

A stylized illustration of a high-speed train, possibly a Shinkansen, moving towards the viewer. The train is white with blue and grey accents. It has a large, rounded nose and multiple windows. The background shows a forest of evergreen trees and a fence.

Editorial Team: John Baxter, Richard Cowell, Rob Brown

This year our AGM is returning to our usual pre-pandemic venue of the Coach House of the Swan Hotel, Bradford-on-Avon, on Tuesday 8th March at 7:30pm. John Baxter will be providing the after AGM talk on the rising from the ashes (literally as you will hear) of Midsomer Norton station. If coming by train, please note that GWR is currently operating a temporary timetable due to staff shortages – so do check train times before travelling.

As no doubt you are aware the through Bristol Temple Meads to London Waterloo services provided first by South West Trains (SWT) and latterly, by South Western Railway (SWR) ceased in December 2021. This despite a magnificent campaign spearheaded by committee member Graham Ellis, who comprehensively undermined the DfT's arguments that this would provide a "quick win" (their words not mine) by removing little patronised 'duplicate' services and provide 'better value for taxpayers'. We know that these services were well patronised pre-pandemic, especially the first train of the day that combined with an Exeter to Waterloo service at Salisbury. The group successfully fought off attempts in around 2003 to remove these services and the support at that time from local MP Dr. Andrew Murrison was key. Both of our local MPs supported our campaign to save these services this time, and to his credit Andrew wrote a strongly

At a time when we are being urged to use public transport for a greener environment it is particularly perverse that the Treasury is telling train operating companies that they must find £1.5bn savings in each of the next four years and an erudite analysis in RAIL magazine by Sir Michael Holden entitled '*Reform of the workforce or death by a thousand cuts*' makes for stark reading. There is only so much that can be blamed on the current Covid epidemic and it is widely seen by many as an excuse to cut services temporarily - the risk being that this becomes permanent to meet the money saving aspirations of the DfT and Treasury.

Friday 10th December 2021 marked the final South Western Railway services between

Bristol Temple Meads and London Waterloo, drawing to a close South Western Railway's services at stations Bristol Temple Meads to Trowbridge inclusive - the end of a service that can trace its origins back to Wales and West days in 1994. I travelled on the 15:50 from Bristol to Waterloo, the 19:20 from Waterloo to Bristol, and the final 22:25 from Bristol as far as Bath Spa.

My intended train from Melksham - to be operated by GWR - was cancelled and having had that flagged up in the morning on JourneyCheck, I left home early and took the bus into Bath where I caught a train just before 14:00 to Bristol - a through 10 carriage train from Paddington, reported over the tannoy prior to arrival as "full and standing" and with a request "please let people off first". A lot did, indeed, get off and the train was busy but comfortable into Bristol, from where I took a connection out to Redland, a few minutes there, the start of my journey to Waterloo on a pleasantly busy Severn Beach line train. Why? Well because a day return from a Severn Beach line station to Waterloo works out cheaper than from Bristol, Bath or even Bradford-on-Avon. The train which left Waterloo at 12:20 arrived at 15:13 (9 minutes late) and people seemed to flow off it for an age! According to people I spoke to, it had been busy all the way with people standing and seated in the lobbies (there's quite a bit of that at the moment, even where there are seats free alongside other passengers as people 'social distance'). Lots of luggage too indicated to me that the passengers had made longer distance journeys on the service, and these were not their regular daily commutes! The train was formed by two car class 158 unit 158881 which was our steed for the final round trip.

The train left Bristol Temple Meads at 15:50 bound for London Waterloo arriving into Salisbury pretty well on time where 6 more carriages were attached. I didn't pass through the train talking with people - just those around me. Those I spoke to did not know it was the last trip and expressed a resigned disappointment when they learned this. Their reasons for using this train: "it's direct, it goes

to Waterloo not Paddington, and it's a good price". It arrived around seven minutes late into Waterloo. The very last SWR through train from Waterloo to Bristol departed bang on time at 19:20 comprised of eight carriages - the last two (158881) forming the portion going forward to West Wiltshire towns, Bath Spa and Bristol Temple Meads. The train manager announced that this was the very last SWR service from Waterloo to Bristol "after 16 years". This portion was very busy from Waterloo (as the carriages nearest the barrier, it was going to be well loaded with passengers to intermediate stations). I counted 65 in the two carriages arriving into Salisbury, 47 on departure, of whom 36 were through passengers. The train manager from Salisbury into Waterloo and back did an excellent, professional job in his interaction with passengers on the service and is to be commended. He left the train at Salisbury (either ending his shift or continuing with the portions going forward to Yeovil and Exeter). I spoke to another passenger who had joined at Waterloo, travelling all the way to Trowbridge - he had no idea either that this was to be the last direct train.

The final SWR departure from Bristol Temple Meads (formed of 158881) left on time at 22:25 to Salisbury with over 100 on board (but lost around 10 minutes on route). On the train, the "next station" indicator had been programmed to say "Last SWR from Bristol" and the train manager announced that this was the very last SWR train from Bristol "after 16 years" and that "as from tomorrow this service won't be running" - but there was no "thank you for your custom over all this time", there was no "the alternatives you will have in the future are". Although the Train Manager was visible at stations, and passing through the train between, there was no ticket check, nor interaction with passengers. What a sadly missed opportunity for First to show that they care for their passengers by having someone (anyone) doing customer care on that train, reassuring them that the company / group as a whole still wants their business (and perhaps - blow the expense - a leaflet saying "thank you" and listing future alternatives).

The way it was done, it was announced as an operational, almost, celebration... and a company that really seems not to care whether it has customers or not, and what they think of it. Between 5 to 10 (including myself) left at Bath Spa and I estimate roughly 150 joined! The train was visibly full and standing up the aisles as it pulled out - not a chance of social distancing!!



The final train at Bradford-on-Avon

DILTON MARSH TRAVEL WOES (by Ruth Vincent)

Ruth's account of a recent journey to visit her mum in Keysham on a Sunday in January:

Another trip to my mum's in Keynsham yesterday and more train issues! Trains in both directions were formed of three coaches rather than the booked five. The train home, which is supposed to connect with the last train from Westbury to Plymouth, was running 15-20 minutes late because of "train crew being delayed". When we ran into Westbury the Plymouth train was already in platform 2. The signaller very sensibly put us in the adjacent platform 3 instead of the usual platform 1. You've guessed it, just as we were coming to a stand, the Plymouth train departed. If it had been held, the delay would have been no more than a couple of minutes. Unfortunately the new rail contracts reward this "behaviour" as the Plymouth train left on time this would improve the punctuality bonus.

Another rather alarming story I heard while waiting for a train at Dilton Marsh from a fellow passenger: he had planned to get the last train on Christmas Eve from Swindon to

Dilton Marsh (the through train, I assume). He checked it and it was reported as running. At the very last minute the train was cancelled. He was offered no alternative to get him home, even though there were no further trains until 27th December and he had to get a friend to drive over and pick him up. Not surprisingly he did at least get his ticket price refunded!

Are we really hell bent on destroying our railways for the sake of a few pennies? Those pennies saved will cost billions of pounds if everyone is forced back into cars, new roads have to be built to cope with the extra traffic and that's even before we consider the effects of pollution on climate change.

TWO TUNNELS CIRCULAR WALK (OR CYCLE) by Graham Ellis

Fancy a day out with a difference? Emerging from lockdown, I took the train from my local West Wilts Station to Oldfield Park, the suburban station to the west of Bath Spa. My new bicycle with me, but a good walk too. About 100 yards above Oldfield Park, I joined the trackbed of the old Somerset and Dorset line as it climbs out of Bath (Green Park) on its way south to Radstock and onwards to Bournemouth. Now named the Two Tunnels Greenway, it's an avenue of green amongst the housing.



Devonshire tunnel on opening day, April 2013

Waymarking signs along the way tell you something of the history, hills getting closer before you plunge into Devonshire Tunnel.

Yes, the path and cycleway passes right through the tunnel, across a hidden valley above Bath when it emerges, then through the much longer Combe Down Tunnel (*just over a mile, and Britain's longest cycling tunnel*). Do take a torch with you, and perhaps a bottle of water and a snack. From leaving the roads in Bath right through to Midford, you are in an oasis of calm away from the commerce of shops and cafes.

Emerging from Combe Down Tunnel and its cutting, the old line strides out over Tucking Mill Viaduct, lake and mill to be seen below, before running on through the wood towards Midford - but don't go all the way to Midford. Double back onto the lane just before the short tunnel (known as long bridge), follow this lane past the front of Monkton Combe School, turn right down through their grounds and along the path of the former Camerton branch of the GWR to Dundas. There is great history in this valley - see what you can spot not only of the railway, but also of the Somersetshire Coal Canal which ran from the Kennet and Avon to the Somerset coal fields. Long, long gone you'll see little of it, but can enjoy guessing where it ran.

If you were thirsty by Monkton Combe, you may have stopped at the Wheelwright Arms - or perhaps you've carried on to the Cafe beside the Canal at Dundas. A hub of activity in summer, with boats, walkers, ducks, and a magnificent aqueduct which the main railway line from Cardiff to Portsmouth passes under (and, yes, it IS a mainline railway, even if it's often forgotten about because it doesn't have London at one end!).

And, refreshed, you have choices. Return to Bath alongside the Kennet and Avon Canal, taking in Claverton Pumping House and Bathampton. Cross "The Viaduct" or walk down to Limpley Stoke (sorry, station closed) and on to Freshford (station open). Or walk the other way along the canal to Avoncliff where you can pick up the train that calls there each hour, in each direction.

I loved this walk or cycle - from the Victorian terraces of Oldfield Park through the black

holes under Combe Down, the countryside of Monkton Combe and the bustle of canal at Dundas and the waterside stroll to Avoncliff. Should you be going and fancy company, feel free to invite me to join.

CUTS IN THE OFFING

Make no mistake, the potential cuts in services at a time when we are trying to promote more rail travel is going to be difficult to square. The Government has had to bail out every Train Operating Company during the pandemic which may well have saved SWR from the indignity of being taken over by the Operator of Last Resort due to their financial position early in the franchise.

Even GWR, who were in a better state pre-pandemic are up against it when the Treasury is their paymaster and demands cuts even though they undoubtedly go against the grain. That could see reductions in staffed stations which would be anathema for us but whilst revenue will have decreased over the last year, staffing costs will have remained fixed. Now the Government wants its payback and staffing is where the cuts will fall. Referring to Sir Michael Holden's article in *Rail* 948:

TOCs essentially have four charges – Network Rail's track access, rolling stock costs, staff, and what he calls anything else. NR charges are normally fixed for a five year period, rolling stock costs depend on many factors – age of rolling stock, length of lease, etc. GWR pay Hitachi to provide the InterCity express trains, so don't pay for any not supplied. Staffing can be reduced by Driver Only operation and fewer station staff, but then revenue protection can suffer. Ticket vending machines are no substitute for knowledgeable booking office staff and can't give travel information and are unlikely to offer the best value fares.

Michael considers that cutting costs will not be pain free. The industry signed up to identifying and eliminating duplicate services which was the reason used by DfT and SWR to axe the direct Waterloo to Bristol trains. To make further savings TOCs are having to look beyond these 'quick hits': Cross Country is

considering making some of its pandemic service reductions permanent which does not augur well for those travelling to Birmingham on fewer and even more crowded trains. But as Michael points out workforce reform does not appear on the horizon. Thus currently most trains operate with a guard or “train manager” but no doubt the Government’s aspiration is to reduce cost and the power of the RMT by having driver only on new trains. He sees Driver Controlled Operation as key, opening and closing doors, but retaining a second person onboard whose role would be answering queries and revenue protection – helping to ensure no passenger attempts to get a free ride, as is common in our area. Large fines for defaulters need to be the norm but how often have you recently experienced a ticket check on your journey.

Michael states that there will be “sacred cows” that the government will insist in tackling. His view is that if there is fares reform and simpler ticketing, all ticket offices and travel centres could be gone in five years or less. All very well of course when ticket machines are working and sensibly positioned (unlike at Bradford-on-Avon - screen almost impossible to see in bright afternoon summer sun). With computerisation it would be easy to create a matrix of every station in the UK with the shortest distance between each station. Allow for alternative routes such as Bradford to Swindon via Melksham or Bath and then create a fare structure that is a uniform price per mile taking account time of travel – peak / off peak etc. All tickets are single and returns should be double the single fare. Apply discounts from railcards / group savings etc. But isn’t that how it works now I hear you ask? To a point but the rate per mile is not uniform across the country. You can of course build in a minimum ticket price whatever the distance but on this basis you would always be able to find a ticket based upon a uniform cost per mile. Or is there something I have missed?

Michael contends that costs could be saved by peak service lopping. It is unlikely that levels of traffic in the peak from Bristol to London will return to pre-pandemic so with fewer passengers some services can be

removed to match the demand that he estimates as 70% of what it was for the business commuters. Personally I think further savings could be made by GWR running a 9 car train in the peak in place of two 5 car sets. Sets thus released could be used elsewhere for example on the Cardiff to Taunton and Plymouth route with the Castle Class HSTs cascaded to the Cardiff to Portsmouth route. For other TOCs getting rid of old stock could then result. However I see no attempt as yet by GWR to decrease the peak services which would remove the need to cascade further unsuitable Class 165s and 166s Turbos.

Michael states that, whisper it quietly, people in the rail industry are pretty well paid so pay freezes could be applied. I am not so sure that this holds when we are all it appears being faced with a doubling of our energy costs this year but he stated that it is then one way actually to retain staff. SWR of course shot itself in the foot by a recruitment freeze and now are reaping the consequences with reduced services between Salisbury and Exeter. Graham Ellis has observed that journey planners for an Exeter to London Waterloo journey only show journeys via Westbury, Paddington and Bakerloo line at a higher cost with no mention of the cheaper option via Salisbury. You really couldn’t make it up.

Finally the other sacred cow of workforce productivity – here Michael has a go at track staff restrictive practices and states that with the extra demands for services on a Sunday the railway should become a 7 day operation that does not rely on drivers working on rest days. In other words drivers can be expected to be rostered on a Sunday and have time off midweek. Contentious yes for the NUR and ASLEF but this surely must come at some point, no pun intended, down the line.

Working through some of these five elements he feels will help reduce subsidies but he realistically says that it could produce all sorts of disputes in the short term. Railwaymen should realise that their jobs are not sacrosanct in a time of financial problems across the sector and if there was proper

conversations he feels that there would be less staff lost than to take a draconian across the board 10% cut which he considers will be disastrous and lose even more jobs in the interim. He does lambast the Government and rightly so accusing them of being hung up on total cost rather than net cost, something he regards as a gigantic mistake in the railway world. An understanding of the relationship between marginal costs and marginal revenue is key, he states.

He concludes: During the past two years, there has been an increasing industry focus on just this by looking at profit and loss on a whole industry basis. Is this embryonic approach about to be thrown into the dustbin and replaced by a 'never mind the quality, feel the width' approach. There are only months to save our railway from a vicious downward spiral. Do we choose reform of the workforce or death by a thousand cuts? Who will stand up and speak for the industry to avoid a massive own goal?

BRADFORD-ON-AVON FOOTBRIDGE CANOPY PROJECT

You may recall that following our AGM in 2019 Graham Findley gave a fascinating talk about the Bradford-on-Avon footbridge canopy project. This seeks to replace the canopy on the footbridge at Bradford-on-Avon's railway station which was removed in 1964.



A photo of Bradford-on-Avon station from 1921 showing the footbridge with canopy

Bradford is one of the few surviving Brunel designed stations, and the main station

building has been restored to its original form in recent years. However, the lack of a canopy on the footbridge detracts from the appearance of the station as it would have been in Victorian times and also exposes users and the structure to all the elements.

A planning application has just been submitted to Wiltshire Council for permission to renovate the existing footbridge and install the canopy with a deadline for the decision due on March 2nd. Lengthy, detailed investigations were made by the team in order to find the correct materials to be used to make it as close as possible to the original. This has involved much liaison with Bradford-on-Avon Town Council, Bradford-on-Avon Preservation Trust, train operator GWR, Network Rail and project architects Oxford Architects. The roof of the canopy was originally constructed of corrugated iron. One might think it would be straightforward to use modern corrugated steel but no company could be found in the UK who could press corrugated steel into the correct shape. Fortunately a steel company was found in Italy who can create the necessary profile using old-fashioned heritage steel pressing techniques. Another problem was how to re-create the original timber tongue and groove side panels on the footbridge stairs. These had been replaced in the 1970s by using point rodding as upright stanchions but Network Rail will not accept ordinary timber due to its relatively short life. A type of wood treated to give it an extended life of up to 50 years was found which when painted with fire resistant paint can be used for the stair side panels and the daggerboards (the pointed decorative wood details which project down from the canopy).

Funding is coming from: the Railway Heritage Trust who have committed in principle to granting up to 40% of the build and installation cost, GWR who have generously granted £15,000 from their CCIF fund, a generous local supporter, and donations to the registered charity No.1184339. See the group's website for further details:

www.footbridgecanopyproject.org.

West Wiltshire Rail Users Group

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PUBLIC MEETING

Tuesday 8th March 2022

Annual General Meeting

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**Followed by an illustrated talk:
The Somerset & Dorset at Midsomer Norton -
Rising from the Ashes by John Baxter**

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**7:30pm The Coach House, Swan Hotel
Bradford-on-Avon**

Tea / coffee served from 7:00pm

If travelling by train, check the latest train times by referring to GWR's website as a temporary timetable may well still be in operation. If coming by car and intending to park in the car park at the Swan Hotel (space limited), please remember to enter registration number on terminal inside the main building to avoid a parking fine.