Through a glass, darkly

Transport and especially rail services have always been fraught in the Greater Bristol area. There are many reasons such as lack of political will, in-fighting between different interest groups and councils, etc. However, at present things appear to be more murky than usual and trying to find out what plans there are for rail provision in this area is like trying to see through a glass, darkly! There appears to be so many interlocking factors affecting every rail improvement plan - with log jams occurring every step of the way. What is happening with the Portishead line re-opening, what chances are there for a Henbury Loop (rather than just a Henbury Spur), how is the new West of England Combined Authority (WECA) going to improve transport and reduce congestion? Plans come and go, exciting pronouncements are made and then retracted and of course money is never available.

In this newsletter some articles will try and pick out the various key plans and decisions that could and probably will have an effect on our local rail system. Don't expect clarity - it's all murky in railway land!

Filton Bank Four Tracking

This is one of the good news story at present. Network Rail are getting on with the works which will be completed in 2018 (fingers crossed!). Ongoing work includes:

**Muller Road Bridge**: strengthening works and improvements to the road rail access point off Muller Road.

**Easton Road Bridge area**: after replacement of the old bridge, there is work still needed to tidy up after the works.

**Ashley Hill embankment**: Piling and soil nailing (slope stabilisation) will be carried out at Ashley Hill North and South during November 2017 to May 2018

**Ashley Hill footbridge**: A new replacement steel footbridge was installed in August and will open in early 2018.

**Narroways cutting & footbridge**: The footbridge was closed on 28 August, will be demolished/ replaced during 18/19 November and then opened in February 2018. Meanwhile the footbridge abutments are being removed, the slopes regraded and reinforced.

**Horfield cutting**: Extensive earthworks from south of Bonnington Walk bridge to Filton Abbey Wood station have been substantially completed. Now the main excavation for the new track formation and drainage works are underway to be completed by February 2018.
Having reached the end of its life, the old 1850 Stapleton Road iron viaduct was demolished between 28 July and 14 August. Ground works are now being carried out in readiness for construction of the new bridge.

To see a short time lapse video of its removal go to: https://www.networkrail.co.uk/running-the-railway/our-routes/western/great-western-mainline/city-of-brisol/

Portway Park & Ride Station

A second good news story - it looks like this station might actually happen!

It was in 2009 that it was first proposed that a railway station should be built next to the Park & Ride site from which buses take people into the city along the Portway. The site presently has 580 car parking spaces, with provision for a further 270. This new station would give travellers an opportunity to nip onto the train and make their way into the city on the Severn Beach line - so for instance being able to go directly to Clifton Down or Temple Meads. It will also help improve access to the Temple Quarter Enterprise Zone and the Avonmouth Enterprise Area - both important employment growth areas. The plan was approved in October 2012 but a load of technical issues plus a lack of money meant that nothing happened for five years.
However on 28 June 2017, at the first meeting of the West of England combined Authority (WECA), it was announced that £2.25 M has been obtained towards the **£2.63M total cost** of the station. This £2.25M came from a successful bid of £1.67M from the Government’s New Stations Fund plus money from WECA and the West of England Local Enterprise Partnership. The remainder of the costs will be paid by Network Rail (£86,000) and Bristol City Council (£320,000).

The project is currently at the GRIP 3 Stage; apparently the Council was originally told that the GRIP process would not be needed, then it was told the opposite but hopefully now this process will be expedited. Ground surveys are being carried out and it is hoped that the station will become operational in 2019.

Photo from Bristol Post, August 2017

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**Rail Infrastructure Funding - some more good news**

In a written statement to Parliament on 12 October 2017, Transport Secretary Chris Grayling MP laid out the Statement of Funds Available (SOFA) to Network Rail for Control Period 6 (April 2019 to March 2024).

Network Rail will receive up to **£34.7 billion** of Government grant funding (the Network Grant) over that 5 year period. With other income from track access charges and commercial activity (such as property lettings) expected to be of the order of **£13.2 billion**, this means that NR will expect to have **£47.9 billion** of funds available. Actually there may be some adjustments made when the income figures for NR have been examined in more detail by the Office of Road and Rail (ORR) with a final determination in October 2018.
However the main point is that, despite all the gloomy predictions, Government is increasing its grant to NR from about £4 billion per year in the present CP5 to £7 billion per year in CP6. Remarkable! It seems that the Government, despite austerity, is not going to let the railways go down the pan.

The direct Government grant is for operations, maintenance and renewal of the existing railway. It should also be noted that this grant includes money for some enhancements (improvements) that were deferred from Control Period 5 (estimated at some £5 billion) - could this include the deferred electrification to Temple Meads? However new enhancements will be dealt with by a new process to be announced later.

**We should not think that this is going to directly solve all or any of the rail related problems in the South West and around Bristol - but at least it gives a glimmer of hope!**


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**Joint Transport Study (JTS)**

This study was commissioned and funded by the four West of England Unitary Authorities and part-funded by Highways England. Its aim was to set out a programme of transport schemes and interventions for the long-term development of the transport system in the West of England to 2036 and beyond.

The study itself is not a 'will do' document but will be used to compile the Joint Local Transport Plan (JTP) that is due to be published next spring. To go along with this, a Joint Spatial Plan (JSP) is being developed to set out a way forward for sustainable growth to help the Region meet its housing and transport needs for the next 20 years, to 2036. Once adopted the JSP will become a statutory Development Plan Document and will guide the four Councils in the development of their own Local Plans. It sounds complicated but actually makes good sense.

Coming back to the Joint Transport Study: it started in March 2015 and since then there have been a couple of consultations and various drafts. The final version (113 pages) was presented to WECA Joint Scrutiny Meeting on 22 September 2017; to look at it go to: https://www.westofengland-ca.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Item-13-Joint-Transport-Study.pdf.
The different components of the Transport Vision and estimated costs are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Est. costs (£ billion)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour change</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle routes</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buses</td>
<td>0.35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Metrobus</td>
<td>0.63</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mass transit</td>
<td>2.6 +</td>
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<tr>
<td>Park &amp; Ride</td>
<td>0.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rail</td>
<td>1.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Road Network</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8.9+</td>
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</tbody>
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* based on overall costs to 2036, taking account of inflation

As far as rail is concerned (it is assumed that Metro West Phases 1 and 2 are going ahead as planned - if only!) there are two rail projects in the JTS:

- **New Stations Package (Rail 1):**
  5 new stations - Constable Rd (Horfield), St Anne’s, Saltford, Charfield and Ashton Gate. Priced at £80m, assuming that 6 stations may be built - that works out at £13M per station, which does seem very high.

- **Station Upgrades and Service Improvements (Rail 2):**
  The station upgrades are: Major Improvements to Weston super Mare, Nailsea & Backwell - with upgrades to Yatton, Worle, Weston Milton, Oldfield Park, Keynsham and Yate (also Yate which will have an interchange with the Metrobus). Assuming 15 (?) stations improved with improved access and interchange, costing £80M.
  The service improvements include: Target for all stations to be served by at least 2 trains per hour in each direction, with increased capacity rolling stock to accommodate demand. Various capacity improvements to permit additional services in the future, for example an extra train per hour from Bristol to Gloucester (calling at Yate), Bristol to Exeter, etc. Initial priorities include re-modelling of Bristol East Junction and
delivery of the Masterplan for Temple Meads. Longer term improvements include major improvements between Westerleigh and Stoke Gifford junctions (to enable more trains between Bristol & Gloucester). The figure put on this is £500M.

Comments:

- We would love to have had more than just five new station re-openings - the FOSBR suggestions for MetroWest Phase 3 did mention five more - but still these will be welcomed if they come to fruition. This number of re-openings is certainly greater than we might have expected say 5 years ago.
- The station upgrades are welcome, especially the idea of developing interchange Hubs - rail-bus interchanges at stations. We note however that there only seems to be one station interchange planned for the Metrobus - at Yate station. The service frequency increase to 2 trains per hour at all stations (30 minute frequency) is something FOSBR has been demanding for several years (remember our 'Unite the City' campaign). So good news but surely some of these improvements should form part of the DfT franchise requirements?
- Overall there is an apparent greater emphasis on public transport, coupled with various measures that could change travel behaviour, specifically to encourage more people to switch from using cars (what is called 'modal shift'). There is even a mention in the document that 'a combination of a Workplace Parking Levy and Road User Charging would help to encourage mode shift and improve the performance of the transport system'.
- Many of the public transport initiatives are to be applauded - more cycle routes, park & ride schemes, Metrobus development, etc. The 'mass transit' proposals, although obviously very fuzzy at the moment, are at least showing that some imagination ('blue sky' thinking?) is being applied to solving the area's traffic problems. Light rail (which is probably what is meant by Mass Transit in the Transport Vision) is of course still a rail based scheme. However when reading through the document, it is apparent that the public transport proposals are less well developed than the road-based schemes.
- We are not happy about the proposed road schemes - which take up about a third of the transport budget over the next 20 years. It is good that some of the schemes proposed in earlier drafts have been dropped (for example the Saltford bypass) but we still think that there is an over-emphasis on road schemes to relieve congestion. We strongly oppose any such new road building to open up development sites - this encourages car use and is against the spirit of the Joint Local Transport Plan, which prioritises public transport and sustainable transport modes.

Of particular concern to us is the proposed extension of the urban area around South Bristol. The area around Whitchurch should not be developed further as it already suffers from considerable congestion. Further development is being used as an excuse to extend South Bristol Link Road and build the Whitchurch bypass. However the provision of a public transport alternative could enable some sustainable development to take place in the Whitchurch area.
The Study talks about the importance of the Bristol Port facility at Avonmouth both locally and nationally. It also states that an increased focus on rail freight will help reduce lorry movements and congestion on the Strategic Road Network. But nowhere is there any discussion on how improvements can be made to the freight rail network.

We are also very unhappy about two rail based schemes that have been specifically ruled out of the Transport Vision within the next 20 years: (a) the Henbury Loop and (b) the Rail link to Thornbury.

The reasons for not considering the Thornbury link are discussed in the article on the 'Thornbury Branch Line' later in this newsletter but the Henbury Loop decision will be discussed in the next section.

All in all, the JTS has a lot to commend it but of course we have reservations and criticisms about some aspects of it. FOSBR has submitted a formal statement about the Transport Study for the WECA Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting on 24 October. What we do not know is how much the JTS proposals can be changed when it is used to formulate the Joint Transport Plan (part of a statutory Development Plan for the area). Is it a fait accompli or will WECA still listen to suggestions for improvement?

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Henbury Loop and Port Access

The Henbury Loop versus Henbury Spur argument has been going on for ages (as featured in detail in our newsletters nos. 89 and 90). Obviously the Loop will not occur as part of MetroWest Phase 2 but we and many other rail campaigners, local Councillors and MPs think that it is a vital component of public transport for the Bristol area. It is needed to enable access to Severnside which is due to expand considerably (25,000 jobs) and can only be reached by public transport with great difficulty. It is a social equity measure as well as a transport proposal. The Loop would provide improved access for those in Henbury, Filton, Patchway, Horfield, Lockleaze, Easton, Lawrence Hill, and other areas that would connect well with the loop by bus.

The JTS report does not consider the Henbury loop to be viable although it does make the suggestion that it could be looked at again in the future subject to the outcome of further feasibility work. It has been suggested to us that such a study would cost about £50K - anybody got any spare cash?

One reason for not taking forward the Henbury Loop scheme is related to the 2015 CH2M Hill report about the Henbury Loop and Spur. This report had very serious flaws such as unrealistically low predicted passenger demand and growth, no account of benefits to the local businesses on Severnside, etc, etc. FOSBR and others have put in many statements criticising the assumptions in this report but to no avail. Based on these incredibly low passenger figures, it was assumed that a train subsidy would be needed for 30 years and so the resultant Benefit: Cost Ration (BCR) came out very low.
In reality, the main reason that the Loop is being dismissed is because of problems with access to the Avonmouth port:

- Bristol Port hopes to develop a Deep Sea Container Terminal - apparently they estimate that the proposed terminal will generate some 1800 new jobs and be worth over £114M to the local economy. Thus it is important not only to the Port but also to the area. If, or when, they get their container port built, they don't want to have years of negotiations with Network Rail to get the capacity for freight increased and so do not want to lose any existing capacity due to use by passenger trains.

- They are also concerned over their access to the Port which crosses the Severn Beach line at St Andrews Gate level crossing. An increased amount of passenger trains would lead to the level crossing being closed for longer periods, limiting lorry movements into the port. Network Rail did a study on the costs for a rail cutting at the level crossing; although nothing has been published, we have been told that NR has come up with a figure of £128M. Without any further information, nobody is able to challenge this sum - although of course there are many instances where NR costs for rail schemes have been found to be seriously flawed. Think about the Portishead line!

Besides the suggestion for either sinking the train line in a cutting under the access road (*but what about drainage and flood risk?*), some people have advocated a rail fly over - but the trouble is that there would need to be long elevated ramp sections either side of the access road (the train can't go over a humped back bridge!). So some other way needs to be found. The trouble of course is cost - who is to pay for it? But if the Port is such a strategic asset, then it should be the Government (DfT) that funds access improvements - what about the Strategic Freight Network fund?

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Portishead Passenger Service Re-instatement

In the last newsletter, we reported on the extraordinary increase in cost estimate to re-open the Portishead line for passenger service - a three-fold increase from an original estimate of £58M to a staggering £145-£175M. This caused outrage at the time - what has been happening since?

In the previous newsletter, we reported that £1.6M extra funding had been put aside for further technical work on the proposed scheme. This has been continuing with only rumours coming out about what was being considered. Because of the seeming endless delays to the scheme, a proposal was put forward by Mark Weston (Councillor for Henbury & Brentry) that the timing of the MetroWest phases should be changed - with the Phase 2 part of the scheme (which includes the Henbury Spur) being brought forward before Phase 1 (The Portishead line re-opening). One problem with this is that apparently Phase 2 can only be successful if Bristol East Junction is re-modelled - and that is going to take some time. Another suggestion this summer was that Ashton Gate should be re-opened first before completing the passenger service to Portishead. Of course both of these suggestions, although perfectly sensible, do risk the Portishead scheme being kicked into the long grass - for a very long time!
Thus it was pleasing to see a recent email from James Willcock (MetroWest Phase 1 Project Manager) that was upbeat about the Portishead re-opening. He suggested that things are looking good for an hourly Temple Meads to Portishead service plus the half hourly upgraded service for the Severn beach Line and the Bath to Bristol Line (i.e MetroWest Phase 1). The amount of engineering works required through the Avon Gorge and Ashton Gate has reduced dramatically, and as a result the cost of the project has reduced considerably. Although there is still a funding gap, the Project Group is actively working that through with the DfT and there are a number of opportunities to resolve it.

He also noted that they have looked in detail at the effect of the proposed service on the level crossing at Ashton Gate (Ashton Vale Road). For an hourly or hourly plus (with additional trains in the am and pm peaks) passenger train service, modelling has shown that the existing Ashton Vale Road level crossing can remain open with specific mitigation and it won’t be necessary to provide alternative highway access to the Ashton Vale Industrial Estate. In other words the cost of providing alternative road access to the Ashton Vale Industrial estate can be avoided.

It does look like things are moving ahead because the consultation document on the Development Consent Order being sought for the Portishead passenger service scheme has now been published. The ‘Stage 2 Consultation on re-opening the Portishead branch line as part of MetroWest Phase 1’ will run from 23 October to 4 December of this year. The timeline in this document shows that, if all goes well, work on the scheme should start in 2020. The consultation document can be found on at: https://metrowestphase1.files.wordpress.com/2017/10/27543-metrowest-phase-1-campaign-final-web-version.pdf.

We are still awaiting the revised proposals for the scheme being prepared by the outside consultants. Apparently they will be published at the end of October. We suspect that we may have reservations about some aspects of the proposals (and their costing). The question is: will anybody be able to question these proposals? There is nothing more to add at this stage - we shall just have to wait for the report and, in the next newsletter, we will let you know what is happening.

A story to highlight why this re-opening is so essential:
An interesting article in the Bristol Post ((19 October 2017) entitled 'Why we’re moving'. A woman and her husband moved to Portishead in February. She has to commute to Whiteladies Road in Bristol. 'Being only 9 miles out of Bristol with a 'regular' bus service, I was under the impression that I could commute by public transport every day. To anybody else considering this, don’t make that mistake. Portishead is definitely not a commutable distance from Bristol without your own car and permit to park'. Because of these problems, they are moving back to Bristol.

She found that she regularly had to wait over an hour at Sainsbury's waiting for a bus to turn up - a bit of a problem as she is 6 months pregnant- and so is often late for work. She added 'With no working train line and the cost of a taxi being over £25 one way, you are completely stranded [without a car]'. First Bus, in reply, said that they were doing their best to improve services but the effect of traffic congestion and poor bus priority infrastructure was making it problematic to meet the timetable.
We certainly have sympathy with the bus operator. How can they run a good service when there are so many cars on the road at the best of times - and of course complete gridlock if there is an accident on the roads or some major roadworks. This all makes the case for the rail service more pressing. Portishead will soon choke up unless something is done to relieve the pressure on the roads - a train service would reduce the number of cars travelling to the town via the congested roundabout at M5, Junction 19 and thus free up those who really do need to travel on them - including buses. Otherwise, sooner or later, there will have to be a major road scheme to accommodate all the cars - and then this will only lead to a further increase of traffic as more people decide to try their luck on the roads.
The Bar-Belgrade Railway

The Bar-Belgrade railway runs 300 miles through the Balkans from the Montenegrin port of Bar to the Serbian city of Belgrade. It is a feat of engineering dating from the Tito Yugoslavia era, constructed from 1952 to 1976 with 254 tunnels and 435 bridges between the Adriatic and the Serbian capital.

Our 7am departure from Bar is made easy by the synchronised cockerel and goat alarm calls at our Airbnb in a suburban smallholding. As we are dropped at Bar station, cows are grazing the roundabout. Our taxi-driver had driven past the port to proudly point out NATO ships, Montenegro having joined only in May. This is a region at the crossroads of western/Russian influence; Serbia has a more ambivalent attitude towards HATO/NATO.

Our train is the slightly shabby second-class Tara; Tito’s splendid Blue Train is used only for occasional excursions. The train line follows the Adriatic coast north to Sutomore (pronounced Sutomor-ay) the name of which had caused some confusion at the ticket counter the previous day. “Ticket tomorrow?” “Sutomore?” “No, tomorrow”, “Sutomore?” and so on....

At Sutomore, the train turns inland to cross Lake Skadar on a causeway running alongside the ruined 18th century Lesendro fortress. After Podgorica (the Montenegrin capital) we pass Bioče where a 2006 derailment into a ravine caused the deaths of 45 people.

Since that accident, speed restrictions on the line have slowed the running time to 12 hours from the original 7 hours at the time the line was opened.

A lack of proper maintenance in the 1990s is being addressed by a rolling programme of track upgrades which also aims to improve the freight capacity from Belgrade to Bar port. (A Bar-Belgrade motorway is also under construction for this purpose.)

Safety procedures are different to those in the UK. Some level crossings are without gates or signals and the train approaches these with caution. The train doors do not lock and we pull away from one station with a slow-moving elderly lady halfway down the steps.
shouting for help as the train picks up speed. We haul her back in and she complains bitterly at having being to stay on the train to the next stop which is the other side of a mountain.

The villages are notable for their impressive woodpiles stacked ready for winter. Women seem as likely as men to be wielding an axe to split the wood. The train climbs steadily through hills and mountains offering increasingly spectacular scenery, at first rocky ravines and then lush wooded valleys. This 1000m ascent from Podgorica to Kolasin (at 1032m above sea level) is made in the relatively short distance of 70km. 1 ½ hours into the journey we cross the Mala Rijeka viaduct. From its construction in 1973 to 2001 this 200m high bridge was the highest railway bridge in the world until surpassed by the Chinese Shuibai railway bridge over the Beipan river (height 275m). A dozen rail bridges over 210m have been or are being constructed in China since 2001. In 2019 the record will likely pass to India with the completion of the Chenab river bridge in Jammu & Kashmir (height 359m).

By 10am we are at the Montenegrin border post of Bijelo Polje, followed by a Serbian passport check at Kumanica Monastery. The Serbian passengers leap out of their seats to photograph the monastery, so it must have great religious significance. At Prijepolje Teretna we are scheduled to make a 6 minute stop. 6 minutes turn into 60 minutes. Running low on snacks and drinks, due to unexpected absence of both buffet car and onboard vendors, we go in search of refreshments. There are no shops or facilities in this cargo depot. We ask other tourists, locals and evasive railway staff how long the stop will be and are told variously that there is a problem with the driver and/or the locomotive.

Our 4 words of Serbo-Croat are not enough to disentangle the explanations, but the conductor mutters “Minimum 1 hour”. Some passengers disembark to hitch a lift on the adjacent road. We wander up to the front of the train where various security staff are gathered around the locomotive and are told “No here” and “No photos”. The loco had changed at the border from a Montenegrin to a Serbian Railways unit (both electric) but is not undergoing any maintenance.
Back along the platform, a Belgian tourist (who happens to be a train driver back home) tells us that the loco is fine but the train driver has been arrested by police for smuggling and we have to wait for another driver. Sure enough, 3 hours after our scheduled departure time, a new driver arrives by car, we re-board and the loco pulls away. So whether or not the tale of the train driver in handcuffs is true, clearly there was some staffing issue rather than a technical issue.

Five minutes down the line the frustratingly brief stop at Prijepolje station does not allow time to visit the shops, but a coffee vendor boards with a pot of hot, strong coffee served in lurid pink plastic cups. The train follows the Lim River past the Potpec hydro-electric dam and then briefly wriggles through the edge of Bosnia. Back in Serbia the Zlatibor tunnel is line’s longest tunnel at 4 miles, leading into the town of Branešći.

It is getting dark somewhere around Uzice so we do not see much of the Serbian plains. The Serbian Railways website had warned of works on the line after Valjevo so we are prepared for a mid-evening substitution to Vreoci and then a modern suburban train. We pull in to Beograd Central at 10pm, relieved that we are only 3 hours later than the scheduled arrival time. And after a hungry journey, the sweaty cheese and limp lettuce bap from the station buffet tastes very good indeed!
Approximately 300 people turned out to celebrate the 90th birthday of Parson Street station on 3rd September 2017. The celebration was timed to coincide with the steam engine “Clan Line” departing on a Torbay Express excursion to Dartmouth. The speed of this train, and of the preceding HST, demonstrated the importance of the recently-painted yellow lines which remind passengers to stay well back from the platform edge. The fantastic Friends of Parson Street Railway Station (FOPSRS) group organized refreshments, stalls and music from the Ravens Marching Band. Special edition Parson Street fridge magnets proved popular and an information board about the station history was unveiled.

The new plaque is unveiled by (from left to right):

Mhairi Threlfall (BCC cabinet)
Malcolm Brammar (FOPSRS)
Mark Bradshaw (Councillor for Bedminster)
Keith Walton (Severnside Community Rail Partnership)
John Lanchester (GWR)
Well done Friends of Parson Street Railway Station for organizing this!
FoPSRS can be found on: Twitter@FoPSRS or on Facebook at
https://www.facebook.com/groups/1220052218062514/

**Ed:** We are pleased to note that, due to the efforts of FoPSRS, from 17 December 2017, more trains will be stopping at Parson Street on Sundays. Nine trains going to Temple Meads (starting from 12.37) and twelve trains from Temple Meads (starting from 10.22) will call at Parson Street — this is a dramatic increase on the current three northbound and four southbound.

News from Pilning Station  

Olga Taylor

Following the Summer-long publicity campaign by Pilning Station Group, residents have begun using the station in small yet significant numbers again - many for the first time, with some previously thinking that the station had either closed or not even existed. Figures, to be released in December, are expected to show a three-fold rise in journeys made between April 2016 and April 2017.

People have been coming from far and wide to visit the station, following the publicity it received after being named 3rd least used in the UK. Pilning has also appeared in recent regional TV news articles, acclaimed online documentaries (including Day 49 of the 'All the Stations' tour led by Geoff Marshall & Vicki Pope) and national railway publications.

On Friday August 25th, Olga Taylor, Chair of Pilning Station User Group, met with Jack Lopresti (MP for Filton & Bradley Stoke), highlighting the issues that lead to partial closure of Pilning Station last year.
Olga expressed local residents' dismay at Network Rail's use of the "Minor Modifications" procedure to enable it to close the westbound platform at Pilning Station with the minimum of consultation or discussion. The Minor Modifications process was intended to cover minor changes to (or closures of) parts of stations which were no longer necessary for the provision of a normal level of service. In our opinion, that definition cannot reasonably be stretched to include the closure of half a station, such that a service can only be provided in one direction, thereby rendering it virtually useless for all practical purposes and amounting to closure by stealth without going through proper formal closure consultative procedures. As such it would appear to be a misuse and abuse of the Minor Modifications process.

Olga therefore asked Jack Lopresti to address the Secretary of State, so that they would review the use by Network Rail of the Minor Modifications process in this case, with a view to requiring any future similar cases to be subject to the same full consultative process as total station closure. Jack promptly responded confirming that he had written to the Secretary of State for Transport about Pilning Station, renewing the case for the station.

Pilning Station Group, now represented on the GWR Customer Panel, has applied to the GWR Customer and Communities Improvement Fund for reinstating lighting on Platform 1, which would enable the trains to call after dark. Jack Lopresti has contacted GWR to express his support for this application. An answer is expected soon - we will publicise the response in due course!

Installing energy efficient lighting would permit a possible 3rd Saturday service stopping in the early evening (for safety reasons, trains are not permitted to call at stations in the dark if there is no lighting). The medium-term goal is the reopening of the westbound platform and a modest weekday commuter service for local residents travelling to South Wales or Bristol, as well as for employees coming to work in the nearby business and leisure developments. However, any improvements to services or facilities will depend on the best possible use being made of the current Saturday-only timetable.
The Pilning Station Group had negotiated with GWR for them to put on a special train (10.43 from Pilning) on Sunday 20th August. This allowed followers of 'Ploughfest' (the annual music festival held at the Plough Inn, Pilning) to get home in the morning after the festival held on the day before (they could get there on the Saturday but sadly not return on the Saturday).

25 people turned up for this event, to show support for the station - not only Ploughfest survivors but also local supporters who enjoyed day trips to places including Bath, Bradford-on-Avon and Westbury.

The train took a little over 14 minutes to reach Bristol Temple Meads, demonstrating starkly the benefits that rail can bring to the communities of the wider Severn Vale area of South Gloucestershire, especially if it is integrated into a local bus and cycle network.

The only disappointment was that no tickets were checked or fares collected, so those passengers who did not buy an advance ticket were not recorded. How can the station’s popularity be judged without proper ticket sale figures?

We are grateful to GWR for making it happen.

We have expressed our hope that, in future, GWR will also be helpful when further service improvements are being considered for Pilning.
So, this Autumn and Winter, start an adventure from Pilning! Why not take the train to a rural station in Somerset, Wiltshire or Gloucestershire, visit a country pub or enjoy a walk through colourful seasonal displays of nature at its very finest? Or perhaps just access Bristol, Bath, Cardiff, Gloucester or Cheltenham effortlessly for a festive shopping experience, Christmas show or meal. Passengers, who do not wish to double-back at Newport, may travel back to Severn Beach using a return Pilning ticket.

See our website for more information about current services, ideas for places to visit, latest news, campaign updates and details of an upcoming group outing in early December. It is also the place for station facts and history, more about media appearances and press articles, photo galleries, reports, chatter, trivia and challenges. Discover what a Pilning Grand Slam is and perhaps even attempt one yourself. Follow @pilningstation on twitter, or email savepilningstation@gmail.com for a free Pilning Station guide. Please contact us if you can bring any ideas or expertise to the group. We also welcome any general assistance including printing and distribution.

A petition ('Eradicate the loophole that allows railway stations to be closed by stealth') has been launched on the Parliament website to support the case. Please take a minute to sign it if you agree that Pilning Station should be rebuilt and returned to us, with a good train service. The link is - piln.in/sign

Thank you! Pilning Station Group (website: www.pilningstation.uk)

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Clifton Bridge Station, 22 May 1964  
(photo by Mike Farr)

Ed: No reason to put this photo in except that I like it. Thanks to Mike for this lovely picture of the now extinct station on a lovely sunny day, with Clifton and the Suspension Bridge in the background.
On 3rd July 2017, Class 166 units started running on the Severn Beach line, replacing the Class 150 Sprinter Units. Built during 1992-1993, these 3 car units had originally been used on the Thames Valley lines. They have been refurbished and mod cons include air conditioning, accessible toilets and WiFi. They can also carry more passengers than the previous train sets and so increase the capacity of the line (by about 35%). So all well and good and these new trains have been eagerly awaited.

Unfortunately it was only a few days after their arrival that news reports came in about delays and cancellations on the Severn Beach line. The Bristol Post ran a few articles on the very real problems that these delays have caused to passengers on the route. Our very own Terry Miller has been following this by looking at the actual records of train movements online - and since July the number of minutes of delays and cancellations have greatly increased above that in previous months. There has also been an increase in the number of trains that have turned back before reaching their destination - usually turnbacks at Clifton Down or Avonmouth stations, as well as reports of some stations
being missed out along the route. The main reason for turnbacks is to try and stop any further delays to the service timetable from an earlier train that has been particularly late.

There seem to be various factors causing the problems, such as:
- Crew training - apparently the Severn Beach line has been used as a 'training' centre for GWR crews working the Class 166 train sets.
- Because of width restrictions, some platforms at Temple Meads cannot be used by these new trains.
- On these Class 166 trains, the Drivers release the doors and the Guards close them but the Guards can only do this from the back cab. Due to the length of the trains the Guards cannot always see the whole train when shutting the doors and so, after shutting the doors, they have to walk forward to check that the doors are shut and nobody is trapped. They then walk back to the back cab to give the Driver "right a way" (2 on the buzzer). This of course all takes time and can cause delays.
- There has been understaffing, especially of fitters, which has led to delays in repairs as well as lack of train crews.

There has been sufficient concern about these problems that a delegation from Bristol City Council, Severnside Community Rail Partnership and our very own FOSBR met with GWR on 31st August to discuss. They were told that the main problem was due to train crews not being used to the new trains! During discussions, GWR were asked:
  - for experienced staff rather than trainees to run the trains at peak times
  - for trains not to miss out stations to try and catch up time - but instead to turn back
  - If turn backs are necessary, passengers should be made aware that they can use their train tickets on buses.

Apparently GWR has been working hard on a plan of action to solve the problems on the Severn Beach line and also the next phase of the cascade of the Class 166 Turbos from Thames Valley to the South West. We hope to catch sight of these planned actions in the near future. One action discussed at the August meeting was that GWR was planning to restore the Guard's ability to close doors from the middle of the carriages - we do not know if this will actually happen.

We have recently been told that two more Turbos were brought into service on the Weston super Mare to Bristol Parkway route on Monday 23 October and so far there appear to be less hitches than with the Severn Beach line. There are now 7 Turbos in Bristol, one being modified for use at Bristol and 6 available for operations, maintenance and training; four units are required for passenger service. It is hoped that this as well as increased experience amongst the train crews will help the problems.

Everybody agrees that the last 3 months' problems have been unacceptable and risk turning passengers away from using the Severn Beach line. This would be a tragedy considering the hard work that has been put in to improve the line over the last few years. We hope to report in the next newsletter that the situation is improving!
There has been much interest on local Thornbury and rail online forums over the last few weeks as line clearance was carried out on the Thornbury branch line. Local residents have been asking “Can the Thornbury line be opened to passengers ASAP?” As Tina (FOSBR secretary) responded, “ASAP is not in the WECA vocabulary!”

In 2017 freight traffic is due to return to the line after a 4 year absence. Network Rail have cleared the Thornbury branch line as far as Hanson’s Tytherington Quarry. The track has further been cleared past the quarry sidings from Grovesend Overbridge to form the headshunt for long trains. The freight track west of Grovesend bridge does not follow the original alignment of the passenger route; it runs along the south of the cutting embankment between Grovesend Overbridge as far as the A38 bridge. This level was created by gravel infill for a level formation for quarry trains.

The track along the base of the cutting was lifted after Thornbury line closure in 1966. A new passenger line would need to follow this (deep) original alignment to meet the central arch of the A38 bridge and Grovesend Tunnel west of the A38 (Grovesend Bridge to A38 bridge is 0.4miles). Although the Grovesend tunnel itself is open, it is blocked at its northern end by infill – which would need removing before track could be reinstated towards the town.

Thornbury station was originally located opposite Screwfix on the Midland Way. If Thornbury were to have a new railway station, it would likely be located east of town near the Midland Way/Grovesend Road roundabout (A38 to Midland Way is 0.3miles).
A view of the of the freight line just south of the Grovesend tunnel under the A38. This has now been cleared of its vegetation cover. It can clearly be seen that the line has been built up from (and skewed slightly to the left of) its original alignment - and so, the present embankment would have to be lowered back to its original level for passenger trains to pass through the tunnel to the other side of the A38.

The West of England Combined Authority (WECA) does not favour a rail link to the town and their preferred transport solution is Metrobus extension from Bristol. Luke Hall, MP for Thornbury has asked WECA about reinstating the line and they responded in June 2017, giving the same reasons as in the JTS report:

- The former line into the town has been built over and so the station would have to be at the edge of the town - this severely restricting likely passenger use. *(We think that our proposed site at the Grosvenor Road roundabout would not necessarily put people off using the service).*
- The Grovesend tunnel would need to be reopened and its current condition is unknown - *so what, why can its condition not be assessed?*
- It would be necessary to upgrade the whole line up from Yate to cater for the necessary safety requirements of a passenger service.
• Capacity constraints at Westerleigh Junction (but doesn't the JTS suggest capacity improvements at this and Stoke Gifford Junctions - which would alleviate this problem? Also the fourth platform at Bristol Parkway should also help with capacity at Westerleigh Junction).

Despite lack of WECA support, FOSBR hear great enthusiasm for rail re-opening from Thornbury residents. Accidents or breakdowns on the Midland Way “ring road” cause gridlock in the town and commuters are badly affected by incidents on the A38, M5 and M4.

A previous report in 2014 by Halcrow for West of England Partnership (WEP, forerunner to WECA) estimated that re-instating the line would cost £38 million, but this figure included the cost of running the railway into town (which FOSBR are not advocating). The report states “Extending the service to Thornbury from Yate would require further alterations at Yate Middle Junction, as at present trains from Thornbury cannot reach the southbound platform at Yate from the junction. The line from Tytherington to Thornbury would need to be re-established, a distance of just over a mile; however this work would require the re-opening of a tunnel to traffic, the demolition of approximately a dozen residential properties and the relaying of track along a footpath. Single platform stations are envisaged at Thornbury and Tytherington.”

FOSBR are interested to hear the opinions of local residents about rail to Thornbury. Please contact us via email to general@fosbr.org.uk

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Walks to FIVE public libraries along the byways, streams and woodlands of Bristol

As part of Bristol Walk Fest (started in May 2016), FOSBR and other ramblers have put together short, easy walks to 5 Bristol libraries - four of which start or end at railway stations. Details, including route maps and public transport connections, can be found on the FOSBR website (under 'Leaflets'). Have fun with these short walks and, of course, support our libraries!
Cabot Circus to J3 Library – 0.75 mile
From Champion Square take River Street, with the River Frome beneath your feet, until Riverside Park. Walk along the walled Frome to the colourful flats above J3 Library, Baptist Mills Court, BS5 0FJ. Stapleton Road station is not far away.

Sea Mills Station to Sea Mills Library – 1 mile
Starting where the River Trym joins the Avon, follow the Trym upstream through lush, green space to sturdy Sea Mills Library, Sylvan Way, BS9 2NA

Parson Street Station to Bishopsworth Library – 1.25 miles
After a short trudge along Hartcliffe Way, walk alongside the Malago through Manor Woods Valley to Bishopsworth Library, Bishopsworth Road, BS13 7LN

Greenway Centre to Westbury on Trym Library – 1.5 miles
From Greenway community hub, find the Doncaster Road kissing gate into Badocks Wood. The route runs downstream beside the Trym amongst lofty trees then zigzags through the charming village of WoT to Westbury on Trym Library, Falcondale Road, BS9 3JZ

Lawrence Hill Station to Wick Road Library - 3 miles
From Netham Park, admire the spectacular view of south Bristol, then follow the north bank of the River Avon, crossing the footbridge to the roundabout. Enter the woods and follow Brislington Brook through St Annes Wood and Nightingale Valley. Wick Road Library is at Wick Road, BS4 4HE

Membership Matters

Tony Lloyd (FoSBR Membership Secretary)

All those of you who sent their 2017 subscriptions by June this year should have received membership cards with the June (Number 94) newsletter. Thank you to all who sent their subscriptions since then – your membership cards are enclosed with this newsletter. We would also be happy to receive any other subscriptions for this year – every little bit helps!

Date for your Diary:

We are planning to hold our next FoSBR Annual General Meeting on the evening of Friday 26th January at the Alma Church Hall in Clifton. Full details will be sent to you later.

Our next newsletter will be in January 2018. If you have anything for the next newsletter (comments, photos, whinges, praise, poems, etc.), please send them in to us.

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