

4th April 2020

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Melksham

rail user group

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Dear Members and Supporters of Melksham Rail User Group,

Melksham Rail User Group newsletter – April 2020

In these extraordinary times, we encourage you to only travel if absolutely necessary, and all of our in-real-life meetings are cancelled or at least postponed for the indefinite future, in line with government direction and common sense.

The Melksham Rail User Group officers remain very much in touch with each other by telephone and electronic means, and the latest news is updated regularly via <http://www.mrug.org.uk> which includes links to a summary and timetables of all public transport running to, from through and within Melksham.

Another way of getting to public transport information locally is at <http://www.firstgreatwestern.info/espresso.html?month=00&year=2020&board=18>
If you have any questions, we can try to answer them at info@mrug.org.uk

As a railway group we are still very interested in other transport options, both for access to/from the station and also for longer journeys.

Member support

Please get in touch if you need or wish to. We have been very busy indeed for the past two weeks, but things are now settling down and we expect the pendulum to swing towards being quieter than usual. Our officers are not key workers, and will welcome a chat / message / mutual support. It's also an opportunity to think, regroup, prepare to partner and promote services in the future as they improve from their emergency basic levels.

Current public transport provision

At the time of writing, public transport is reduced but we are fortunate to retain:

* a bus every 2 hours to Bath and to Devizes and Urchfont (Faresaver 273)

* a bus every hour to Chippenham, and to Frome via Trowbridge (Monday to Saturday only) (Faresaver x34)

* two buses each way per day (Monday to Saturday) to/from Corsham and to/from Trowbridge via Holt (Faresaver 68/69)

* Trains are just less than every 2 hours Monday to Saturday (so just slightly thinner than usual) but just one train each way on Sundays. (Great Western Railway)

* A single vehicle is running a Saturday service (6 days per week) on the Town Bus service. (Fromebus 14/15)

All bus services cease by the early evening.

Services no longer running include:

Coach to London (National Express)

x76 bus to the RUH, to Calne, to Marlborough (Swindon's bus company)

D3 bus (First West of England) to Bath (evenings and Sundays also to Devizes)

Passenger numbers have plummeted - and in the current extraordinary circumstances that's good news, but that gives rise to service finance problems. There may also be problems of staff shortages.

It would be guesswork to speculate as to when improved services might return. We may be in for further reductions before things get better again. It is not clear what service levels will be as we come out of lockdown, nor how quickly they will ramp up or how they differ from what was previously planned.

Great Western Rail Contract extended

Great Western Railway (GWR) have signed a contract to continue to run train services in our area for a further three years from 1st April, and concurrent with that there are six month emergency measures in place to cover the foreseeable short term problems.

The contract has been in negotiation for some considerable period and much work was done between community representatives, GWR, and the Government to encourage service and station improvements. The Department for Transport's announcement of the contract included a reference to improvements in the Bristol and Exeter areas, but beyond that brief statement we await news of what's been included in "DA3" (Direct Award 3) and what hasn't. It is understandable that everyone has other priorities and there are staffing constraints, and limits on staff working too; we will bring you more news as we have it.

Melksham Station

TransWilts have been doing sterling work, to move towards the station infrastructure upgrades. These include a small café, an extended car park and

better station information display. No doubt there will be some delay to these due to the Coronavirus but we can look forward to significant enhancements.

Thinking of the future

As we come out of the current storm in public transport provision, we have both risks and opportunities. The risks are that some facilities and services will be lost, and available funding for long term projects may be restricted. It does offer an opportunity to rebuild in a better way "from the ground up" and **for the good of the climate and passenger.**

Bus service to and from Bath

Less than two months ago, we were very concerned at the loss of the D3 bus to Bath - with especial reference to services though Whitley, direct from Melksham Forest, and in the evenings and on Sundays.

Fortuanelly, Faresaver announced a new set of services, retimetabled to include much of the D3 coverage. Indeed, with just one company the service may be more coherent. The following services were planned to start from 5th April, but are replaced for the immediate future by the temporary "lockdown" service described earlier.

Monday to Saturday, daytime:

Hourly Bath to Bowerhill via Kingsdown, Atworth, Whitley, Melksham Town and Melksham Forest - service 271

Hourly Bath to Devizes via Box, Atworth, Shaw Hill, Melksham Town, Melksham Hospital, Bowerhill and Sells Green - service 272

Monday to Saturday evening and Sunday:

2 hourly Bath to Devizes via Box, Atworth, Whitley, Melksham Town, Melksham Forest, Bowerhill and Sells Green - service 273

Most journeys on service 273 are supported by Wiltshire Council - a big "Thank you" to them for that support. Also a big "Thank you" to Faresaver for providing an additional early commercial journey to meet key transport needs at a time that only First provided a service in the past.

A big Thank you from MRUG to all of those who came along to our February meeting and wrote in support. The resulting service timetable is good; whether we would have got that same outcome without strong community inputs is a hypothetical question, but past experience suggests it was wise to make the strong inputs we and others did.

Due to Coronavirus, the registered timetable will NOT be starting from 5th April - see elsewhere in this newsletter. Once it does, MRUG offers its support

to Faresaver and Wiltshire Council in helping to make it work well. Of course, further changes are possible (there were 25 service change registrations on Bath - Melksham services in the last 10 years)

Rail promotion events

Our real life meetings, surveys, station cleans, stalls, trips, 35th anniversary celebrations, membership plans, aren't happening at present. Consider them "on hold" rather than cancelled or postponed. This newsletter is something of an alternative to our regular meetings, and we're keeping our web site up to date too. Data on the usual things there will be thinner, but much more there on the current pandemic, on personal support, and on looking forward to the future.

MRUG are proud of their spring timetable leaflet, distributed widely in Melksham and available online link With the current emergency timetables, and Faresaver's new services, these leaflets no longer accurately represent the public transport we have. Design and production of our summer 2020 timetable leaflet is also on hold. There are planned timetable changes to be operational from 16th May 2020, but it's improbable that they will happen from that date. Leaflet distribution is impractical, and we are in the temporary territory of discouraging rather than encouraging leisure travel.

Please expect a further newsletter in about a month's time; our AGM is due in May and we are looking for the most appropriate way of updating members and asking for confirmation of our officer's roles.

Bus and Rail plans - looking further ahead

Our group has been working with local councils and Wiltshire Council to update the town bus routes and timetable to reflect changes to travel patterns and roads available to buses, and also to network better with the changed face of commercial and other contracted services.

Government money was promised for bus network improvements in February, of which £671k was allocated to Wiltshire, and proposals have been worked on to route the town bus through Bowerhill Industry (taking advantage of Portal Way), and to serve new developments and the railway station at times that connect with trains. An additional driver - extending one town bus vehicle to start early and finish late, and to provide lunchtime relief so there's no longer a service gap, is also part of the proposal. Service direction of the 14 through Queensway and Melksham Forest to be reversed so that it runs in the opposite direction to the Faresaver 271. Ensuring that service is maintained for existing users who rely on the bus is vital.

At the time of writing (3rd April 2020) the government has just announced short term support for bus operators during the current pandemic, and the BBC suggests this support money may largely come from the fund set aside for improvements. Discussions last week with Wiltshire Council's transport team

suggest they do not have the resource at present to progress and new enhancement scheme - rather, they are re-arranging remaining services for the short term.

Rail plans - we await details from GWR / TransWilts as referred to earlier on what is in the new contract.

Financial report - prior to AGM

Total **expenditure** from May 17th 2019 to our year end on 30th April 2020 is projected to be £1563. The main items are: Printing of publicity materials; Insurance; Room hire and Affiliation fees.

Income for the same period is £1990 with the main items being grants from Melksham TC and Melksham Without PC; Profit from the Santa Special and Donations from individuals. There have also been "donations in kind" that are not reflected in the Accounts, principally the rail tickets provided by Great Western Railway for events and the considerable amount of graphic design work that makes our publicity materials so attractive.

Thus our positive balance for this year will be approx £427 which, with the balance carried forward, means we will start our new financial year with a healthy £2600.

News from our partners

All of our partners find themselves in new territory; their websites are:

GWR - <https://www.gwr.com>

Faresaver Buses - <http://www.faresaver.co.uk>

Fromebus - <http://www.fromebus.co.uk>

TransWilts CRP - <https://transwilts.org>

TravelWatch SouthWest - <http://travelwatchsouthwest.org>

Wiltshire Council (Transport) - <http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/transport>

Melksham Town Council - <https://www.melkshamtown.co.uk>

Melksham Without Parish Council - <http://melkshamwithout.co.uk>

RailFuture - <https://www.railfuture.org.uk/Welcome+to+Railfuture>

Transport Focus - <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk>

Passenger forum (Coffee Shop) - <http://www.passenger.chat>

ACoRP - <https://communityrail.org.uk>

Wiltshire Council (Transport) - <http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/transport>

And finally – please take care of yourselves and your loved ones. We look forward to seeing you all at date some time in the future.

Peter Blackburn - Chair

John Hamley – Secretary

Judith Gradwell – Treasurer

Graham Ellis – Vice Chair