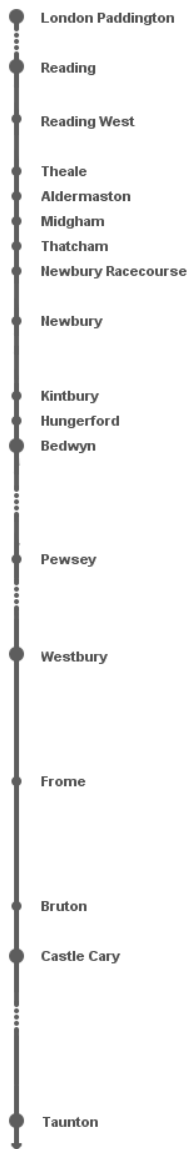




A Review Of Train Services On The Berks & Hants Line

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Foreword

The Berks & Hants line (running through Newbury and Westbury) forms the most direct route between London and the West of England. The purpose of this document is to look at the future of train services on this line in view of the major changes to come throughout the Greater Western franchise area.

Bedwyn Trains Passenger Group was formed in 2006 to represent the interests of all users of Bedwyn station. The group was formed initially to fight against cuts to services which were proposed as part of the new Greater Western franchise. Having succeeded in that aim we have subsequently worked closely with First Great Western (FGW) and other parties in an attempt to maintain and improve all services for Bedwyn station.

We were pleased to be able to participate in the Great Western Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS), which was published in March 2010. We submitted detailed suggestions for consideration and also responded to the Draft RUS. Details of our response can be found on www.bedwyntrains.org.uk

Since the RUS was published there have been significant developments concerning not just the Berks & Hants line but the whole of the Great Western area. These include electrification, Crossrail, the Foster and McNulty reports, IEP and a change of government.

At the time of the preparation of this review there is much uncertainty as to all aspects concerning future services in the Great Western area. The Bedwyn Trains Passenger Group will naturally concentrate on the Berks & Hants line in this review.

Bill Wells
Bedwyn Trains Passenger Group

The Current Position

There are a total of fourteen stations on the Berks & Hants line between Theale and Castle Cary inclusive. These stations are served by a variety of train services at present. These can be broken down as follows:-

- Fast trains between Paddington and Penzance/Plymouth/Paignton. These run at hourly intervals with sporadic stops at Pewsey, Westbury and Castle Cary.
- Semi-fast trains between Paddington and Bedwyn running hourly between the peaks. Calls are made at Reading, Theale, Thatcham, Newbury, Kintbury and Hungerford. There are additional shuttles between Newbury and Bedwyn during the peak periods and also some extensions of stopping trains between Reading and Newbury both early and late in the day.
- Trains between Reading and Newbury calling at all stations at hourly intervals.
- Services running roughly every two hours to and from Weymouth which call at Westbury, Frome, Bruton and Castle Cary.

There are also a number of semi-fast trains running between Paddington and Exeter St. David's or Taunton which run in both the peak and off-peak periods

As a result of the above all stations Theale to Bedwyn inclusive enjoy at least an hourly off-peak service. Pewsey to Castle Cary inclusive have a more sporadic service with two and three hour gaps off-peak. There is a more frequent service during both peak periods.

The total number of trains calling each day (Monday to Friday) at stations on the Berks & Hants line can be seen in Figure 1.

Station	Total Trains	Through Trains to/from Paddington
Theale	70	27
Aldermaston	46	3
Midgham	42	0
Thatcham	70	27
Newbury R/C	42	0
Newbury	90	40
Kintbury	41	20
Hungerford	48	27
Bedwyn	44	24
Pewsey	20	20
Westbury	45	23
Frome	24	3
Bruton	16	0
Castle Cary	33	17

Figure 1 Berks & Hants line services, per station, per day, with direct trains to Paddington shown as subtotals. (Source May to December 2011 Monday to Friday timetable).

The Great Western RUS

A great deal has happened since the RUS was published in March 2010. As a result it seems likely that a considerable review will be required in the near future. At this stage it would be useful to examine the relevant parts of the RUS regarding potential services on the line in the future.

Part 4.3.3.4. *'On the Kennet Valley section between Reading and Newbury, services will be provided by an hourly semi-fast service between London Paddington and Exeter St David's, with extra peak hour services between London Paddington and Newbury. In conjunction with this arrangement longer distance services (to Plymouth and Cornwall) will run faster to Exeter St David's than at present'.*

The RUS states that trains running beyond the electrified section (Paddington to Newbury) will be bi-mode IEP. The date for electrification as far as Newbury is 2016. This was subsequently confirmed by the DfT in November 2010.

Part 6.9.1.2 *'Electrification will enable the current Thames Valley suburban services into London Paddington to be operated by electric trains instead of the existing diesel trains. It is proposed that existing Thameslink four-car electric trains be transferred onto the GWML, replacing the two and three-car diesel trains, when the new Thameslink fleet is introduced'.*

Although this statement does not specifically mention Newbury, it can be assumed that these trains would operate services on the electrified section of the Berks & Hants line.

Part 9.8.1 *'On the Berks & Hants route to the South West, significant journey time reductions could be achieved for the Plymouth and Cornwall services through the provision of faster services calling only at principal stations between Reading and Taunton. The principal intermediate stations in Wiltshire and Somerset can be catered for by another group of trains, duly flighted to enable exploitation of the maximum linespeeds (between 100-110mph) which are expected to remain on this more curved route'.*

The Future – Post Electrification

Whilst the Great Western RUS contained a great deal of detail in its 254 pages, some of it being of relevance to the Berks & Hants line, there are many vital questions to be answered with regards to future services.

With electrification to Newbury now confirmed by 2016 the main purpose of this review is to look at the various service options on the Berks & Hants line in the post-electrification period.

The RUS makes it clear that 'local' services to Newbury will be operated by four-car electric trains cascaded from Thameslink (likely to be class 319 trains). These trains have a higher top-speed than the class 165/166 diesels which form all local services at present. It should be noted that they are older than the trains that they will replace.

The problem with the RUS and various other statements regarding this subject is the fact that at present virtually all local trains to and from Paddington actually start from and terminate at Bedwyn, some thirteen miles west of Newbury. The only trains that could operate with electric traction in the current timetable are the all-stations services between Reading and Newbury.

This clear omission was highlighted by BTPG in our response to the draft RUS. It should be noted that at least six other respondents also commented on this situation at the time.

The long-distance services

These trains between Paddington and Plymouth and Cornwall will probably operate on a similar basis to the current services. At present they run hourly with various stopping patterns. Their main purpose will continue to be to provide fast limited stop trains to Devon and Cornwall. The RUS appears to suggest that improvements to timings will be achieved by omitting stops east of Taunton. These stops would then be transferred to the proposed Paddington to Exeter semi-fasts.

Operated at present by HST's, their duties were due to be taken over by bi-mode IEP traction according to the RUS. Doubts were cast as to the likelihood of these trains being built following the Foster report. Of the four possibilities put forward in this report, two were initially selected. A revised electric train with bi-mode capabilities and an electric train with a diesel locomotive added beyond the wires.

The subsequent announcement that electrification will be extended to Bristol and Cardiff appears to suggest that HST's will continue to operate for some time after 2016 on the long distance services to Plymouth and Cornwall.

Newbury stopping services

The RUS does not specifically state that the current Reading to Newbury all-stations service will continue in its present form. The assumption would be that such a service would be operated by the cascaded ex-Thameslink class 319's. However Figure 9.1 in the RUS shows three proposed IEP trains per hour running from Paddington. These are shown as West of England, Exeter semi-fast and Newbury.

There are two possible conclusions to be drawn if this diagram is correct. 1. The all-stations service will be extended to and from Paddington. 2. The all-stations service will continue to operate between Reading and Newbury with an additional semi-fast electric hourly train running between Paddington and Newbury.

Several respondents to the RUS highlighted the need for a second hourly through train for Newbury. It is suggested that the growing importance of Newbury warrants more than the one semi-fast through train per hour to and from Paddington in the current timetable.

Bristol to Weymouth services

There is little in the RUS to suggest any great changes on this route, at least on the section between Westbury and Castle Cary. If the planned stock cascades go ahead there could be additional capacity to ease overcrowding and possibly provide some extra services. The emergence of a potential open-access operator recently could also be a welcome addition for stations on this route.

Bedwyn/Exeter semi-fast services

For many years the standard semi-fast Paddington trains on the Berks & Hants line have terminated at Bedwyn, operated since the early 1990's by class 165/166 'turbos'. The use of Bedwyn as a terminus for these trains has been questioned, given its size and geographical position. However, it should be noted that it acts as a railhead for a wide area including Marlborough.

The BTPG have consistently supported plans to extend services westward, subject to current stopping patterns being maintained. For this reason we would welcome a Paddington to Exeter St David's hourly semi-fast. Unfortunately the RUS is, to put it mildly vague on the likely stopping pattern, mentioning only Newbury. Despite concerns over this from several organizations, including the Office of Rail Regulation, no further clarification has been forthcoming to date.

With electrification confirmed to Newbury there is now uncertainty as to the type of traction to be used on such a service. The RUS suggests bi-mode IEP's will be used, but there were doubts as to whether these trains would be built. It has now been confirmed that a number of bi-mode trains will definitely be built. However the numbers quoted are much reduced and they will be only built in five-car sets. With these trains likely to be required on other services as well it remains to be seen whether there will be sufficient stock to run a full semi-fast service.

A semi-fast hourly service to Exeter following the present stopping pattern as far as Bedwyn then calling Pewsey, Westbury, Castle Cary, Taunton and Tiverton Parkway, with possible calls at Frome would appear to be a sensible solution. It would also retain a direct service with Paddington for Bedwyn, Kintbury and Hungerford. The possibility, as a result of electrification, of Bedwyn, Kintbury and Hungerford losing their direct services with Paddington is unacceptable to BTPG and the users of these three stations.

The Likely Conclusions

Although the exact type of traction for the fast Plymouth and Cornwall services is still uncertain, the likely stopping pattern on the Berks & Hants section can be predicted. If the semi-fast trains to Exeter take up the stops at Pewsey, Westbury and Castle Cary the fast trains would probably run non-stop between Reading and Taunton. If the possibility of attaching a diesel locomotive for the section of line 'beyond the wires' was used the change-over would presumably be made at Newbury.

Whilst BTPG would prefer to see the proposed Exeter semi-fast trains take the stopping pattern previously described, we are well aware that this has not yet been confirmed. The concern is that alternative stopping patterns may be proposed for these trains. 1. That they only stop at 'larger' stations such as Newbury, Hungerford and Westbury. 2. That they miss out Kintbury, Hungerford and Bedwyn.

If either of these scenarios are implemented the likely assumption would be that an hourly 'turbo' shuttle would be provided between Reading or Newbury and Bedwyn. Even if these trains were to provide a connection to Paddington BTPG would, taking into consideration the long-standing through service, consider this a retrograde step and would lobby and campaign to prevent this from happening. It would also require extra diesel trains in order to run such a shuttle service with the resultant extra cost. An hourly off-peak through service to and from Paddington with additional peak trains as at present, will be the aim of BTPG. It would appear that several other RUS respondents share similar views on this subject.

If such a service runs to and from Exeter St David's as suggested, this will allow excellent connectivity to the West Country from Kennet Valley stations. It will also bring Pewsey, Westbury, Castle Cary (and possibly Frome) into line with other Berks & Hants stations, by giving them an hourly service. The fact that journey times would be slightly longer than on the current HST fast trains may attract some opposition however.

The introduction of such through services could be said to be long overdue. In the current Monday to Friday timetable just one West Country train in each direction is provided during the eight hours between the peak periods for Kennet Valley stations. This is hard to justify, particularly for a large town such as Newbury.

The RUS clearly states that Exeter St David's is the preferred terminus for the semi-fast trains from 2016. However, there may be other suggestions which may emerge particularly as there has been no further clarification of the operation of these trains since publication.

Taunton is a possible alternative that might be considered. There would be some cost savings with trains travelling shorter distances though any savings in stock would probably be minimal. Connections to the West Country would be maintained in most cases as the majority of long distance trains call at Taunton.

Westbury may also be considered given that it was intended to be used as the terminus of semi-fast services following the franchise change in 2006. As a junction of some importance, the basic idea at the time was sensible. This was spoiled by the decision to change the established stopping pattern which, if implemented, would have left Bedwyn and Kintbury stations with only a two-hourly service. Following the successful campaign by BTPG and others to maintain hourly trains it was somewhat surprising that extension to Westbury was abandoned.

Whilst Westbury does offer connections to Bath Spa, Bristol Temple Meads, Salisbury, Weymouth and others there would be clear difficulties with connections to the West Country. The stated aim of the RUS is to speed up Plymouth and Cornwall trains by cutting out stops on the eastern part of the route. If semi-fast trains were to terminate at Westbury there would need to be stops inserted there on many of the fast services in order to provide any semblance of connectivity. This would also create a problem at Castle Cary with the only obvious answer being the insertion of another 'fast' stop thus negating the whole idea of speeding up these services.

A Possible 2016 Timetable

Electrification may provide the opportunity for a complete recast of the timetable in 2016. The RUS states that a review will be carried out but the extent of any changes is yet to be established. For the purposes of this review it is assumed that the current departure times from Paddington on the fast line are largely retained.

The likely composition of the off-peak timetable after 2016 will depend upon several factors, in particular the stopping pattern of the Paddington to Exeter bi-mode semi-fasts and the possibility of a second through hourly service for Newbury. BTPG have produced sample timetables reflecting our view of how services might operate, taking into account various potential scenarios. These are available as separate documents.

Peak services may also be subject to a complete recast but we are making the assumption again that the basic pattern remains. The London & South East RUS indicates that the current number of evening peak main-line departures from Paddington may only increase by one per hour (from 15 to 16). Therefore it seems most unlikely that the Berks & Hants line will see any increase in through trains from Paddington, and that any potential additional trains would need to run from Reading.

If five-car bi-mode trains are to be used on several lines on the Great Western network it may be worth considering the possibility of trains being joined or split at Reading. It also seems likely that some trains, particularly during the peaks, very early morning and late evening, will still start from and terminate at Bedwyn.

At present Kintbury, Hungerford and Bedwyn effectively have a half-hourly service during the morning and evening peak periods. Most of the additional trains are operated as shuttles between Newbury and Bedwyn. If this level of service is to be maintained a continuation of these shuttles would appear to be the best way forward, as it may not be possible to fit longer journeys into the busy timetable.

Weekend services would appear to be more straightforward to programme, with no peak periods as such. The same general pattern of fast, semi-fast and stopping trains would appear to be in order for Saturday services with a scaled-down version for the Sunday timetable. Some Sunday connectivity for Kennet Valley stations with the West Country would be welcomed as the current timetable is, with the exception of Newbury lacking in this respect.

The Next Five Years

Whatever changes are forthcoming from 2016 it must not be forgotten that there are still five more years before this all takes place. During this time major work will be undertaken to enable the remodelling of Reading station. This work, along with the electrification to Newbury may well curtail any major improvements to the timetable on the Berks & Hants line.

The serious lack of rolling stock under the current franchising system makes the introduction of any additional services very difficult to achieve. FGW are receiving some cascaded units but with others due to be returned the final position is likely to be neutral.

Under the original rolling stock plan, later cancelled, it was widely reported that FGW were to receive a total of 96 diesel carriages in three and four car sets. BTPG understands that a number of these were to be used on the Berks & Hants line where they would have operated an hourly Paddington semi-fast service to and from Westbury and Taunton on alternate hours from December 2011.

The RUS proposals if implemented fully, will transform connectivity between the Kennet Valley and the West Country from 2016. BTPG feels that a gradual improvement in connectivity in the period up to 2016 would be beneficial.

In 2004 Jacobs Consultants looked at potential extensions of Paddington to Bedwyn and return trains involving four services in each direction. The three potential destinations were Exeter St David's, Taunton and Bristol Temple Meads.

The preferred option was, perhaps surprisingly Bristol Temple Meads, though none of these options were eventually implemented. If this had taken place the services would have been operated by class 180 'Adelantes' but these are no longer in use with FGW.

As part of the RUS consultation BTPG suggested some similar extensions which would provide some basic connectivity to and from the Kennet Valley. The main barrier to this would probably be lack of suitable stock. The new diesel units promised under the original rolling stock plan, subsequently cancelled, could have been ideal for such services.

It is interesting to note that FGW extended one Paddington train in each direction to and from Bristol Temple Meads serving Trowbridge and Bradford on Avon from May 2011. This would appear to be a sensible idea as it allows additional journey opportunities for these stations and the Kennet Valley.

BTPG also brought up the lack of an early westbound train west of Bedwyn – along with several other respondents. This was addressed by FGW in its December 2010 timetable. Unfortunately, due to time constraints this train has limited stops, and as a result is of limited use to most Kennet Valley stations. Whilst there is probably little chance of any improvement in the short term BTPG would like to see an early semi-fast train, possibly starting from Reading and running via Westbury to Bristol Temple Meads.

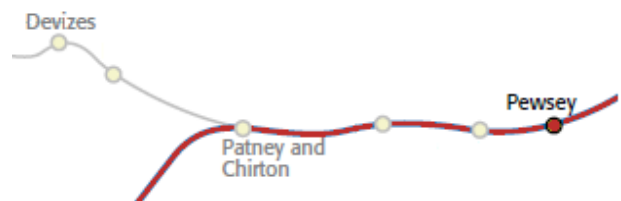
Reopened Stations

The Great Western RUS contains a substantial list of stations which have been suggested as candidates for opening or reopening. From this list there are four on the Berks & Hants line that could be considered.

Devizes Parkway

The original Devizes station was situated in the town on what was initially the through route to the West Country. In later years it formed the terminus of a short branch line diverging from the Berks & Hants line near the former Patney & Chirton station. The station and branch line closed in 1966.

In recent years there has been a campaign calling for the re-opening of a station to serve Devizes. It is widely accepted that there would be little chance of the branch line and a station in the town being re-opened. However, a 'parkway' station to be situated where the main line passes under the A342 at Lydeaway (just to the west of the old Patney & Chirton station) would seem to be the best option if re-opening is to be considered.



In the present economic climate the cost of station building would obviously present a major hurdle to overcome. Devizes does appear to have a fairly strong case for a station having a sizeable population and catchment area. Any building is unlikely in the short term particularly as there are no obvious services which could easily stop there. It would be hard to justify the insertion of stops on the West of England fast trains, and the semi-fast trains only run to and from Bedwyn.

However, if the proposed Exeter semi-fast services are introduced from 2016 a potential extra stop between Pewsey and Westbury would become a much more attractive proposition. With good acceleration and less dwell time an extra stop should not have too much of an effect on these services.

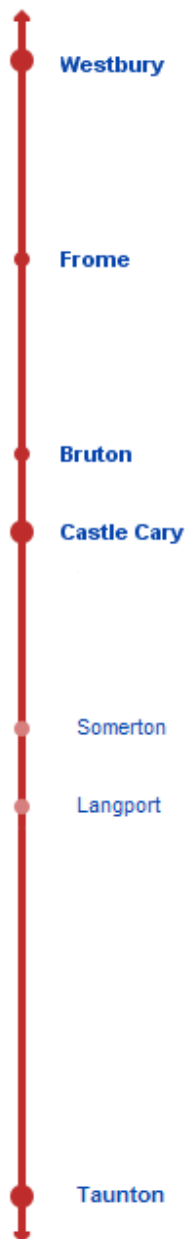
Somerton

Although not strictly part of the Berks & Hants line, Somerton, situated between Castle Cary and Taunton also appears to have a reasonable case for re-opening. There would appear to be no suitable services at present but, as with Devizes Parkway, an Exeter semi-fast might present an opportunity.

As an alternative a proposal was put forward in 2004 to run a stopping service between Westbury and Taunton with several potential re-openings which included Somerton. It was also suggested at the time that this would be linked to an extension of the Bedwyn semi-fast trains to Westbury.

Langport

Also situated between Castle Cary and Taunton, Langport is another former station that has been suggested as a candidate to be re-opened. It is likely that Langport would have a similar case to Somerton.



Marlborough

Marlborough has been without a station since 1961 when the second of its two stations closed to passengers. The Midland & South Western Junction Railway, which ran north to south and connected Cheltenham, Swindon and Andover, would probably serve a useful purpose had it survived.

Bedwyn station has served as a railhead for Marlborough and the surrounding area for many years. In order to re-open a station at Marlborough it would be necessary to reinstate a branch line to connect with the Berks & Hants line at Savernake where two stations were once situated. Although some of the track bed is still in place the cost of such a scheme would be considerable.



There has been some interest in possible re-opening but apart from the high cost the other main problem would appear to be the type of service which could operate to the town. If a branch line to Marlborough was in use now, theoretically it might be possible to extend some Paddington to Bedwyn trains. However, with the RUS proposing that the semi-fast trains in general should be extended to Exeter St David's, it would appear that a shuttle service of some sort would be the only viable option.

As it seems unlikely that 'turbos' will be operating on the Berks & Hants line after 2016 it is doubtful that suitable stock could be found to be used on a potential branch line. Light rail vehicles have been used successfully in other parts of the country. However they usually run on self-contained sections of track where they do not mix with high speed trains.

Stations and Other Facilities

This report has concentrated on the type of train services operating now, or likely to be operating on the Berks & Hants line. However, attention should be given to facilities available at stations and also on board the trains.

Of the fourteen stations on the line, only seven are staffed at all, with four of these (Newbury, Pewsey, Westbury and Castle Cary) being staffed through most of the day, and three others only during peak periods. The remaining seven stations are unstaffed with only one (Hungerford) having a ticket machine.

Although the seven unstaffed stations are not part of the Penalty Fares Scheme, BTPG has consistently voiced concerns as to the major difficulties passengers have in order to purchase tickets. The Paddington to Bedwyn and Reading to Newbury services are Driver Only Operated at present with only a minority carrying ticket selling staff.

Apart from a serious loss of revenue this also has the effect of under-recording the usage figures for the unstaffed stations. If the proposed Paddington to Exeter semi-fast trains are introduced from 2016 it would appear likely that they would carry a Guard or Train Manager which should lead to an improvement in revenue collection.

The main purpose of the McNulty Report is to examine costs on the railways in this country. Few would argue with the premise that costs could, and indeed should be reduced. Closure of stations, lines or a reduction in services would be totally unacceptable, and would be strongly opposed by many groups across the country, including BTPG.

It has also been suggested that staffing levels may be reduced in an attempt to save money. As staffing levels on the Berks & Hants line are already low it is to be hoped that this suggestion will be quickly discounted. Any reduction in on-train staff and ticket offices would make it even harder for passengers to obtain tickets, leading to a further reduction in revenue.

The McNulty Report recommends that Category E stations lose their ticket offices completely. This would affect Thatcham and Theale if implemented. It is also proposed that opening hours are reduced at Category D stations. Pewsey, Westbury, Frome and Castle Cary are all listed under this category. Even Category C stations such as Newbury may suffer a reduction in the number of ticket office windows under these proposals.

It is certain that passengers will have more choice as to how they purchase tickets in the future. There must still be a role for some ticket offices and on-board staff on the Berks & Hants line for some time to come.