

Update – through train services Bristol Temple Meads to London (Waterloo)

Notes, 22nd November 2021, correlated by Graham Ellis. Working with West Wilts Rail User Group, TravelWatch SouthWest, Coffee Shop forum, Railfuture Severnside and Wessex branches, Two Tunnels and Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways and with supportive input from many other sources.

Background

The through train service from Bristol Temple Meads via Trowbridge to Clapham Junction and London (Waterloo) has run from before rail privatisation - since that date in the 1990s being run by Wales and West, Wessex Trains, South West Trains and currently South Western Railway (2). Initially 3 trains a day into Bristol, it rose to 4 and then to 5 immediately pre-covid (early 2020). The trains are popular and busy all along their route, indeed the fifth service was added as a commercial undertaking on top of the franchise - so good was/is the case. (1)

Amongst the benefits the service provides are:

1. Direct trains from Keynsham, Oldfield Park, Bradford-on-Avon, Trowbridge and Warminster to London. Otherwise (A couple of tiny exceptions - (3)) passengers from these stations are required to change trains, often multiple times (4) to make the same journey
2. Passengers from Bristol Temple Meads, Bath Spa and Westbury have a choice of services to "London" (6). Their other direct train services arrive into London's Paddington station rather than Waterloo - the busiest station in the UK with lots of connection opportunities, and lots of destinations within walking and cycling distance including major passenger flow generators. Clapham Junction is the busiest junction in the UK, offering an additional and different wide range of connections.
3. The services also provide direct service from Surrey and North Hampshire (Woking, Basingstoke and Andover) to West Wiltshire and Severnside (Bath and Bristol)
4. Significant local traffic is carried both between Salisbury and Bristol, and Salisbury and London, and intermediately in those segments. In association with other trains on those segments, they make up a much more attractive complete service than would be offered if they were simply removed from the timetable.(5)
5. Between Salisbury and Westbury, SWR's trains provide train crew route knowledge needed for engineering diversion of their Exeter to London service.
6. Day return fares are offered on the trains into Waterloo, offering an affordable day trip not only for leisure traffic but also for developing traffic such as office visits for people now predominantly working from home. Many other fares on this route are better than the Intercity fares on the Paddington routes which have their origins in the High Speed Train days - offering a faster service but at a substantial premium. (8)

What's planned

On 28th July 2021, South Western Railway issued a 43 page consultation for their services from December 2022 to Stakeholders in their planned area of operation for 2023. On page 37, it stated SWR services between Westbury and Bristol Temple Meads are to be withdrawn from December 2021 and that this is a separate decision from any outcome from the consultation - it is already decided.

* As from 12th December 2021, South Western Railway will no longer serve Trowbridge, Bradford-on-Avon, Bath Spa, Oldfield Park, Keynsham, and Bristol Temple Meads. All through

trains from any London station to Trowbridge, Bradford-on-Avon and Oldfield Park will cease to run, and Keynsham will only have a single direct train from London (Paddington) at 06:20 on Mondays to Fridays

* In addition to these cuts, the SWR Salisbury to London service outside "peak hours" is reduced from 2 trains per hour to 1, with a second train that used to run from Salisbury calling additionally at Grateley, Overton and Whitchurch now terminating at Basingstoke and not offering passengers from those stations daytime or evening direct London services

* In further addition, 2 out of the 3 GWR services per day that run south from Westbury via Salisbury and terminate as Southampton Central are to be withdrawn "south of Warminster" though in practise at least one of them does not even run from Westbury to Warminster in draft timetable data. (7)

Is the plan right?

I do **not** believe so, because it significantly impacts all the benefits provided by the services (see above), in many cases to the extent of destroying rail traffic and regrowth opportunities too. It's pushing people away from rail onto road, or back into their homes, not travelling at all. It's a significant hurdle for places like Bradford-on-Avon where the economy has a major tourist element, but those tourists won't be able to get there without negotiating a train change any longer.

At a time when MetroWest plans to increase services on the Bristol - Bath corridor, it is perverse to throw away the current extra services and leave a hole - a market that is already served and will need to be rebuilt when MetroWest starts against a background of mistrust, knowing that services will be axed if it suits the Department for Transport. Better to feed the services in.

I am not advocating keeping the services exactly as they are for ever - I am advocating them continuing while we work out what is best to provide the benefits that the wider user base and community need. Various suggestions have been made but they need to be developed from where we are today, and not from the base of a service removed and customers drained away.

Where do we stand today?

We have over 6,000 signatures on a petition asking the Department for Transport to carry on running the service while proper consultation and future direction planning is undertaken. Of those, around 1,400 each are in Andrew Murrison's constituency and a further 1,400 in Michelle Donelan's - the most-signed open petition for either of them at present.

Transport Focus, The WECA mayor, the Wiltshire Councillor for Transport, with Swindon and Wiltshire LEP, and the Western Gateway sNTB have raised/flagged it, in support of a similar line to we have taken, with the Department for Transport. The Rail Ombudsman has advised us that this matter does not fit within their remit

A Freedom of Information request has revealed that the DfT took the decision without consultation and with poor data in the spring and it only came to public attention long after it could not be changed under normal industry processes.

Some 100 people (50 in person, 50 online) attended a public meeting in October addressed by South Western Railway who's rep was 'supported' by a representative of the Department for Transport, who said little. Explanations were offered (9), and a promise was made to see if connections in Salisbury could be improved from December 2022. The explanations and offer did not satisfy the audience. At the time of that meeting, we were just shy of 3,000 signatures. Note that the number of names on the petition has DOUBLED since then.

MPs Wera Hobhouse, Thangam Debbonaire, Michelle Donelan, Andrew Murrison, Ranil Jayawardena and probably others have raised this with the Department for Transport but

answers have been similar to the ones we received at the public meeting and less than satisfactory. Michelle (my MP) has asked for a minister to visit the constituency soon, and tells me she continues to press the case; it's unclear if the minister's visit would be to address the culling of the Waterloo trains from Bradford-on-Avon (we could dream of a positive announcement if he comes in person), or to help maximise publicity for the £50,000 awarded to Corsham for a business case to be made for a new station there.

In the House of Commons (17.11.2021), Dr Andrew Murrison who's constituency includes Trowbridge said "Will he throw my constituents a small crumb by delaying the planned closure of services from Bristol Temple Meads to Waterloo via Trowbridge and Salisbury, pending a proper consultation that will show very clearly that the South Western Railway service he thinks duplicates services run by Great Western Railway is over capacity now and certainly will be once he closes the SWR service?". Sadly, the minister spoke of his visit to Okehampton where passenger trains are starting again this weekend, and told Dr Murrison that we have to think of the country as a whole.

As of today, we continue to encourage people to sign the petition and to write to their MPs. The weight of argument from almost all quarters in favour of the suggestion are beginning to get through with our representatives appreciating the desirability of continuing the service next year. That said, as senior members of the government, a number of them may have been instructed to toe the line and are looking to ride this one out. "I have raised this with the minister" is a good soundbite.

Evidence suggests that SWR have already been reducing their staff / availability in preparation for the cuts – which they have known about for six months – and indeed ceased the very popular Saturday services (perhaps the busiest ones in the week?) in October, claiming "staff shortage". Also perhaps a very good way of presenting a "fait accompli", and coming up with some rather poor figures for November is a "recount" is demanded. They will have been helped in this with the line in Salisbury being closed for a fortnight due to the accident there on 31st October – and any suggestions that use has dropped off should be met with a reminder that – just perhaps – it's because the through trains weren't running.

From my earlier "cheat sheet" when doing radio interviews, talking of the suggestion of keeping the service running - the following remains valid:

- our suggestion would be good for passengers and town's economies
- our suggestion would be good for climate, cleaner air, congestion
- our suggestion would be good for MPs
- our suggestion would be a long term, affordable, clock face services
- our suggestion would be good for Dft and government

Marketing / User Groups

You'll note a long list of user groups who have come together to strongly support the request for a better way forward to be found – and for the service to be retained through 2022 while that is done with proper consultation. I'm not only co-ordinating the campaign to help work out what's better, but also offering with those groups to help promote and market the service into the future and to work in pragmatic partnership – very much like I and many other involved have done for the Swindon – Westbury service which was the fastest growing in England for a number of years (passenger journeys up 25 fold at Melksham – we could NOT match that statistic on the Bristol – Waterloo service because it wouldn't have enough room!)

Footnotes

(1) on train busyness

It is telling that SWT chose to increase services along this route - so it must have made commercial sense. Our SWR rep in October showing loading graphs, but as yet has not provided the requested copy of the presentation so I am writing from a quick look at a chart only. I believe I saw loading figures substantially in excess of the industry norm, which is

between 20% and 30% (you must bear in mind that trains tend to be quiet in the very middle of the day and early and mid evening, and this tends to drag the figures down.

(2) on running beyond

The Waterloo - Bristol train historically ran beyond Bristol into South Wales, with some services carrying on beyond Swansea and others up "the Marches" line via Hereford and Shrewsbury. Such long distance through trains on secondary routes are not fashionable these days, but there is little doubt that a significantly larger market is available for a through trains than for a journey that requires changes. By having the through trains as part of the "clock-face" timetable, the through train doubles up as the regional / more local service too, making for much more efficient operation.

(3) on extra trains

Bradford-on-Avon will still have one GWR direct train to Paddington at 05:35 (yes, before 6 in the morning) and Trowbridge will have one at 06:41. There will be no direct trains back. A train at 06:20 from London will call at Keynsham, and a train at 17:35 will run through to London (Paddington). The only through train from London to Warminster will leave Waterloo at 07:50; there will be three through trains per day in the other direction.

(4) on changes

Official line - "change at Salisbury - often quite a short wait, or at Bath Spa".

In practice - if you change at Salisbury your short wait is only to / from the local train to Basingstoke where you have another change and wait (for the train that's come from Salisbury anyway) for Woking, Clapham Junction or Waterloo.

In practice - from Keynsham or Oldfield Park you'll need to change at Westbury as well as Salisbury

In practice - whilst there ARE lifts, changing at Bath can be problematic ... and then you end up in Paddington and if you're headed for south London there are more lifts and stairs to navigate onto and off the underground.

(5) on frequency, capacity, reliability

There are capacity and reliability issues on the GWR's Bristol - Salisbury section and have been for years. It's now 2 years since we were promised that all trains would be 5 carriages but last week (for example / CDF - SAL, w/c 8.11) just 14 carriages were operation on the hourly semi-fast service - that's just 56% of the 25 needed. They're full and overcrowded and can hardly cope even with the GWR trains. Connections oft miss too - delayed trains, connections dispatched as people arriving on delayed trains run up to them, etc. A sorry story. No sign of the 2 x 5 car trains per hour that the DfT believed were running in making their decision.

(6) on separation of Waterloo and Paddington

<https://www.facebook.com/graham.ellis.5055/posts/10159553106382094>

(7) on GWR's service cuts

Although not consulted, there is some sense in cancelling the 11:11 Westbury to Southampton and its return trip,

(8) on premium fares

Bristol to London via Reading - £230.00 anytime return. Via Salisbury, £91.60 anytime return

(9) on explanations

see <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/16-reasons-continue-through-trains-london-graham-ellis/>

22.11.2021 - GE - V0.91