting ridership numbers. As well as the month long closure after Christmas there were also midweek closures in the autumn. Although replacement buses were provided past experience shows it does depress ticket sales, particularly for leisure journeys.

Work continues in Swindon town centre

The multi-million pound project to replace the bus station and other boarding points around the town into a new purpose built interchange took a major step forward in December. The new walkway across Fleming Way was opened over the site of the old subway from the Parade. This allowed the lengthy pedestrian diversion to the west of the site to be closed. It is hoped the scheme, which is largely funded by central government, will be finished by the summer.