

# **The 234 / x34 story**

or public (bus) travel between the Wiltshire strategic towns of Chippenham and Trowbridge - serving Melksham in between and extending to Frome

## **and some forward looking suggestions**

### **The story**

- \* For "as long as people remember", bus service No. 234 ran Chippenham - Melksham - Trowbridge - Frome.
- \* It was privatised in 1986, "Badgerline" and as a result of a merger became part of First Bus in 1995.
- \* The Sunday service was withdrawn around (?) 20 years ago. From around this time, the daytime services were commercially run, but evening services required a subsidy from Wiltshire [county] Council.
- \* Around (?) 2010, Faresaver introduced competing buses, Monday to Friday, so we were up to 2 vehicles an hour - but running within minutes of each other and at times rushing to stops to be first to pick up passengers. This competition was prevalent across the UK, and indeed it was still happening (seen in Dorset) in very recent years.
- \* First withdrew from the route on 1st August 2015. Faresaver introduced a commercial hourly Saturday service to handle that market. Wiltshire Council solicited and received bids to run an evening service similar to that which had been provided by the 234, but although bids were received, did not accept any of them due to budget constraints. Funding that had been provided to the evening 234 was redirected to other services elsewhere in the county which were considered to be better spending.
- \* From summer 2024, subsidy has been provided for a Sunday service on the x34, running a shorter route from Chippenham to Trowbridge (Sainsbury's), not continuing as the Monday to Saturday service does to Trinity Church (for the station and rail connections) and then Frome.
- \* No subsidy has been provided for an x34 evening service; I understand that it was also looked at very seriously but wasn't funded.

## **Where we are now**

SO ... we have a 7 day x34 service - single operator - which ends at about 17:30 on Monday to Saturday and at about 18:30 on Sunday. End times at Chippenham and relate to how long a shift drivers can legally and safely work. They start later so can finish later on a Sunday.

## **Analysis**

**Loss of the evening x34 bus:** Looking back to 2015, the evening proposal was for a single vehicle running 2 or 3 round trips during the evening between Trowbridge and Chippenham. This made sense as an adoption of what was running; I used the 22:16 bus from Chippenham RAILWAY station quite often and it typically had 10 passengers when it set off, dropping people off along the way. The final run back up from Trowbridge (the bus headed back to the Westbury depot) terminated at Melksham - perhaps half a dozen passengers. I hate "last days" but I happened to be on that one, driver dropped me off on the A350 at the top of the approach to Melksham Station to pick up my car. "I can do this today - I am hardly setting a precedent".

**But saving of the evening Bath bus:** A similar story of potential service loss based on competition was unfolding on the Bath - Melksham - Devizes corridor in late 2019, with Faresaver providing a Monday to Saturday service and First Bus providing a 7 day service, including 6 evenings. First had pulled out of daytime extensions from Melksham on to Devizes - providing only the D3 (equivalent of the 271 and 273 - NOT the 272). We helped alert the community and strong inputs were made via public meetings and otherwise to suggest a joined up, 7 day including evenings, service and one which also covered route segments only served by First at that time, such as Whitley an Melksham Forest. The outcome was the services more or less as we have today, which are (IMHO) a good result - whether the community should take credit for that, or whether Wiltshire Council and Faresaver without intervention would have come up with the same solution, I don't know.

On the 273, the early evening buses into Bath and the later buses out have gotten very busy towards the end of the week and on Saturday - to the extent that an extra vehicle (2 round trip) was added last September. We could do with that on Friday and perhaps Thursday as well.

## **Personal (but informed) suggestion for x34**

From Chippenham Bus Station, via Railway Station to Trinity Church, Trowbridge:  
18:00, 20:10, 22:20

From Trowbridge to Chippenham Bus Station  
(Railway station served outbound only in the evening, but then it's on a loop):  
19:05, 21:15 and 23:25 (Terminates Melksham?)

And, yes, 7 days a week.

A second vehicle could - usefully run from Chippenham at 19:05 and 21:15, and from Trowbridge at 18:00 (the existing last bus), 20:10 and 22:20.

It's my view that the subsidy per seat occupied would be lower with a service running about hourly, even though the overall subsidy would be higher. In other words, the buses would be busier and more than twice the passenger numbers carried with this better frequency, but not enough to pay for the extra bus.

Evening route / loop through Chippenham – incoming to Bus Station, then railway station, then back out.

Potential route / loop through Trowbridge – incoming direct along Hilperton Road and The Halve, outgoing via Horse Road as daytime x34, and also serving Paxcroft Mead. This could speed it up to clockface.

Final outbound bus from Chippenham Station to be timed for a robust connection off the train – known point of failure in 2015 (22:11 arrival from Penzance / 22:16 bus / missed one day in three)

Seven days a week, all buses should serve Trinity Church in Trowbridge, and Chippenham Railway Station. This may be on a loop around Chippenham.

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Whilst I have done my best to be accurate, much of this is done from personal memory and so it's "Errors and Omissions Excepted". Happy to answer any questions that may arise / clarify points. This is an information piece and as at version 1.0 has not been validated / commented upon by service specifiers or operators. With those provisos, I am happy for it to be shared as appropriate.