

# Melksham Rail User Group



## Minutes

24<sup>th</sup> February 2017 at 19:30

Melksham Town Hall

### Present

Peter Blackburn	Chairman	John Hamley	<i>Secretary</i>
Rolf Brindle	MWPC	Kevin Hayes	
David Carter		Paul Johnson	<i>Chair TWCIC</i>
Graham Ellis	Vice-Chair	David Phillips	<i>WC</i>
Lisa Ellis		Eddy Watts	
Judith Gradwell		Richard Wiltshire	<i>MTC</i>

### Apologies

John Glover *MWPC*

## 1. Minutes of meeting 5<sup>th</sup> October 2016 and 6<sup>th</sup> December 2016

- Minutes were agreed. Proposed GE, seconded PB.
- The draft new constitution will be refined over the next few months, but provides a basis for ongoing activities.

## 2. Promotion

- GWR will be running Swindon to Weymouth on summer Sundays in 2017, always good for promoting train services
- Good contact has been maintained with ACoRP
- A number of one-way dog walking outings, with return (or outward) by train are scheduled. (In addition the Wessex Wanderers run similar events on the adjacent Heart of Wessex route, and their next event will be on 24<sup>th</sup> May to Weymouth.)
- A proposal for mini-timetables covering Melksham to Bath and London are being considered.
- An updated website is being developed providing first source of travel information to the general public, including timetable and fares information.
- On 2<sup>nd</sup> March a special will be run from Swindon to Salisbury with Paul Maynard MP (who is responsible for rail matters) travelling. This service is being run to celebrate the success of the current services, and will be a springboard for additional enhancements. Press coverage will provide excellent publicity. (note this is not a public event).

## 3. Trans Wilts Rail Partnership (TWCRP) and Community Interest Company (TWCIC)

*TW issues consider the services and general issues for the entire TW corridor. The following summary lists the key issues that relate directly to the Melksham service.*

- Co-Op are still hoping to provide an open access service from Taunton to Nuneaton via MKM, possibly at 2 hourly intervals and possibly from 2018
- TW still pressing for hourly service in each direction (by 2020) and also for extending the route to Southampton via Southampton airport
- Input needed to minimise trains bypassing Westbury via the avoiding line, as this station provides a wealth of interchange opportunities at present
- A key target that improves the benefits of Melksham station include station opening at Wilton Parkway and Corsham.
- Further disruptions to services is foreseen in Easter 2017 with services not running between Bath and Bristol. This will result in the Cardiff – Portsmouth service again being diverted as a Swindon-Portsmouth service, with a two hourly stop frequency at Melksham. There is a possibility that 'via Melksham' tickets will only be valid for trains that stop at Melksham. This is under review.
- A 'Explore Swindon by Rail' leaflet promotion has been funded by GWR.
- A key long term target for TWCIC is an hourly daytime service in each direction.
- Other issues handled by TWCIC are covered elsewhere in the agenda.

### 3.1. Melksham Station Improvements, and Related Infrastructure Upgrades

- Current extrapolations forecast 300,000 journeys to/from Melksham in the next five years. To accommodate this, GWR propose the use of cascaded 2 car trains from 2018. This will necessitate platform extensions at Melksham in 2017. A basic North extension is scheduled for build in late 2017 in order to allow new trains early in 2018.
- Further upgrades have been considered, but a holistic view is now needed. A 'master plan' covering all enhancements is being prepared as a basis for discussions with WC and GWR. Meetings are to be scheduled in the near future, and applications form funding to cover work in 2018 to be made. Currently the following works are being considered:

- Additional platform extension to the South, in the area currently occupied by Melksham Tyre Services. MTS would then relocate to the former Reeds area. (This would also allow steps to Bath Road to be reinstated).
  - Improved access via Murray Walk
  - Northern pedestrian access to Foundry Close (which will also provide a better interchange route with the Chippenham / Melksham buses).
    - This could later be the basis of a local bus route.
  - Routing other local buses through station (currently thought to be difficult due to turning space) or provision of a bus stop on Bath Road near station near the traffic lights
  - Additional signal midway between Thingley and Trowbridge to allow two trains in the same direction
    - Later - provision of a passing loop at the station sufficient for passenger trains, subsequently extended to a longer loop for freight trains (probably mid/late 2020s).
  - Improved subway access, and making the underpass more inviting
  - Expanded waiting facilities
- TWCIC are considering use (on a short term basis) of the empty Reeds office as a station 'welcome' facility, manned by volunteers who could provide help to passengers informally. Other possibilities include provision of Wi-Fi, toilets, defibrillator and the sale of cakes etc,
    - It is hoped that sufficient height can be added to ensure visibility from trains perhaps with a pagoda style rook.
    - Outline costs for conversion are estimated at £50,000 (e.g. painting etc), but operational costs have not been reviewed.
      - Solar panels are being considered to minimise energy costs
      - Business sponsors for the works are being sought.
      - Council support might be possible if a toilet was provided as part of a more general scheme for businesses to offer toilet facilities to the public
    - The facility would not provide manned ticket sales unless volunteers were specially trained and liability
  - A new station manager has been appointed (James Wilcox) and a meeting is to be arranged to meet up with him in the near future.

#### 4. Fares

- TW been able to redistribute the balance of fares slightly, a consequence of service 'designation'
- Certain rovers covering MKM now extend out to Pewsey making it a very useful option for leisure period travel
- Creation of a Wiltshire Rover is desirable.

#### 5. Services

- Provision of trains to fill gaps, and for later/earlier services (such as 5:20 and 17:20 up, 7:36 and 20:36 down) still urgently needed
- Later evening trains still needed (a priority for TWCIC), as well as an additional Southbound commuting service
- Requests for earlier and later trains in each direction indicate that additional passenger generation could be created at those times. In the evenings, a late train could provide travel security for passengers that use earlier trains, and hence even if lightly loaded, are still desirable.

#### 6. Passenger Usage

- Overcrowding on the rail service at times has led to criticism of the service, although this can be seen as a reflection of the high demand from passengers.
- Significant incoming flows to MKM, and an increase in MKM travellers to the South direction, have developed.
- Typically trains through MKM on average have 50% who alight or get on, and 50% passing through. This is increase on previous years where typically 75% were through travellers
- It has been noticed that the most crowded train (17:36 ex SWI) has probably reached saturation point and further passengers are unlikely until it becomes a two-car unit
- The busiest section of the line is Melksham to Chippenham.
- Many users use this service as a feeder to towns south of Westbury, (Southampton and Salisbury) supporting the case for a Swindon – Southampton regular service, and the need for regular long distance trains to include a Westbury stop.

#### 7. Station Issues

- Information presentation
  - Station display not often working
  - Banner displays typically found at other stations would be ideal, and ideally a remotely driven PA should be provided.
- The (unused) 'bicycle houses' should be removed, to make space for another station bench.
- The yellow safety line on the platform needs repainting

- Rolf Brindle and Eddy Watts continue to maintain parts of the station in their role as 'friends'. The flower tubs are well maintained and a very attractive addition at the station.
- The TVM is invaluable but
  - is difficult to use in bright weather (in which case, users should purchase tickets from the train supervisor)
  - offers full fare tickets when the next train is the first off-peak train and cannot differentiate between Off-Peak and Super-Off Peak
- Better taxi services are desirable perhaps with peak trains being met.

## 8. Steam Train Heritage Railways

- A discussion was held on the possibility of a heritage service, perhaps with steam running on the TW route. *Details and issues can be found in the attached slide set.* This is planned as a Melksham town promotional facility led by councillor John Wiltshire.
- The idea was well received but capacity issues at present would not make implementation easy. Even if a passing loop were provided at Melksham, this would be primarily for support of an hourly mainstream service.
- Possibility of a heritage service on the former Holt-Devizes route could be a viable alternative, and/or provision of a static exhibit at Melksham station.

## 9. Finance

- A grant has been applied for from MWPC, and will be followed by application to MTC.
- Payment of £268 from Westbury TIC for the Santa trip 2014 has yet to be received.
- Rolf Brindle is proceeding with opening a regular cheque based account at HSBC. Ideally all cheques would require two signatures, although a low limit value for single signed cheques might be possible.
- Current banking regulations require considerable paperwork to ensure the account is being used for legitimate purposes, and this is taking some time.
  - Both HSBC and the Coventry BS will be advised of our new name in due course (John Money – Coventry and Rolf Brindle HSBC). At a suitable time, bank accounts and other relevant documentary changes would be implemented

## 10. AOB

- Capacity problems when Swindon Town are playing was raised as a serious issue. Related to this, (but not exclusively) issues had been identified where passengers were under the influence of alcohol which had been distressing other users.

## 11. Next meeting date

- The next meeting will be on the **12<sup>th</sup> May 2017 at 19:30** and will include the AGM.
- Note that there will be meeting reviewing bus services around Melksham at Well House Manor on 11th March (10:30) to which all are invited,

## “Running a Steam Train from Melksham”

A LOCAL councillor has suggested running a steam train from Melksham as the town looks forward to more years of railway improvements.

Following the huge success of more frequent trains stopping in Melksham, town councillor Richard Wiltshire has suggested adding a steam train in future to boost tourism.

Cllr Wiltshire said, “Congratulations to the TransWilts rail partnership and the Melksham railway group for their promotion of local train services resulting in the proposed enlargement of Melksham’s station.

“With the lengthening of the platform and loop rail works, could there be an opportunity to provide a base for a steam heritage train operating from Melksham?”

“The interest in steam trains has grown over the years since they were replaced by diesel and electric engines on the main routes. There are now over 170 active heritage rail and tramways in the UK, with several in Somerset and Gloucestershire but only one in Wiltshire at Swindon.”

Recent efforts by local railway campaigners, transport organisations and government have seen an extra 90 trains per week and 48,000 more journeys per year since 2013.

Plans are now in the works to extend the platform and make the station bigger, with the hope of adding more services in future.

Cllr Wiltshire added, "Some of the existing heritage rail sites offer a wide range of tourist attractions from dining car events, rail museum trips, special trips for children and much else.

"With the coming of the Wilts & Berks canal link through Melksham, the addition of a steam railway would greatly add to tourism attraction.

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"Although Melksham does not have any heritage rail buildings, it does have track and standing space and an historical link with railway engineering through Spencer Moulton.

"Any heritage railway can only exist through support from enthusiastic volunteers; perhaps this article will generate interest from such enthusiasts."

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## Suggestion for steam railway based at Melksham – January 2017

Where would it be based?

Where would the supply of enthusiasts come from?

Where would the initial funding come from?

What would you anticipate as ongoing revenue and expenditure?

Where would the trains run?

Where would the stock come from?

Where would the visitors come from?

What would make this one special?

How would you keep it going over 20 years?

What is the balance between compliment and interfere with national services?

Would it abstract resources and compete with other preservation schemes?

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- Many thanks to Mike Gorrige, Director and acting Chairman, GWR Preservation Group Limited for his inputs on 4<sup>th</sup> February
- Mike has experience in restoring and running locomotives and coaches, including the running of such services occasionally on parts of the national network, such as the Brentford freight branch.
- Mike explained the large number of considerations and costs involved in setting up an operational preserved railway site that's open to the public, in running costs and ongoing manpower requirements



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The way forward?

- Provide evidence that there are viable answers to these questions
- or
- Look at alternatives to make best use of the enthusiasm and funding support
- or
- Decide this isn't for Melksham

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## Thoughts on potential heritage / tourist opportunities

- Holt toward Devizes, Chippenham to Calne?
- Small Local museum
- Support the Swindon initiatives or Didcot
- Support Westbury (from Radstock)
- Steam operators to call