**Hogrider 155 (June - Mid-September 2017)**

**South Hampshire Rail Users’ Group Newsletter**

**South Western Railway Watch (@swtrains\_watch)**

In recent years, we have established an excellent working relationship with Jeremy Varns of Guildford who, with his former colleague Samantha Holmes, is founder of a group Twitter account, South Western Railway Watch (formerly South West Trains Watch), which campaigns on behalf of passengers. We routinely exchange news and reports, and he has generously acknowledged our website as a source of inspiration. Our poor views of South West Trains under Stagecoach are very comparable. **[See also the ‘@swtrains\_watch’ item, which will appear on our website** [**www.shrug.info**](http://www.shrug.info) **shortly]**

The arrival of this new facility is excellent news. Now that all the core commuting members of our original group have either retired or found local employment, we cannot cover day-to-day events to the same extent as in the past.

**The final version of our evidenced-based history of South West Trains under Stagecoach (now comprising over 21,000 words, and over 200 source references) will also appear on** [**www.shrug.info**](http://www.shrug.info) **shortly.**

**GTR (Southern) proposed timetable changes from May 2018 offer early morning and evening speed-up between South Hampshire and Gatwick Airport, but Ashford International connectivity lost**

Govia recently held a public consultation on its proposed **Monday-Friday** timetable changes from December 2018. The Southern-branded services are expected to change from May next year.

Hampshire’s standard off-peak service will be essentially the same, with five trains per hour each way: Southampton/Portsmouth Harbour-Victoria via Gatwick Airport (semi-fast); Southampton/Portsmouth Harbour-Brighton (semi-fast); and Portsmouth & Southsea-Littlehampton (stopping).

There is, however, some significant tweaking of early morning and evening services, which improves journey times for Gatwick Airport passengers

On a more disappointing note, Southampton services will no longer connect at Brighton with direct trains to and from Ashford International. When Govia previously proposed this change, they bowed to complaints from passengers in Kent not wanting to lose their direct Brighton services. This time, however, the Government’s sudden policy change away from electrification has removed any early prospects of more diesel units becoming available to provide much needed additional capacity - the route is not electrified between Ore (the first station east of Hastings) and Ashford.

General

We would stress that the proposed changes may not be final and, whilst every effort has been made to achieve accuracy, we cannot guarantee that no errors have arisen in our analysis of the draft tables below.

Proposed changes, include:

* Brighton services will normally start from Southampton 7 minutes earlier, at 26-past. Victoria services will generally start from Portsmouth Harbour one minute earlier at 11-past. Littlehampton services will generally start from Portsmouth & Southsea 2 minutes earlier at 57-past.
* All services from Southampton to Brighton (and in the opposite direction) will run via Swanwick, except the 09.26 and 11.26 from Southampton. These two trains will serve Southampton Airport Parkway and Eastleigh, thence running fast to Cosham. Fareham passengers will therefore need to catch the preceding Victoria trains, and change at Cosham for stations east of Barnham, adding 14 minutes to their journey times (the increase could be less if there is a SWR connectional service from Fareham to Cosham between the Victoria and Brighton trains).
* The practice of running Bognor-Victoria evening services via Hove will stop. These trains will take the normal route via Horsham and acquire portions from Portsmouth.
* Some smaller stations between Havant and Chichester will see reductions in their peak services. The same applies to Portsmouth Harbour, though this may be attributable to pathing difficulties and/or the closed platform.
* Passengers between Hampshire stations and Ashford International will need to change at Hastings as well as at Brighton. Journeys between Southampton and Ashford will apparently take about 50 minutes longer in both directions.

Details of some of the more significant changes

* A new 04.58 Brighton-Portsmouth Harbour (arrive 06.23) service will replace the 05.35 Littlehampton-Portsmouth Harbour. The 05.12 Brighton-Southampton will then start from Barnham at 06.03, with passengers from Brighton able to connect out of the 04.58. The 05.35 Littlehampton-Portsmouth Harbour will be replaced by a 05.56 service, providing a connection from the 04.58 to some smaller stations.
* The 05.01 Havant-Victoria via Hove (non-standard route) will be discontinued.
* Additional 05.04 Littlehampton-Southampton service, which will make one of the rare stops by Southern trains at Woolston (06.08). This train will form an additional Southampton-Victoria service at 06.33, which will also stop at Woolston.
* The current 05.46 Southampton-London Bridge and 06.10 Southampton-Brighton will swap paths. Passengers on the 05.46 to Brighton will be able to change at Barnham for stations to Gatwick Airport and Victoria. The 06.10 to London Bridge will not call at stations between Barnham and Horsham, but will call additionally at Gatwick Airport. The overall journey time from Southampton to London Bridge will be reduced by 25 minutes.
* The 05.47 Portsmouth Harbour-Victoria will depart at 05.57, connecting at Barnham into the 05.46 Southampton-Brighton. The 06.04 Portsmouth Harbour-Brighton will be replaced by a 06.12 to Littlehampton, connecting at Barnham into the 06.10 Southampton-London Bridge.
* 05.53 Brighton-Portsmouth Harbour will depart in the standard hourly path at 06.02, ceasing to call at Fishbourne, Bosham, Nutbourne and Warblington (leaving a gap of almost one hour in westbound services from these stations), and terminating at Portsmouth & Southsea. Train will form an additional Portsmouth & Southsea-Littlehampton service at 07.32.
* New 05.54 Victoria-Southampton service (depart Gatwick Airport at 06.26). The 07.05 Brighton-Southampton will then depart at 07.02, call additionally at Portslade and Southwick, and divert to Portsmouth Harbour, providing a connection out of the 05.54. The 05.54 will run from Fareham to Portsmouth in the current timings of the 07.05 from Brighton, suggesting that it will continue to stop at all intermediate stations.
* 06.27 Brighton-Southampton will depart in the standard hourly path at 06.32, and cease to stop at Woolston.
* 06.56 Littlehampton-Portsmouth & Southsea will depart at 06.48, providing a sharper connection out of the 05.56 Gatwick Airport-Southampton.
* The 07.06 Southampton-Victoria will depart at 07.12 and cease to call at Warblington, Nutbourne, Bosham and Fishbourne. The 07.20 Portsmouth Harbour-Brighton will depart at 07.17 and call at all stations to Barnham, providing an alternative (earlier) service for young people no longer able to use the 07.06 from Southampton to get to school in Chichester or Barnham.
* 07.18 Littlehampton-Portsmouth Harbour will be replaced by a 07.08 Littlehampton-Portsmouth & Southsea, not stopping at Warblington.

08.10 Portsmouth Harbour-Victoria will then start from Portsmouth & Southsea at 08.14.

* 07.37 Brighton-Portsmouth Harbour will start at 07.41.
* 08.00 Brighton-Portsmouth Harbour will depart at 08.03 and terminate at Portsmouth & Southsea. 09.29 Portsmouth Harbour-Brighton will then start from Portsmouth & Southsea at 09.33. Subsequent trains from Brighton to Portsmouth/Southampton will start in standard hourly paths at 02/32-past until 20.32.

* 08.03/08.51 Portsmouth & Southsea-Littlehampton will depart in the new standard hourly paths at 07.57/08.57. The 08.57 will be the return working of a 07.53 additional Littlehampton-Portsmouth & Southsea service.
* Trains from Littlehampton to Portsmouth & Southsea at 08.56, 09.57 and hourly to 17.57, and then 18.48 will depart hourly from 08.55 to 18.55, with an additional service at 19.55. The 15.23 and 16.22 will no longer run.
* 09.04 Brighton-Portsmouth Harbour will depart at 09.05 and terminate at Portsmouth & Southsea. 10.29 Portsmouth Harbour-Brighton will then start from Portsmouth & Southsea at 10.33.
* Brighton-Portsmouth Harbour trains at 15.02 and hourly to 20.02 will terminate at Portsmouth & Southsea. 16.29 and hourly to 21.29 Portsmouth Harbour-Brighton will then start from Portsmouth & Southsea at 16.33 and hourly to 21.33.
* The 17.02/18.03 Victoria-Portsmouth Harbour will start from London Bridge at 17.03/18.03. The former will cease to call at Nutbourne, Warblington, Bedhampton and Hilsea. The latter will call additionally at Fishbourne and Bosham, so that the two trains have symmetrical stopping patterns. All other evening trains to Portsmouth Harbour/Southampton will depart from Victoria in the standard 06/36 paths. This affects services from the current 17.34 Victoria-Southampton.
* The 17.46 Portsmouth-Littlehampton will start at 17.57. The 17.59 Portsmouth Victoria will start at 18.15 and run fast from Havant to Chichester. Passengers from the omitted stations can connect out of the 17.57.
* The 18.11, 19.12 and 20.11 Southampton-Victoria will depart at 13-past and omit all stops between Barnham and Horsham, reducing overall journey times by about 10 minutes. The 21.33 Southampton-Barnham will be extended to Three Bridges, replacing the 22.40 from Chichester.
* The 18.37 Portsmouth-Littlehampton will be discontinued, but there will be an additional 20.40 Portsmouth Harbour-Littlehampton.
* 21.02 and 22.02 Brighton-Portsmouth Harbour will start at 20.57/21.57. 21.33 Brighton-Portsmouth Harbour will start at 21.27 and terminate at Chichester. Passengers can connect into the 21.06 Victoria-Portsmouth Harbour (a new portion of the existing 21.02 Victoria-Bognor Regis).
* There will be additional services from Portsmouth Harbour to Victoria at 19.11, 20.11 and 21.11, the 21.11 replacing the 21.15 Portsmouth-Brighton. The 21.40 Portsmouth Harbour-Three Bridges is then replaced by a 21.33 Portsmouth & Southsea-Brighton.

**Friendly and constructive meeting with DfT about Great Western and Cross Country re-franchising**

Three members of our Group met Matt Tyler from DfT on 15.8.2017 to discuss issues around the next Great Western and Cross Country franchise. We are grateful to him for talking to us, and a summary of some of the topics covered is below.

**GREAT WESTERN FRANCHISE ISSUES**

**Cardiff-Portsmouth services**

* Insufficient capacity. Trains serve about a dozen towns and cities, so there is a mix of long-distance and local travel, including peak commuter flows. Passengers without reservations often have to stand for all or part of their journeys. Sometimes it is impossible to board, for example on early evening southbound trains from Bath.
* Overcrowding increases station dwell times and affects punctuality.
* The Strategic Rail Authority’s ‘Strategic Plan’ of January 2002 identified a market for a half-hourly service every day between Portsmouth Harbour and Bristol Temple Meads, with an expected completion date of 2005-06. The service is now broadly half-hourly between Southampton and Salisbury, and between Westbury and Bristol, but generally hourly between Salisbury and Westbury. Current thinking has moved towards hourly Swindon-Westbury-Salisbury trains rather than more Portsmouth-Bristol services.
* Longer trains have been promised for years, but plans for a new build were abandoned, and class 166 trains from the Thames Valley are in prospect. These are being smartly refurbished, but have 2+3 aside seating which is unsuitable for long distances such as Cardiff-Portsmouth (almost three and a half hours). Better to shuffle shortened High Speed Trains, or more refurbished class 158 units, to this route if no hope of new trains?
* Sunday morning services are very sparse. First services reach Portsmouth Harbour at 11.52 and Cardiff Central at 12.41 (followed by 2-hour gap).

**Lost services**

* Excluding the Southampton-Weymouth route, there are no longer any direct services between Brighton, Portsmouth, and Southampton and anywhere west of the Wessex Main Line (Portsmouth-Bristol).
* This means that passengers from these cities usually have to change trains at both Salisbury and Exeter St David’s just to get to Plymouth. If they are travelling from Bournemouth or Poole, they need to change at Southampton Central as well. In addition, there are very limited opportunities to change at Westbury rather than at both Salisbury and Exeter St David’s. Bournemouth and Poole passengers can also travel on Cross Country services to Reading and catch Paddington-West of England services, but with an enormous increase in mileage (and no doubt cost).
* Up to 2007, there were limited direct services between Brighton, Portsmouth and Southampton and destinations such as Exeter, Plymouth, Paignton and Penzance. At various times these have operated via the Salisbury-Exeter route, and via Westbury and Taunton. They were very well used.
* Pathing constraints were sometimes overcome by running such services in place of selected Waterloo trains between Salisbury and Exeter, or as additional carriages (between Portsmouth Harbour and Westbury) of Cardiff services.
* The current Great Western franchise included running rights between Southampton Central and Poole from May 2017, reportedly at the wish of the industry. Connectivity could be greatly improved by (for example) a morning and evening service each way between Poole, Bournemouth, and the West of England via Southampton and Westbury. An alternative would be a comparable service between Poole, Bournemouth, Bath and Bristol, with good connections at Westbury with the West of England. [A further alternative would be through carriages between Poole and Exeter via the Yeovil Junction route, though this would seem more appropriate to the SWR franchise]

**New services**

* There is a remarkable gap in rail services between Weymouth and Exeter. A direct service between Weymouth and Exeter would greatly increase connectivity and new journey opportunities. Timetabling and pathing constraints through Yeovil Junction might mean that a Weymouth-Dorchester West-Yeovil Pen Mill-Yeovil Junction service, with Exeter connections would be the most realistic option. An alternative or complementary option could be more frequent connections at Castle Cary between Weymouth and West of England services.

**CROSS COUNTRY FRANCHISE ISSUES**

* Southampton and Bournemouth services are well used, and suffer capacity problems. Fares are often relatively high, presumably to dampen demand. It can be cheaper to travel via London, which defeats the purpose of having direct inter-regional services. Proposals to add an additional coach, with electric motor, disappeared with the ‘Electric Spine’ from the Midlands to Southampton container terminal.
* When Bournemouth services switched to the other side of the hour, same platform connectivity at Winchester with SWT services to and from Portsmouth Harbour was lost. These connections now apply only to the limited service between Southampton and York, Newcastle or Edinburgh. Portsmouth connections with Manchester trains via Southampton Central are awkward, and depend mainly on overcrowded GWR services. [Note: the position could change with the new SWR timetable from December 2018].
* There is a more limited range of direct services than in the past, which reduces the convenience of not having to travel via London. Network Rail’s long-term Wessex Route Study proposed hourly services between Southampton and Hull in place of existing North East/Scotland services. This looks like an attempt to keep Cross Country services off the East Coast main line but York, Newcastle and Edinburgh must surely be more popular destinations than Hull.
* Currently, Cross Country trains from the North East operate to a two-hourly pattern on weekdays, running to Southampton Central / terminating at Reading in alternate hours. If additional rolling stock became available, these trains could ideally run to Southampton Central hourly [or even just to Basingstoke] for Portsmouth connections. If paths are not available between Reading and Basingstoke for hourly running, it would seem worth considering whether the services which terminate at Reading could continue to Guildford (for Portsmouth), Redhill (for Kent) and Gatwick Airport (for Brighton). The ultimate goal might be hourly services using dwell time at Reading to split into Southampton Central and Gatwick Airport portions. Extension of services to Sundays would help address capacity issues.

[Follow-up: One of our participants attended a DfT workshop on Cross Country (Bristol, 12.9.2017). This had very limited attendance and passenger feedback was overwhelmingly about high prices and overcrowding.  The new franchise is planned from late 2019. DfT saw a conflict between providing good, fast, long distance services, and providing local services to various areas, but no-one had a good answer to that.]

**Friendly and constructive meeting with the South Western Railway management team**

Stakeholders were invited to a meeting with members of the SWR management team in Southampton on 1.8.2017. This followed a similar meeting in Woking a few days earlier.

Managing Director, Andy Mellors, from First Great Western gave a presentation and led responses to questions. This was followed by informal discussions after a very generous dinner.

First/MTR’s plans have been well publicised, but some further points were clarified:

* A consultation on the draft December 2018 timetable is to be launched in September. The new Portsmouth-Weymouth service is to operate all day. A wide range of improvements are in prospect, and we hope there won’t be too much devil in the detail, given the complex network involved.
* The Wessex Electric trains are to get new traction to boost acceleration.
* ‘Try the train’ days are to be held to encourage rail travel.
* The need for two staff on longer-distance services is recognised.

The evening underpinned the widespread feeling that big changes for the better are on the way, and participants were grateful for this opportunity to establish contacts and hear more of the operator’s ideas for the new franchise.

Footnotes

First/MTR revealed their new livery for SWR on 4.9.2017. It basically comprises broad diagonal bands of white and pale grey (pale and dark grey towards the unit ends), with touches of mid-blue, and appears to have been inspired by the roof of Waterloo’s international platforms. This fits well with SWR’s “The journey starts here” motto, as does their app symbol based on lines radiating from Waterloo. Get Surrey reported that ‘The red, blue and orange of South West Trains is completely gone’. No doubt that was precisely the intention as SWR promises a transformation.

**First/MTR to lease five times as many new carriages as Stagecoach**

* Bombardier is to build 750 ‘Aventra’ carriages for the Reading, Windsor and suburban routes from Waterloo.
* The new carriages will be built at Derby and formed into 90 trains (expected to be sixty 10-car and thirty 5-car sets). They are due to come into service between mid-2019 and the end of 2020 and will be maintained at Wimbledon.
* The £895 million deal will provide 46 per cent additional capacity at peak times.
* The 150 class 707 carriages (without toilets) ordered from Siemens by Stagecoach will then be withdrawn, along with the BR 4-car class 455 and 2-car class 456 units (the entire ‘red’ train fleet, except on the Isle of Wight) and the small Stagecoach class 458 fleet (which recently received design modifications and switched from 4-coach to 5-coach formations, and from ‘white’ to ‘blue’ livery).
* These changes, along with the return of 18 Wessex Electric sets for the Waterloo-Portsmouth (via Guildford) line, represents a net increase of 98 carriages on the SWR network.

Note

MTR will also be operating Aventra trains on Crossrail (now generally referred to as the Elizabeth Line).

**Waterloo-Southampton open access bid**

Network Rail has offered Alliance Rail seven weekday return paths between Waterloo and Southampton Central. The Office of Rail and Road will decide later in the year whether to authorise the new services.

Alliance would initially use Class 442 ‘Wessex Electric’ trains, with peak services each offering 600 seats and with both standard and first class accommodation provided. Trains would call at Hook, Basingstoke, Winchester, Eastleigh and Southampton Central.

These extra services would help address the problem of severe overcrowding on this route in the peaks.

**Wareham-Swanage train service returns**

The Swanage Railway has finally achieved its ambition of restoring through trains between the popular seaside resort and the mainline station at Wareham. Services ran on 60 days as part of a 2-year trial. The operating period was 13th June to 3rd September inclusive, but with no service on Mondays and Fridays. Trains left Swanage at 10.23, 12.23, 14.23 and 16.23, returning from Wareham at 11.15, 13.15, 15.15 and 17.15. Services are planned to operate on 90 days in the summer of 2018.

The service has been hailed as a great success, and those of us who waited 45 years to see it restored can only wonder at the optimism and persistence of all involved in the project.

Mainline connections at Wareham were not always so good. Railway Magazine reported chaos on Saturday June 17th, caused first by signalling problems at Waterloo and then a broken rail at Totton.

At 17.10 the upside information screen at Wareham was showing no service until 18.58. A late Weymouth train was then turned back and its passengers told to wait for the next westbound service, which was running 70 minutes late. The eastbound service was to terminate at Brockenhurst, and when it got to Bournemouth there was already a long queue of people stretching along the platform, awaiting taxis to Southampton.

**Stagecoach yields South West Trains with a crash**

Given the failure of the much-hyped Deep Alliance between South West Trains and Network Rail, it seemed almost symbolic that August’s major works at Waterloo were severely disrupted after a SWT suburban service ran into a line of wagons, thankfully at low speed and with no serious injuries to passengers or rail personnel.

The crash resulted in an even more reduced service from 24th August and overrun on the 29th. The latter date was supposed to have seen Kent Coast services operating from Waterloo’s international platforms during closure of Charing Cross and Waterloo East, but they needed to divert to Blackfriars.

SWR was unable to run a normal service until 30th August. Surely this will be a month that will long be remembered in commuting folklore, especially given the steep fare rises expected from January 2018.

As a parting shot, Stagecoach put a potted history of its tenure on-line, with glowing comments from successive senior members of staff, except Christian Roth who was managing director when they lost the franchise. Commuters’ voices were also notably absent.

**Abandonment of the rolling electrification programme deprives the rail industry of certainty and stability. Is the remarkable new raft of transport policies aimed mainly at buying time on pollution until Brexit?**

The summer has seen a remarkable range of government transport announcements.

RAIL

* HS2 is secure despite the huge cost.
* There is still ministerial support for Crossrail 2, but costs need to be shaved and London must contribute.
* Rail electrification between Cardiff and Swansea (and probably the Welsh Valley lines), Kettering and Sheffield/Nottingham, and Oxenholme and Windermere is abandoned. This follows abandonment from the Midlands to Southampton Port, on the Thames Valley branches, and between Oxford and Cambridge (where service reinstatement remains in prospect, but with diesels). Electrification to Bath and Bristol Temple Meads is to be delayed. Pity the rolling stock industry had been told that the future is electric with little need for new diesel trains.
* A new route (following the M3 from Chertsey and bypassing Egham’s busy level crossing) has been proposed for services from Woking and Guildford to Heathrow (and on to Paddington). It is suggested that a Southampton-Heathrow service could be an eventual possibility. Presumably the plan for Southampton-Heathrow services via Reading is moribund following abandonment of the Electric Spine.
* The thinking is that bi-mode trains justify partial electrification. But diesel motors hauling deadweight electric motors won’t do much for energy efficiency or pollution and may come to symbolise just how far Britain is lagging behind many of its Continental neighbours who have benefitted from ongoing electrification programmes. (Bi-mode trains will indeed have advantages on a patchily electrified network, because diversions off electric routes during engineering work will be relatively straightforward. And the generally welcomed proposal to add an electric motor coach to the Cross Country Voyager trains would in effect have created a bi-mode. This has fallen by the wayside – it presumably appeared much less attractive following abandonment of the Electric Spine)
* Plans to construct additional tracks for container trains in Southampton Port have been rejected by Southampton City Council because of residents’ concerns about noise and pollution from diesel locomotives. Understandable, but this will mean more pollution from lorries and may be detrimental to the city’s economy. It can perhaps be seen as the first consequence of abandoning the Electric Spine.

ROAD

* Tolls on the Severn bridges are to end. This looks like a consolation prize to the Welsh Assembly Government for abandoned rail electrification schemes, but will further boost traffic pollution.
* All new cars are to be electric by 2040. Pity energy from Hinkley Point is set to be so expensive. In addition, this reportedly won’t solve the problem of particulate matter, which is created by car brakes and tyres and road surface wear.
* Some sections of motorways may be encased with tunnels of nitrogen dioxide-capturing material. This, reportedly, could increase health risks for motorists.
* Driverless lorries be introduced as soon as 2018. This raises all sorts of safety issues.

TRAMS

* A meeting of the Solent Local Enterprise Partnership and Southampton City Council has established support for a super-tram or light railway system in the Southampton area. [Daily Echo 26.7.2017]. The primary route would be Eastleigh-Airport-St Mary’s-Royal Pier-West Quay-Central station. It might be extended west to Romsey, then on to Eastleigh and Segensworth, with a branch to Marchwood.

LEP director and Leader of Fareham Borough Council leader, Sean Woodward, doesn’t expect government funding to be available. (So government won’t be interested?) Interestingly, the plan is put forward primarily in terms of relieving congestion rather than legally contestable pollution.

Tramways in the most polluted cities, such as Southampton, are surely long overdue. That said, it is not clear what data were used in mapping the suggested system, but many of the journeys for which it would seem to provide can or could be made by train. Without a lot more data, the idea looks just a little ‘back of envelope’. It may have been put together as an early contribution to the wider Transport for the South East body, in which councils and LEPs would work directly with the Department for Transport [Daily Echo 30.6.2017].

BACKGROUND

A FOI request has established that DfT has spent £383,000 defending an action to make the government tackle illegal pollution levels. So is government playing for time on tackling pollution – cutting back on rail electrification and not funding tramways, while bringing forward futuristic plans which include the promise of reduced pollution from road traffic, but which may well not be deliverable?

Legal challenges can be mounted if EU pollution limits are breached. Brexit would remove that power. With mounting evidence that pollution is reducing life expectancy in some areas, we can only hope government can find the odd £350 million a week extra for the NHS. Mrs May might like to visit Millbrook roundabout instead of Warwick Road on her next visit to Southampton.

**Reasons to rejoice as Stagecoach SWT era ends**

**East Coach franchise in trouble just two years after Stagecoach took over**

The East Coast franchise was operating successfully in the public sector prior to 1.3.2015, when it was franchised to a partnership of Stagecoach (90%) and Virgin (10%). Affordable fares were quickly limited by the new operator and, unsurprisingly, profits have dropped by 80%. Stagecoach reportedly wants the contract to be revised, and there is a possibility that promised new services will not be introduced and promised carriage refurbishment will not take place.

Meanwhile, West Coast - Stagecoach (49%) and Virgin (51%) - has confirmed that it is to hire 25 more staff as a result of complaints. Transport Focus has issued a scathing report about the company’s hard line ticket terms and conditions, leading to a large increase in the number of appeals, and on poor responses to passengers’ complaints.

Remember how Stagecoach overbid to grab a third franchise on SWT and fares were continually hiked over a decade whilst customer service was virtually extinguished and performance targets saw long-term failure? RAIL magazine (13.9.2017) reports that Stagecoach bid more than First/MTR to hang on for a fourth term, but the rival company offered more customer benefits. How like Stagecoach to put money before passengers.

**Crammed suburban services to get air-conditioning**

SWT’s Twitter has consistently maintained that the company’s substantial non-air- conditioned suburban fleet would be retained for a further ten years. With increasing ridership and hotter summers, this causes additional misery for commuters, for whom First/MTR’s new trains can’t come too soon. Specimen complaint: “I have been commuting for nearly 50 years and my experience on South West Trains on Wednesday was possibly the worst. With no air con, the Waterloo to Woking service was a descent into hell. The train was so hot, people got off several stops early to escape. I helped a lady who was close to passing out. Clothes were wet rags on people. Non-air-conditioned trains on one of the major train routes in the country is a disgrace.” [James Medhurst, Metro 26.6.2017]

**Complaints soaring**

While the troubled GTR franchise saw the highest percentage rise in complaints (218%) during 2016-17, South West Trains came second, with a 50% increase. By way of comparison, complaints on Chiltern dropped by 66%.

**Southampton Airport Parkway rip-off**

Southampton Airport Parkway is noted for its high car parking charges, but Stagecoach has also been charging its users slightly more for annual season tickets to London than from Southampton Central, which is three stations further from London.

ORR’s footfall statistics for 2015-16 were therefore adjusted by plus 180,076 at Parkway, and minus 180,076 at Central. This reflected the estimated level of Parkway commuters buying seasons from Central to benefit from the lower fare, a perfectly legal ruse since season ticket holders can alight/embark at intermediate stations en route.

**Footnote**

Similarly, South West Trains set a £7.10 Anytime fare from Waterloo to Ewell West, a ‘frontier’ station within the London travel zones and within its jurisdiction. The National Rail Journey Planner shows this as the cheapest fare for the journey.

Southern manage the next station (Epsom) and the corresponding fare is £6.90. Under break of journey rules passengers can book to Epsom and use the ticket to Ewell West. Presumably, if they book to Ewell West and continue to Epsom they can be charged a penalty fare despite having paid more than necessary. {Source: Today’s Railways UK, September 2017 issue]

**Stagecoach blots on the landscape**

Fareham station is now on par with Southampton Central for its peeling and falling canopy awnings, which succinctly but disagreeably symbolise the failed alliance between Network Rail and Stagecoach.

The same neglect can be found in Stagecoach bus operations. Winchester City Council have undertaken significant improvements to the city’s neglected and run-down bus station after buying the freehold from Stagecoach for £4 million.

[Note: Portsmouth now has a magnificent new bus station adjacent to the Harbour station. Pity Stagecoach first got out of the red by disposing of Southampton’s bus station for a huge profit.]

**Further reduced station facilities**

Winchester MP, Steve Brine, asked Stagecoach to take urgent action to help morning commuters at Winchester rail station. The ticket office on the London-bound platform was ‘closed until further notice’ and the ticket machines unreliable. A SWT spokesman said: “There appears to have been some misunderstanding that has resulted in the ticket office on one side of the station being temporarily closed. We will be ensuring that the two members of staff at the station are covering both of the ticket offices.” [Source: Daily Echo 12.7.2017]. Alas, communication was never a strong point with SWT.

**Lack of information**

Despite the prolonged chaos from work at Waterloo, a SWT engineering work notice for week commencing 19th June was still on display at Lymington Pier station on the weekend of August 5-6.

**Costa staff at Waterloo threatened with prosecution for selling coffee for homeless people**

A member of the public who tried to buy a coffee for a homeless person was apologetically refused by staff at Costa on Waterloo station. They said they had been warned by station security guards of prosecution if they served homeless people [Source: Evening Standard 19.7.2017]. Naturally, there were denials that such a policy existed, but coffee shop staff are hardly likely to invent such stories.

**Underfloor explosion on recently modified suburban train**

“At around 14.37 on Friday 7 July, an explosion took place inside an under-floor equipment case on the 14.37 Guildford to London Waterloo service, as the driver applied power to depart from Guildford station.

There were no reported injuries. However, debris, some quite sizable, was deposited on public platforms and the car park.

The train comprised two four-car class 455 units coupled together and the explosion took place under the third carriage of the leading unit.

Class 455 trains are undergoing a programme of retrofitting new traction equipment, which started in May 2016. The traction equipment involved was of the new design and the mechanism which caused the explosion was believed to be understood by the industry parties involved. Similar, smaller explosions, have occurred on at least two previous occasions where debris scatter was much more confined. The previous occurrences had been attributed to a manufacturing defect, leading to a build-up of explosive gas within the traction equipment. Industry parties were in the process of devising possible solutions to the problem at the time of the 7 July accident and are continuing to do so.” [Source: RAIB report]

Fortunately, this type of train is to be scrapped under the First/MTR rolling stock programme.

Newsboard

* The Secretary of State favours abandonment of first class accommodation on busy commuter trains.
* SWR has introduced Delay Repay for delays of 30 minutes or more (except where caused by scheduled engineering work). In addition, they have introduced refunds of up to twice yearly (the second with a £10 administration charge) where commuters pay because they have forgotten their season tickets. One refund annually is applicable where someone pays because they have forgotten their railcard.
* A new station at Reading Green Park has been approved. It will be served by GWR Basingstoke-Reading trains.
* Rolling stock has now been removed from Fawley sidings, and the line is effectively closed south of Marchwood. Councillor David Harrison has told the Daily Echo that talks about restoring a passenger service to the line are continuing at a high level in government. Transport Secretary Chris Grayling has previously expressed interest in restoring services where track exists, for example between Exeter and Okehampton.
* The independent Transport Infrastructure Task Force is calling for the costs of a rail or road tunnel to the Isle of Wight to be explored. The related article in the Daily Echo of 27.7.2017 showed how the tunnel entrance might look (assuming a four-lane road!). However, the main objective of the initiative appears to be to encourage ferry operators to lower their fares.

A road tunnel would be convenient for island motorists, but the island’s roads would struggle to cope with incoming traffic and the character of the area could be destroyed by the infrastructure works needed to accommodate it. Buses currently play a major role in the island’s road transport, with an hourly service between the principal towns (routes 1 and 3) again scheduled for Christmas Day, something not even London enjoys.

A single-track rail link would be an attractive facility and promote social inclusion, but would probably not generate enough profit for a private rail company. How different from the sparsely populated Scottish Western Isles, where EU grants have secured remarkable projects such as the causeway across the sea from South Uist to Eriskay.

Acknowledgements / Contact details

As always, thanks to everyone who has been kind enough to contact us. Without your support and input, this newsletter would not be possible. It is produced in good faith, based on reports and information from many individuals and sources including from press and website research. Contributions are always welcome. We aim for accuracy at all times, because our good reputation depends on it. We do not use material which could be offensive or which appears unlikely to be correct.

Address for correspondence: Denis Fryer, 19 Fontwell Close, Calmore, Southampton SO40 2TN. E’mail: denisfryer44@gmail.com