

By Mark Annand, from Usenet News in June 2004.

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This is a mirror archive created 24 Nov 2021 [by Graham Ellis] as I feel it is so important in what it says.

I will let you read Mark's words, and those of a respondent and comment onto
<http://www.firstgreatwestern.info/coffeeshop/index.php?topic=25368.msg315047#msg315047>

I went to a West Wiltshire rail user group meeting in Bradford (on Avon) last week - they had SWT managing director talking on several things, including the new Bristol trains. By the time questions were invited from the floor, the room was very short of oxygen, thankfully windows were opened, but the following may well be only mildly accurate. :-)

It was revealing - basically the Waterloo service, being another bright idea from Chris Gibb that worked, wasn't in anyone's passenger service obligation. The trains turned into a real embarrassment when in rearranging Waterloo, the SRA wanted to kill them, and then found that, awkwardly for everyone, demand was buoyant, especially east of Bristol. Also, of course, those trains went to *London* ...

When when news of their demise escaped, letters started to land on everyone's desks, 3000 signature petitions started flying about even from West Wiltshire: so the SRA bowed to political pressure and requested that SWT look at the service and make some proposals.

SWT looked at it, liked what they saw, and came up with a number of options, including several that exceeded what was then on offer. However, the SRA, now even more cash-strapped, bit at the very minimum cost option, for which SWT still needed a train or two - the SRA said that they'd transfer some trains from Midland Mainline in support.

Well, that's not happened ... and SWT has had to find a train to provide the less than bare minimum replacement that it's put in place. Moreover, the contractual framework that backs the service is still rather vapourous, having been completely non-existent as late as April this year.

I think the MD said that SWT have found its single train, basically by taking advantage of better than expected maintenance needs on some of its existing stuff, and is running a twice a day service to Bristol till December, when it will either:

- a) Cease it altogether - unlikely, as the existing one is already showing signs of being popular, and more letters would fly, and they'd be asked to continue.
- b) Continue the service as it is for the time being.
- c) Increase it in frequency to five a day - SWT's original minimum viable plan, and they'd be keen to do this - but someone will need to find the rolling stock, and it sounds as though the original stuff has gone to Central Trains.
- d) If there was the funding, they'd very much like to develop things in a way in which Bristol would see about 9 trains a day to Waterloo with some extended to Cardiff, too.
- e) Also, rolling about on the deck is the RPCs' proposal for the Cardiff route to the south coast - SWT might envisage meeting that with a service pattern involving pairs of trains running together between Cardiff and Salisbury, where they split, one half running to Waterloo and the other to the coast.

The MD, somewhat impressed at the turnout his visit had produced pretty much emphasised that further lobbying and letter writing in support of the 'New' service would be a very good idea ...

He also spoke a little about how the Bristol service fits into the rest of the SWT network, which led on to an outline of their timetable changes for 2005, which involve half hourly clockface trains for Salisbury, hourly clockface as far west as Yeovil Junction, and that they'd take the opportunity to mend Salisbury. Oh, and a cunning colour code for short, medium and long distance trains.

With regards to Salisbury, one of his assistants quite candidly stated that many Salisbury connections had been deliberately broken some years ago, as passengers from the Bristol

direction were delaying London bound trains on tight cross platform connections - and the single line sections on the Exeter route were mentioned more than once as a real obstacle to sane timetabling, and also that demand there was rather more buoyant than can be met with the available line capacity - which isn't right for timetabling anyway. The meeting eventually closed after questions from the floor which left no doubt that the crap connections at Salisbury had by no means gone unnoticed.

Suppressing the memory of the alarming pink train with a loco at each end seen earlier on at Bradford, I walked to Avoncliff and its halt, from where there was no sign of the planet Venus, fast approaching a very inferior conjunction indeed, and where the last train of the day still managed to attract two passengers.

The bare minimum offering put together at short notice from SWT is enough to divert some of the political flak, but it's only a partial replacement for the previous service, even if you don't live in Wales, though SWT are motivated to extend them to Cardiff if they can find the resources. There are the stops and end to end timings too. It's almost as though planners for the original trains looked at the cross-London times from Paddington and offered something which, at 2 hours 10 minutes from say Bath to Waterloo, was close to being competitive in time to Waterloo with the Paddington route from Bristol.

Hardly representative, but the spring bank holiday monday afternoon up SWT train left Bath with 81 on board, lost eight or so and gained about a dozen at Bradford.

Speaking of dozens, I must have made dozens of journeys on the Wales and West services - I can still remember the high morale of the train crews in the first year of operation, a sense that here was the privatised railway doing the opposite of expectation and expanding the network, offering new services that were immediately in demand, the staff were either genuinely pleased with this or were good actors.

On my short outing on the SWT variety the other day, the staff seemed to have been breathing the same air ...

Mark

Mark, you also wrote:

The Wales and West services tended to stop at Wimbledon during the tennis and there was a bit of discussion as to whether the SWT Bristol services could do the same. SWT were looking into this one ...

To which the reply was:

Yes, the Wimbledon stops were an annual, rather peculiar feature of the service (perhaps Chris Gibb was a tennis fan?). I thought it was a rather useful stop, as it gave access to/from Croydon Tramlink, the District line, local buses plus SWT & Thameslink services. When I asked if it could be made a permanent stop, the reply was "Railtrack would refuse as it would use up too much capacity on the fast lines". However, this problem always magically disappeared during Wimbledon tennis week!

One evening, the (then) 19:17 Waterloo-Carmarthen made a scheduled call at Wimbledon for people who had been to the tennis and then another at Surbiton to pick up people who had gone to the Hampton Court flower show (crossing from fast to slow and then back again to make the station stop). I recall several people getting on carrying potted plants, as it was the last day of the show and the exhibitors were selling off their displays! With the two extra stops, we were eight mins late at Woking but on time when we reached Warminster!