**Hogrider 169 (May 2024)**

**South Hampshire Rail Users’ Group Newsletter**

**1. SOUTHAMPTON’S PRIVATISED RAIL SERVICES: MORE TRAINS TO**

 **FEWER PLACES AND ANOTHER POPULAR SERVICE WITHDRAWN.**

 **WILL LABOUR’S POLICY ON ‘GREAT BRITISH RAILWAYS’ HELP?**

Q: What have the following in common? Scotland, The North East of England, The North West of England, The Anglo-Welsh Borders, South West Wales, Devon and Cornwall?

A: Prior to rail franchising, they all had direct train links with Southampton Central. These were operated by the InterCity and Regional Railways sectors of British Rail. Southampton was perceived as a ‘honeypot’ station.

This was part of a deliberate policy to promote a wider range of direct services to drive passenger growth to help meet British Rail’s contract to the Thatcher government to reduce subsidy.

Direct services are very attractive to non-regular passengers. Where they are lacking, people often perceive coach travel as more convenient, so rail usage and revenue reduce and the need for subsidy increases. Crucial factors are concerns about navigating unfamiliar stations, particularly where trains are switched between platforms shortly before departure time, and the widespread practice of refusing to hold ‘connections’ even for a few seconds.

The ‘customer-unfriendly’ practices are stacking up on the privatised railway. Passengers changing trains may have heavy luggage, they may be elderly or disabled, or accompanied by small children. The lifts may be too small to cope without delaying them, even at major interchanges.

Timetabling changes haven’t helped. The weekday stopping trains from Southampton to Bournemouth now depart just a few minutes after the ‘connecting’ services from Waterloo arrive. Retiming of the weekday stopping trains from Southampton to Portsmouth from 2nd June will replicate this problem on the opposite side of the hour.

Inevitably, able-bodied people run up and down steps and disabled people get left behind. There is now a plethora of standard safety announcements across the railway. In the West Midlands, announcements even urge passengers to alight from trains to platforms before trying to lift their luggage off. How long before this practice spreads to South Western Railway, which was unlucky enough to inherit a large fleet of bargain class 450 trains, without outside steps, from Stagecoach?

Once, the railways strove to be user-friendly. Remember the unveiling of the XP64 carriage seat, based on ergonomic principles? Or BR’s acclaimed recast of the whole Southern Region timetable from 1967? This wouldn’t happen today. Huge sums have been squandered on the development of a considerable range of carriages to perform comparable duties. Finding seats which align with windows can be a lottery. The practice of letting paths to individual operators means that drafting a timetable is like struggling with a jigsaw.

**The downgrade of the popular Southampton-Gatwick service from hourly on weekdays to five trains a week, after 33 years of operation, when there have been many initiatives to improve links between rail and air elsewhere, is not just disappointing in itself, but because Govia, which runs (or rather, ran) the service, was one of the more highly regarded operators.**

They tell us that there will be convenient connections at Chichester or Barnham, but ‘convenient’ means journey times being extended by over 20 minutes on a route that was already necessarily circuitous, not to mention extra luggage manoeuvres and finding seats on successive trains.

Weekly departures from Southampton to Brighton in 2005: 30, and weekly departures calling at Gatwick Airport: 85. This year, the figures switch to: weekly departures from Southampton to Brighton: 201. Weekly departures from Southampton to Gatwick Airport: 5 (the 06.37 Southampton-Victoria on Mondays to Fridays). The rationale for switching trains from the Gatwick route to the Brighton route simply hasn’t been made. Brighton is nowadays a major university centre, but Gatwick is a major international airport.

It is possible to travel from Southampton to Gatwick Airport via Clapham Junction, but that is not particularly convenient, especially with heavy luggage, and direct services between Southampton Central and Clapham Junction are virtually non-existent in the long commuting peaks.

**Would the transformation to Great British Railways have helped?**

At the time of writing, a Labour government from 5 July appears virtually certain. One hopeful note in railway terms is that Great British Railways (the Conservative Party’s proposed ‘guiding mind’ for the railways) would become a ‘directive mind’. This might prove beneficial.

We’ve had a ‘guiding mind’ already: the Strategic Rail Authority which antagonised its political masters through its laissez faire attitude, particularly towards the now banished South West Trains. What does loss of the Gatwick-Southampton service tell of the status quo? Rail franchises (Cross Country excepted) are designed to serve geographical areas and take care of the stations. The system is imperfect because operational overlaps are necessary to maintain a network. Such issues would not have arisen in the days of joined-up British Rail.

The boundary between Southern (part of the Govia Thameslink Railway franchise) and the South Western Railway franchise is Havant. The station is used by services on the Waterloo-Portsmouth direct line and is the responsibility of the latter franchise.

It is beyond argument that Southern’s revised West Coastway weekday (Sundays unchanged) timetable from 2nd June is beneficial to passengers in its own franchise area (east of Havant), and disadvantageous to those in the SWR franchise area (west of Havant). So the case starts to be made for the ‘directive mind’ approach.

Here's another oddity. Southern’s new timetable was apparently driven by a rolling stock shortage following the welcome withdrawal of the old and toilet-less class 313 trains. SWR spent millions refurbishing the popular class 442 trains. It then scrapped the units in haste and spent further large sums on refurbishing the more spartan class 458s, only to find it could manage with its considerable fleet of class 450 units.

Now, *Modern Railways* (June issue) reports consideration of a longer term plan to convert some of the latter to electric/battery bi-mode units to replace the ageing class 158 diesel units on the Waterloo-Exeter route, currently electrified as far west as Worting Junction (Basingstoke).Couldn’t a directive mind have got SWR to lend some units to Southern? It wouldn’t be the first case of such contracts between train operators.

Finally, history suggests that optimum outcomes on the railway are achieved when the people with the right experience and right ambitions for rail users are directing. The railways have produced many examples over the years; in more recent times the likes of Chris Green, Sir Peter Parker, Sir Bob Reid and Christopher Garnett come to mind. Their contemporary counterparts will be out there, somewhere.

**2. TIMETABLE CHANGES IN SOUTH HAMPSHIRE STARTING SUNDAY 2ND JUNE 2024**

**[**This is a summary of changes for broad guidance only. Every effort has been made to ensure accuracy but we cannot accept responsibility for the information given, particularly as timetables may change temporarily with limited notice.]

**Cross Country**

The basic hourly services between Bournemouth, Southampton Central, Southampton Airport Parkway, Winchester, Basingstoke, and Manchester Piccadilly via Reading, Oxford, Birmingham New Street, and Stoke-on-Trent continue.

**However, on Saturdays from 8th June to 7th September inclusive, services at Winchester and Basingstoke will be severely reduced to relieve overcrowding.**

The following Basingstoke stops are removed: (southbound) 09.11, 10.12, 12.12, 14.11, 16.11, 17.11, 18.11, 19.11, (northbound) 10.48, 11.49, 12.48, 14.48, 18.49, 19.50.

The following Winchester stops are ‘set down only’ southbound, and ‘pick up only’ northbound: (southbound) 09.26, 10.26, 12.26, 14.26, 16.26, 17.26, 18.26, 19.26 (northbound) 10.31, 11.32, 12.31, 14.31, 18.31, 19.32.

**These changes will inevitably cause inconvenience, especially to Basingstoke passengers. The choice of services looks odd. For example, why should** *alternate* **trains on an hourly service need to shed stops to reduce crowding?**

**So think of the trains rather than the services they operate. It’s clear that some are subject to the reduced stops both towards Bournemouth and on their return journey. It looks likely therefore that these will be single-unit trains with only 4 or 5 coaches.**

**In addition, the former two-hourly service between the North East and Southampton was cut south of Reading because of the pandemic. So the Manchester services are now acting as connections to and from Southampton, with obvious implications for crowding.**

**Restoration of the Southampton-North East services is long overdue. The pandemic started just as Cross Country’s 2020 summer timetable was promising imrovements on Mondays to Fridays, with a round working from Edinburgh and back, and the evening service to York extended to Newcastle.**

**Southern (following their consultation on the original proposals)**

**Southern has amended its original proposals, so that one train per hour will run from Brighton to Portsmouth & Southsea instead of from Brighton to Chichester via Littlehampton.**

**One stated advantage of the changes is that the Victoria-Portsmouth trains will have time to run through to Portsmouth Harbour. So the Brighton-Portsmouth & Southsea trains must be seen as a downgrade of the withdrawn Brighton-Portsmouth Harbour trains.**

**Summary of changes to the basic timetable affecting Hampshire (excludes Sunday, when the existing services continue, but there are some weekday modifications mainly early and late in the day)**

Brighton to Southampton Central services:

13 past (final train 21.13): Hove, Portslade, Southwick, Shoreham-by-Sea, Lancing, Worthing, Angmering, Ford, Barnham, Chichester, Southbourne, Emsworth, Havant, Cosham, Portchester, Fareham, Swanwick, Woolston, Southampton Central.

43 past (final train 19.43): As 13-past, but not calling at Portchester.

Brighton to Portsmouth services:

28 past (final train 18.28): Hove, Portslade, Southwick, Shoreham-by-Sea, Lancing, East Worthing, Worthing, West Worthing, Durrington-On-Sea, Goring-By-Sea, Angmering, Barnham, Chichester, Havant, Fratton, Portsmouth & Southsea.

There are two out-of-sequence late services into Hampshire at 22.10 to Portsmouth Harbour and 22.40 to Havant.

Southampton Central to Brighton services:

These start at 05.50 and run half-hourly to 22.20, with a small number of departures varying by a minute or so. Stopping patterns are the same as for the 28/58-past westbound departures from Brighton. Only the 20-past each hour serves Portchester.

Although Southern has advertised Woolston stops, with the inconvenient option of travelling between Woolston and central Southampton by bus, no Woolston stops are shown in their on-line timetables, and passengers need to look on SWR’s on-line timetables to find them. (Note that, in any case, no Southern services stop at Woolston on Sundays)

**Southern’s driver familiarisation journey via Southampton Airport Parkway is now the 23.11 Southampton Central-Littlehampton on Mondays to Fridays.**

**Whilst Southampton will lose its Gatwick services, there will be two weekday services per hour from Portsmouth Harbour.** Early and late services are irregular, but the basic off-peak service comprises departures from the Harbour at 29 minutes past (which call at all stations (except Bedhampton) as far as Barnham, and 04 past (semi-fast). So Southampton’s loss becomes the gain of stations such as Warblington and Nutbourne. The number of trains to/from Gatwick per hour is Portsmouth Harbour (2), Portsmouth & Southsea (2), Fratton (2), Hilsea (2), Bedhampton (0), Havant (2), Warblington (1), Emsworth (2), Southbourne (2) Nutbourne (1), Bosham (1), Fishbourne (1), Chichester (2), Barnham (2). Services generally run fast between Barnham and Horsham and then attach (northbound) or detach (southbound) a Bognor Regis portion.

**SWR’s off-peak Monday-Friday Portsmouth Harbour-Haslemere-Waterloo services have been significantly recast, but not in the opposite direction or on Saturdays.** They now leave at 15-past (semi-fast, connecting with a 10-past Haslemere-Waterloo stopping service), and 33-past (running as a stopping service south of Haslemere, then semi-fast).

From Waterloo, and in both directions on Saturdays, there is a half-hourly semi-fast service between Waterloo and Portsmouth Harbour, with alternate trains overtaking a Waterloo-Portsmouth & Southsea stopping service at Haslemere.

**Portsmouth Harbour-Basingstoke-Waterloo services now start slightly earlier on weekdays, at 55-past.**

**Afternoon peak stock movements have produced two new services:** 14.55 Southampton-Waterloo, calling at St Denys, Netley, Fareham; Havant, Petersfield, Haslemere, all stations to Woking, then Clapham Junction and Waterloo and 18.55 Southampton-Woking calling at St Denys, Woolston, Fareham, Havant, Petersfield, Haslemere and all stations to Woking.

**Southampton-Portsmouth stopping services**: Mondays to Fridays 06.23, 07.23, 07.52, 08.28 and hourly to 21.28, 22.44; Saturdays 05.28, 06.28 and hourly to 21.28, 22.44. **Portsmouth-Southampton stopping services:** Mondays to Fridays 05.13, 06.48, 07.46 and hourly to 22.46 (There is also an 07.49 Fareham-Southampton Central, calling at all stations except Sholing and Bitterne). Saturdays 05.16, 06.46 and hourly to 22.46.

**SWANAGE REMAINS LEVELLED DOWN**

From the outset, railways helped to boost the economies of seaside resorts, which suffer from their predominance of seasonal trade. Since closure of the branch line from Wareham to Swanage around half a century ago, some determined and farsighted individuals have worked tirelessly to restore it.

The Swanage Railway operates steam and diesel services between Swanage and Corfe Castle, and then on to a purpose-built park and ride station at Norden. This is one of Dorset’s major tourist attractions and, as such, a boost to the local economy.

The final aspiration was to run direct services between Swanage and the SWR station at Wareham, using a heritage diesel train. This was achieved on 90 selected days in 2017 and 2023.

Although operationally successful, the scheme has now been abandoned as uneconomic. The reasons cited are the large payments required by Network Rail to run the heritage trains over their tracks into Wareham station, and revenue extraction attributable to the £2.00 cap on single bus fares.

Occasional excursion trains will still be able to run through to Swanage, but regular services are not considered feasible without a subsidy.

Interestingly, SWR is floating the idea of a shuttle service between Brockenhurst and Wareham, an area already well served by rail. In addition, the hourly weekday semi-fast Waterloo-Weymouth trains now include a stopping portion between Bournemouth and Poole which has little point except to increase the service frequency at the suburban stations of Branksome and Parkstone. This seems an extravagant modus operandi.

The Government has made great play of ‘reversing Beeching’ and ‘levelling up’, which includes reconnecting communities to the national rail network. Couldn’t they nudge SWR to contract with the Swanage Railway to run at least a Saturday return service from Waterloo to Swanage and back, using a class 158 diesel unit, instead of near-empty stopping services between Bournemouth and Poole?

**IN BRIEF**

\* The westbound platform at Totton station is reportedly to be made accessible but there has been no related activity at the time of writing.

\* Plans for a major housing development on the site of Fawley power station have been under review. Questions have risen about the implications for the plan to restore passenger trains to Marchwood and Hythe. However, the population of Totton and the Waterside greatly exceeds that of the City of Salisbury, so there is already a clear case for improved services in the area. In addition, tackling severe traffic congestion between the Waterside and central Southampton just by adjusting traffic lanes needs to be considered against the failure of ‘smart’ motorways.

\* Outgoing Southampton Itchen MP, Royston Smith, called Southern’s decision to scrap Southampton-Gatwick services ‘hugely disappointing’.

\* Re-elected London Mayor, Sadiq Khan, is on record as a supporter of a Heathrow-Basingstoke train service. Trains could potentially extend to Southampton.

\* The mainline late evening service from Waterloo is unchanged. Below are the points made in the previous issue of our newsletter. We sent a copy to SWR, and they responded by saying that they would send a full reply shortly. Months later, we have to assume that their customer service has broken down.

“ Hoped-for improvements to late evening Monday-Friday services from Waterloo to stations between Southampton and Bournemouth have not materialised. Despite leisure travel accounting for a higher portion of demand since the pandemic ended, the need for convenient return travel after an evening in London appears to be off the radar.

After leaving Southampton Central at 23.24, the 22.05 Waterloo-Poole calls at Totton and then all stations to Bournemouth except remote Beaulieu Road. For local passengers it runs rather close to the last Southampton-Totton bus (Bluestar route 12) at 23.25.

The 22.35 from Waterloo serves only Brockenhurst, Bournemouth, Branksome, Parkstone and Poole.

The final service at 23.35 from Waterloo serves Totton, Brockenhurst, New Milton, Christchurch, Pokesdown and Bournemouth (all these stops are to set down only).

So the substantial towns of Totton, New Milton and Christchurch have no service from Waterloo between 22.05 and 23.35. Of course, it’s not only theatre-goers etc. who are affected. It’s passengers travelling from destinations further north (including those from Newcastle, York etc who no longer have direct Cross Country services to Southampton).”

**THOUGHT FOR THE TIMES**

With the economy damaged by Brexit, the pandemic, and Ms Truss, public expenditure will clearly remain constrained. Time to review the sectorised era of British Rail, when returns from rail were maximised by making timetables more attractive (including expansion of direct services to popular destinations) and even Mrs Thatcher’s government responded positively?

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS / ACCURACY / CONTACT DETAILS**

As always, thanks to everyone who has been kind enough to contact us. Without your support and input, this newsletter would be much less comprehensive. It is produced in good faith, based on reports and information from individuals and sources including the press and news websites.

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. However, we cannot accept responsibility for the multi-sourced information provided, particularly in relation to train times which may change at short notice for various reasons.

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