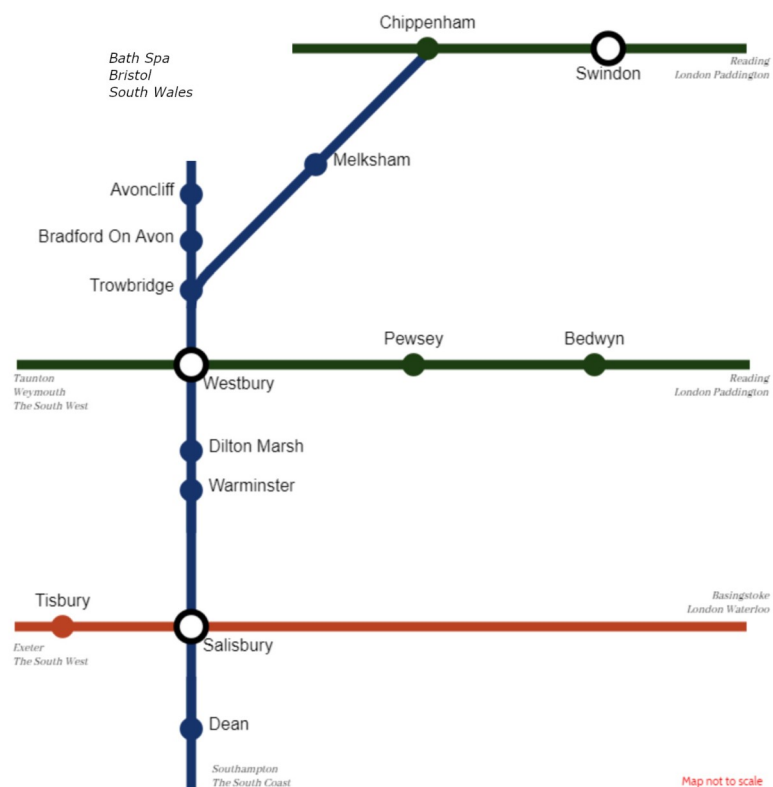


18th April 1966 - Sixty years . . . after the closure of Melksham Railway Station and many other stations across Wiltshire . . . where are we today? What for the future?

Geography

The largest towns in Wiltshire are Swindon, Salisbury, Trowbridge, Chippenham, Melksham, Warminster and Devizes. With the exception of Devizes, they are set in a north to south arc around the west of the county.

Mainline railways run east to west across Wiltshire, but north to south the only service is the "TransWilts" line - Swindon, Chippenham, Melksham, Trowbridge, Westbury, Dilton Marsh, Warminster and Salisbury. Readers will note that this joins six of the seven largest towns, as well as Westbury and Dilton Marsh, each of which is the closest station (and within walking distance) for around 9,000 residents.



Historic Background

Passenger Services on part of the line were withdrawn under the "Beeching Axe" in 1966, with the station at Melksham closing on 18th April - 60 years ago. The line remained open for occasional freight trains, reduced to a single track without any signals along the way ... and so it slumbered for 20 years. In 1985, the station was reopened - a bare platform without facilities, with just a daily commuter service for people employed in Swindon. Various trials were done over the years, but they spluttered out and it wasn't really until 2013 that a service was restored at anything like a generally useful level.

Passenger numbers rose from around 3,000 journeys to 75,000 journeys per annum to and from Melksham, and around 240,000 on journeys to, from and through Melksham - the section and station served only by the TransWilts train. Those numbers sound good, and they are way above minimum targets set for the service when it was enhanced in 2013, but they remain pathetic

when compared to other lines and stations. That's because the service only runs every 2 or 3 hours, which is totally inadequate for most people who are making a short "metro" type journey. The infrequency also means that if something operational goes wrong - and the line is busier now with freight too - and a train gets cancelled, people can't just wait for the next one.

The line and service as it is today

The railway from Thingley Junction (near) Chippenham to Bradford Junction (near Trowbridge) via Melksham remains a single track that takes 14 or 15 minutes to traverse. Call the line capacity 3 trains an hour - 20 minutes per passage, allowing for trains to clear from and onto the single track at each end, signals to change round, and for a call at the intermediate station at Melksham.

For the capacity of three trains per hour to be made full use of, trains need to be waiting their turn prior to their transit. They then be able to clear the single line at the other end onto the main lines toward Swindon or towards Westbury without having to wait for a gap in main line services. When everything is running to time, and with some very clever scheduling, it can work. But when something goes wrong, disruptions and backlog that's hard to recover from can all too easily be triggered.

Do things often go wrong? Sadly, yes, they do. Not only on the route itself, but anywhere between Westbury and Reading, and between Trowbridge and Bristol for which the single line through Melksham is the practical diversion route when those lines need to be closed. For planned engineering it can be worked out, but if either of those lines is closed by a freight train failure, a safety inspection, a road vehicle hitting a bridge, a person hit by a train, flooding, or a myriad of other occasional reasons ... the line can get a sudden and unplanned series of extra trains making their way from London to the West Country, or from Portsmouth to Cardiff.

Once a train leaves Westbury headed for Swindon, there's nowhere it can be pulled off onto a sideline until it gets to Swindon, and vice versa. Waiting to get onto the single line, trains block a main line. Waiting to get off the single line, they block it for trains waiting to enter or follow.

As a train approaches Swindon, there is enough extra track so that a train can get out of the way - either a short passenger train into the bay platform, or a freight into the middle line. It's quite the opposite for trains approaching Westbury, where there are just three operational platforms for passenger trains headed off on six different routes - Weymouth, Southampton, Reading (and London), Swindon, Bristol and the West Country (via Taunton). There are also two lay-by tracks which are used by freight trains - from the quarries at Merehead and Whatley, from the docks at Southampton, and for works trains for which Westbury is a major base.

From being a sleepy backwater 40 years ago, the line through Melksham is now a bottleneck which has been programmed to work well, but it's a long shot from 50 years ago where there were just one or two trains a week passing through.

Into this already-busy line, can anything be added?

Yes, perhaps a little and at the risk of degrading reliability further when things are off-route or running at the wrong time. The Go-op application to the Office of Rail and Road has worked this out, and identified an ability to run 4 extra trains each way, each day, between Swindon and Westbury. The timings proposed have other constraints on them by the service extensions beyond Westbury, and for Go-op's commercial needs; they look to running a service that breaks even, and not one that runs services at a loss to meet social need.

Taking the Go-op work, I speculate from public data as to what could be achieved with a single extra train running up and down. These for shorthand are the potential Melksham calling times, leaving existing passenger services unchanged.

Monday to Friday (from May 2026)

Northbound 07:21 08:02 10:02 12:23 14:34 16:39 18:53 20:22 21:32

Southbound 06:29 09:09 11:31 13:39 15:40 18:10 19:09 20:40 22:56

Could add

Northbound 06:10 08:50 11:10 - 15:20 17:50

Southbound 07:40 10:20 12:40 - 17:00 19:50

Saturday (from Autumn 2026)

Northbound 08:02 10:09 12:33 14:35 16:39 18:51 20:25

Southbound 09:10 11:32 13:39 15:39 18:01 20:09 21:35

Could add

Northbound 06:10 08:50 - 15:20 17:40 21:55

Southbound 07:40 10:30 - 17:00 19:10 22:56

Sunday (from May 2026)

Northbound 08:32 10:57 12:31 14:31 17:08 19:06 20:54

Southbound 09:32 11:57 13:56 16:09 18:09 20:09 21:59

Could add

Northbound 06:40 09:52 - 15:50 21:35

Southbound 07:40 11:15 - 17:30 22:56

Within this consideration, I have allowed for the extra train to have time to get to Swindon / Westbury and back on each service and had turn round time there. I have not looked at train paths and conflicting movements on the main lines, nor at platform availability at Westbury. A break in the middle of the day leaves capacity available for freight services, and the step up from 4 extra services (the Go-op proposal) to 5 is explained by the addition of an early service which is not on its own going to be commercially justified for Go-op, but will generate extra return journeys through the day on GWR services and be socially useful and help the wider economic picture of the area served, not just railway finances.

Is that enough of an improvement?

Frankly, no. But it will help as a stepping stone towards a more appropriate service on the line, perhaps at the expense of some short term reliability.

I am delighted to see the some improvements in reliability on the line (cancellations down from 11% last summer to 5% in the last month), and also additional stops made by longer distance trains diverted through Melksham when those diversions cause capacity issues. Getting information to passenger when these things happen has been a bit patchy and could be improved. And the overall rail network needs to be more reliable to stop diversions being needed at short notice in the first place.

Drivers and train managers (to a lesser extent) of diverted trains need to learn the line, and for this purpose our local trains are scheduled to be driven, at times, by drivers based far, far away. Which is an issue; two trains in particular are prone to be cancelled if London to Exeter expresses are delayed or cancelled - for example by a piece of defective track at Slough, or a train needing unscheduled repair at North Pole (the depot near Paddington). The 12:33 at Melksham has been cancelled four times in the last 35 weekdays, and has been seriously late on another two.

A service that runs at least every hour, and at the same time in every hour, is an appropriate minimum. It would - just about - be possible but with three trains on the line; the round trip is 90 minutes, with turn around time at each end you're looking at 105 minutes, and theres' 120 minutes in 2 hours, so would 2 trains not suffice? No - because the two trains would be required to pass each other in the middle of the single track section. At Turzovka in Slovakia, I have observed two trains using a long single line through the town at increased capacity by swapping over their passengers at the station. It would not work at Melksham; quite apart from the signalling not allowing it, over two thirds of the passengers at Melksham are through passengers and having them swap trains would be less than encouraging and take so long the train might as well go through. Something similar is done in the peak at Bourne End, where the service is increased from every hour to every 30 minutes by having two trains rather than one between Maidenhead and Marlow, but them being unable to pass each other.

So - how do we get a further improvement?

The line used to be double track all the way, allowing trains to pass at any point. There used to be lay-by sidings at Lacock, and there used to be extra platforms at Chippenham, Trowbridge and Westbury (Swindon too). There used to be extra signals along the way so that trains could follow each other closer. These things are long gone, but some elements could be restored - probably in different ways - to increase capacity, increase robustness, and decrease the amount of consequential disruption when things *do* go wrong.

At Westbury, a fourth platform with an extra track beside it could and should be provided. Physically, the bricks and mortar are there and it "just" needs the points, track and signalling - but still a big job. It might be tempting to simply extend the fourth platform out to the bypass line just a track width away, but that line is used as both a bypass and a holding line for very long freight trains, and extending the platform out might well address one problem - but it would create another. No - the solution that's clear is an extra track.

As an aside to this discussion, but very much part of the justification, the extra track will also give an extra robustness to all services at Westbury, allowing the semi-fast service to London to step up to hourly and in doing so provide the services needed for the proposed Devizes Gateway station. It will also allow Cardiff to Portsmouth and Swindon to Westbury (and on via Frome and Yeovil to Weymouth) services to pull in alongside each other and make connections both ways - as can be seen, for example, at Eindhoven in The Netherlands.

Redoubling throughout from Bradford Junction to Thingley Junction is plausible, but expensive. The bridge over the River Avon at Staverton is now a structure that can only take a single track, the junction at Thingley was canted to allow London to Bristol trains to run faster and they would have to be slowed down to get the levels right to put in a true double junction, in places the embankments and cuttings have degraded with the remaining track slewed to the centre, and at Melksham a two track station would require huge investment including a platform and a pair of lifts to provide access for all were the track doubled. Even redoubled, once a train had left Swindon or Westbury, there would be no loop to set it aside for other trains to pass or to wait for a main line path.

Rather than redoubling the whole single track section, it makes sense to provide a loop, or loops, along the line at places where the engineering makes sense, and where it does not impact on the junction at Thingley.

An extended (lengthwise) platform at Melksham, with a loop starting in the middle of the platform, would allow two passenger trains to arrive at the same time, then one depart looping around the other and the second one then depart. This is especially attractive as with passenger trains calling at the same time in both directions, a single set of town bus connections will ensure that all four connections (Westbury and Swindon to Melksham's residences,

and Melksham's residences towards both Westbury and Swindon) can all be handled by the same consolidated services. There is a precedent for these rail operations at both Penryn in Cornwall and Dovey Junction in Wales, and with the bus connections there's a brilliant hourly example at Bad Doberan near Rostock in Germany.

This (long) loop (near Melksham) would also allow two freight trains in the rest of the hour to pass each other, and / or freight to pass passenger services if things were out of kilter. A loop would need to be signalled, and a second train could now follow the first at shorter headway when appropriate - reducing the chance of and damage done by a wait on the main line.

A long (freight length at least) loop has also been suggested near Thingley Junction. This in itself would not dramatically increase capacity, but it would help with robustness if trains presented out of sequence, with trains coming up from Westbury being able to wait for a main line path without blocking trains in the other direction, and trains waiting to head to Westbury being able to do so clear of the main line.

There would also be sense in doubling Bradford Junction and a section of track from there up to (but not across) the River Avon bridge. In something of a mirror of the benefits of Thingley, this would allow trains to be clear of the main line as they waited for the single track towards Chippenham, or for the main line towards Westbury. Using a true double junction (no problem with camber here), faster running could be achieved between Melksham and Trowbridge, and the one-every-20-minutes reduced by a couple of minutes.

Potential service with extra capacity as described

With the loop beside Melksham Station, these and with the extras already timed by the ORR, passenger trains could call (Monday to Friday times) at

06:10 06:29 * 07:21 07:40 08:02 08:50 09:09 *
10:02 10:20 * 11:10 11:31 * 12:23 12:40 * 13:39 *
14:34 * 15:20 15:50 16:39 17:00 * 17:50
18:10 18:53 19:09 19:50 20:22 20:40 * 21:32 * and
22:56 in BOTH directions.

Freight capacity would be doubled too - with the paths (shown at "*") passing each other at Melksham.

In practise, this would be a timetable built on what would have become historic peculiarities, and switching to a clock-face service calling every hour in both directions at 06:30 to 23:30 would make sense.

A 30 minute service for the "Bath and Wiltshire Metro" has been suggested; in order to accommodate freight too, it's likely that at least one of the extra loops would be needed. There is also scope at that point for the second service in the hour to start from a third platform at Chippenham (again, platform is there but no track) and then use a restored triangle - restating the 1990 removed line that allowed trains from Melksham to run direct to Bradford-on-Avon, and to Bath and Bristol which are key destinations from Melksham. This would give Melksham a service every 30 minutes to Chippenham, and every hour direct to Swindon, Trowbridge, Bath, Bristol, and Westbury with changes at Bradford-on-Avon or Chippenham to reach all those places every 30 minutes.