

Ten years of train service Swindon to Westbury via Chippenham, Melksham and Trowbridge

Comment for celebration event, 8th December 2023 – by Graham Ellis
Westbury Station / White Horse Room, platform 1



It's ten years since the train service at Melksham stepped up from 2 trains each way per day to 8. Pictured here in 1994, a few years after it was re-opened and this summer (2023).

Melksham Passengers departing have risen from 4 a day before 2013 to an average of 104 in recent years with the new service in place and established, and journeys on the line (to, from, through) have risen from 18 thousand and quarter of a million.

As well as more service, the trains and platform are longer (and they need to be) and the service, though thin, now runs all day and every day, operated by a dedicated, professional and helpful staff to whom we say our thanks.

On the 10th Anniversary, let's remember local campaigners who are no longer with us - **Gordon Dodge, John Money, and Peter and Margaret Blackburn**, without whom we would not be where we are today. If they could look down, they will see a service and use proudly grown in line with their dreams, but still with a great deal to be done to bring it up from being a thin but appropriate service.

It would not have been possible without long term community campaigners such as **Lee Fletcher, Phil McMullen and John Hamley** who's dedication - well, I don't have the words to describe it. The Community Rail Partnership we formed has become the tool used by **Paul Johnson** who has tirelessly fought the unseen battle to get Wiltshire's rail service recognised and planned into the future of the area, and for towns such as Melksham the difference it's made is unmeasurable. And well set for the future with local plans. And a further shining light is **Bob Morrison** who transcends, with great tact and diplomacy, no little skill and a vast amount of time, often out on the line, with the day to day work of keeping the stations and line on track. A thank you too to county councillors such as **Horace Prickett and Richard Gamble** from various parts of Wiltshire who sit on the board, and to current Community Rail officer **Sophie Martin** who organises her teams to encourage newcomers to rail with schools, litter pickers, glee clubs, Christmas sales, days out by train and much more.

Without help over & above the call of duty from GWR management and Wilts Council officers, we would not be where we are today. Some wish to remain anonymous, others must, though on a day such as today may I pick out **David Phillips** and **Jane Jones** as representatives, in each case, of a whole army without whom this would not have been possible.

Politicians have played a key role too - especial thanks to **Duncan Hames, Andrew Murrison, Michelle Donelan and Claire Perry**, and those at National bodies such as ACoRP - **Neil Buxton and Brian Barnsley. Stephen Joseph** at the Campaign for Better Transport.

We have all crossed swords in our passion for the cause from time to time, yet the results are effective. When I interact with others in the UK, I come to realise how lucky we are here in Wiltshire.

A long list of names? Yes, a team effort by the area and the rail industry FOR the area. In local volunteers, I would also like to highlight **Alan, Andrew, Anne, Bob, Brenda, Brendon, Bruce, Bryony, Carol, Catherine, Chris, Colin, Dan, David, Dawn, Duncan, Emma, Gail, Guy, Ian, James, Jane, Jenny, Joe, John, Judith, Justin, Kevin, Kulvinder, Lisa, Lucy, Marianne, Mark, MartyJon, Mary, Matt, Mike, Natacha, Neil, Nick, Nicki, Nigel, Nina, Peter, Phil, Reuben, Richard, Robin, Roger, Rosemary, Ruth, Sean, Sid, Simon, Sion, Stacey, Sylvia, Teresa, Tina, Tim, Tom, Tony, Tracey, Vicki, Wendy and William** - over 50 names there, some shared and no doubt some overlooked. I don't have a master list but we heck of appreciate what you have done or do. any, many linked with the "Melksham Railway Development Group" which by virtue of success has been able to rename itself the USER group now that we have users!

Between us - if I may add my name into that illustrious mix - we have achieved a very great deal for the line and for the places it serves including Melksham. I would like to thank my local councils of Melksham Without, and Melksham Town for their support and indeed the mayor of Melksham has asked me to add his thanks and appreciation today too, and I am speaking on his behalf as well as my personal one.

So where are we now?

We are in the midst of a project. A massive amount has been achieved as we have move from moribund resource to a thin but useable (and used) provision. We have another decade of work to do. Perhaps in coming years - some of these things sooner rather than later - we will see:

- * **An appropriate train service** - hourly rather than thin and infrequent
- * **Far better service reliability** than we have seen of late, with the rail industry sorting out its problems with operation and governance, and **better connections**.
- * Improved total journey connections - **regular buses to and from the station** in Melksham, and far more at Westbury and perhaps Chippenham.
- * **Better cycling and walking access to stations** such as a northern entrance at Melksham reaching many residential areas without a long zigzag walk
- * **Housing, business and leisure facilities growing near the station.** Planning has already passed for homes on the old up yard, and the Copper Tires site - 11 hectares which comes within 100 yards of the station - is cited for Brown Field development in the new Neighbourhood Plan. All of these plans, of course, protect the railway corridor to allow the line to redoubled when appropriate.
- * **Electrification of the line for heavy freight and passenger use**, and continued adaption and adoption as we move forward in amongst the new world in which the climate emergency is at last being taken more seriously and will be ever more serious, but at the same time maintaining our mobility
- * And finally a **friendly face at the station with an encouragement to use the service** rather than the sticks of penalty warning signs, an incomprehensible fare system, and a feeling at times of isolation that scare so many people away at the moment.

Ladies and Gentlemen, THANK YOU for what you have all done and I, and Melksham for whom I speak, look forward to working further with you in coming years. Personally in my role of running a business in Melksham, the railway made a massive difference once the service was improved in bringing our customers in and taking them home, and that's a difference far from unique to us. As the Transport Minister at the time - Derek Twigg - said to me on Radio 4 in the early days, "We can't run a service just for Mr Ellis". I agree - it's not just running for Mr Ellis - **it's running for the businesses and residents of Melksham, and Trowbridge and Chippenham, and Westbury and Swindon. Now, and into the future.**

Graham Ellis, 8th December 2023

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