

Report for Melksham Area Board of Wiltshire Council prepared 30th August 2016 for 7th September 2016 *from TransWilts CIC / CRP*



Successful numbers

Passenger numbers on trains to, from and through Melksham continue to rise with good customer sentiment.

Passenger counts by almost 20 volunteers of all trains on 16th to 18th July indicated an annual journey running rate of around a quarter of a million. That's about 5 years ahead of the optimistic growth curve from Wiltshire council's pre-service reports, and about 40% up on the community's optimistic forecast. Figures for 16th to 18th July were depressed by operational difficulties, so will tend to be on the low side. Operational difficulties that impact on passengers are subject to a great deal of analysis and reduction work, but there are a wide variety of causes and so fixing isn't a single solution approach.

A further count on Saturday 27th August would scale to an annual run rate of around 435,000 journeys. Counts included trains know to be the busiest and quietest of the day - but the statistical base data is limited and the figure should be read +/- 25% - but even -25% gives a run rate before seasonal adjustment of over 325,000 journeys per annum. Passenger numbers specifically using Melksham Station also indicate continued strong growth, with several trains being significantly delayed by the time taken for passengers to leave and board the trains.

Much of the growth has been fed by press and publicity, with much help from volunteers; some 18 took part in the counts and surveys alone, and there has been a sequence of other meetings and events too. That's only part of the story - passengers are broadly happy with the service and our word-of-mouth ambassadors, and the line is a natural and substantial economic flow which works naturally if provision, price, reliability, safety and information systems align.

Looking forward - services

There remain some notable gaps in train services.

On Monday to Friday, A morning commuter train from Melksham to Westbury, a train in the 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. gap to Swindon, a return train from Swindon between 15:12 and 17:36, and a later evening train would all fulfil significant needs. On Saturdays, an extra train in the evening from Westbury is desirable; 18:30 is too early. On Sundays, the 08:45 to Swindon and 09:50 to Westbury would be useful all year, and not purely in high summer. In all these cases, the provision of a service would result in additional traffic on other services too as many journeys are day returns.

It's notable that the retimed 15:14 (to 15:12) from Swindon via Melksham has significantly grown in passenger numbers since the retiming, the purpose of which was to make good connections from Westbury to Portsmouth via Warminster, Salisbury and Southampton. Initial July survey analysis indicates strong onward journeys (already) from Melksham and north thereof to south of Westbury, providing further evidence to support joining the TransWilts service to local services from Westbury to Salisbury and from Salisbury to Southampton Central and Airport.

Looking forward - Station

Melksham Station is currently only a single car platform, meaning that the longer trains which are now starting to appear (out of necessity!) have to load and unload "single door" or "selective door". This delays the trains, and we also have a platform / crowding issue at times. Comparing Melksham to other rail served towns in Wiltshire, our passenger numbers are still only a tenth to a twentieth of theirs per head of population, and indicators are that our growth will continue - estimated 5 fold in the next five years (35% per annum compound, well below the last three years rate!). In other words, it would not be unusual for over a hundred people to be getting on or off a train (it was, exceptionally, up to 40 the other day).

Since the last Area Board meeting, Paul Johnson who looks after TransWilts strategy has been working with Great Western Railway, Wiltshire Council, Melksham Town and Without Councils and the Area Board on plans to develop the station forward, safe and fit for future passenger numbers, and attractive for sustainable transport access with a longer platform, bus turning circle, and cycle and pedestrian routes to augment the current single road access through the industrial area.

This is a multistage development made complex by the large number of parties involved and the fragmented land ownership and responsibilities. The lion's share of cost - for extending the platform - is budgetted by Network Rail and planned within the next couple of years; by diverting that budget to relocating a business across the site, the existing platform extension which is stone built and virtually straight can be brought back into use, giving an operationally better station with a longer anticipated life, and providing a safe turning circle and 'proper' station entrance rather than a gate beside a light industrial unit who's outworks pedestrians are currently routed through.

TransWilts is greatly encouraged by the positive reception given to the proposals by all parties, including match funding, CCIF (GWR) grants, etc and believes that there is a probability that Melksham Station will provide a welcome fit for visitors within 5 years, and with foot access George Ward, North Melksham and Melksham Forest being significantly reduced in distance and much more off-road.

Trial service on 9th September

On Friday, 9th September, Great Western are trial running an extra evening train - **all welcome**. Graham Ellis is talking at the Railway Inn, Westbury to the West Wilts Rail User Group (all welcome as guests) at 19:00 for 19:30. Then the train runs a round trip at 21:20, back for 22:29. If you're starting from Melksham, catch the 18:03 train - the Railway Inn will be open for drinks and pub meals prior to the talk, and the train gets back to Melksham at 21:36 or at 22:12 if you want to go all the way up to Chippenham and back.

Beyond December 2016 trial

Train use growth has been encouraged by the community working with the train operator and the council (that's Great Western Railway and Wiltshire Council), with Great Western Railway and Wiltshire Council providing some funding. Within the last week, Wiltshire Council has informed the Community Rail Partnership that it will no longer provide funding. "Due to significant demands put on the Council against ever diminishing resources, I have to inform you that I am not able to provide funding" writes the council's officer. Although the amount is relatively small (£5,000) it has potentially serious consequences as it reduces the partnership's ability to obtain match funding. It could also prevent us accessing the central government promotion funding (DCRDF) and having consultation and meeting inputs at a national network level where we believe we have been effective to date, and remove options for local fare pricing to support developments. As this is 'breaking news', consequences are unclear as yet.

Ironically, TransWilts plans had been to spend the Wiltshire Council funding, matched from DCRDF, on a leisure marketing to continue to grow traffic through 2017 and much of this would have been through the Council offshoot of Visit Wiltshire. The print copy deadline is / was 31st August, so we have been left with no choice but to cancel the advertising. In parallel with the writing of this report for the Area Board, we are rebudgetting and considering medium and long term plans.

National Awards

TransWilts, the Melksham Rail Users Group and the Bowerhill Villager, and our volunteers, have been shortlisted in six categories in the annual ACoRP (Association of Community Rail Partnerships) national awards. Announcements of the winners and runners up will take place on 29th September, as part of a national meeting where community partnerships and members meet with each other to share best practise.

As one of the newest partnerships around, and with the smallest of lines and limited train services, it's quite remarkable that we achieved such good passenger numbers and so many finalist entries. A huge "Thank you" to TransWilts chair (Paul Johnson), president (Peter Blackburn), friend's secretary (Bob Morrison), Melksham group secretary John Hamley, Rolf Brindle and Eddy Watts for their work on the station and garden, and all the other volunteers who have helped get us there. And an enormous "thank you" to everyone in the community who has helped promote the service, and to all the passengers who have used it.

Melksham Rail User Group

The next meeting of the Melksham Rail User Group will be on Wednesday 5th October, informally from 18:30 at Well House Manor on Spa Road to celebrate 20 years of the Melksham Rail Development Group which grew passenger numbers 20 fold in those 20 years, and more formally at 19:30 to discuss plans ahead for the coming year.

On Saturday 15th October, we're arranging another guided walk from Trowbridge to Melksham (park at Melksham Station for the 11:02 train). See the Kennet and Avon Canal, Whaddon Church, the Devizes railway trackbed, the Pack Horse Bridge and Melksham's lovely countryside. And meet some interesting people too. On this occasion, dogs will be welcome and the route will be varied to accommodate them - in fact it's styled as a "Longdog and Lurcher walk" and your dogs will be in good company. Stout shoes recommended, bring water and a snack, and you and your dogs need to be reasonably fit.

On Sunday 4th December, we look forward to seeing Santa on the train; with enhanced services these days, Santa is able to make two trips rather than just one during the day, allowing him to see more children in greater comfort than used to be the case - and the trips are always popular with tickets selling out in good time.

On Tuesday 6th December, the following MRUG meeting will be briefed on any timetable and other changes taking part from the following weekend, and will look forward to 2017.

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