

MAJOR LINE UPGRADE ALMOST COMPLETE AND CHALLENGE OF RESTORING HERITAGE DIESEL TRAINS FOR MAIN LINE RUNNING

Published: January 5, 2016

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An ambitious and historic project to restore and upgrade three miles of former Network Rail line, as well as install a hi-tech level crossing with associated signalling and build a road-rail interchange facility, is almost complete – so passenger trains can again run to Wareham.

The start of the trial service from Swanage and Corfe Castle is due to start during the first quarter of 2017 – instead of June, 2016 – because of the need to replace, rather than restore, non-standard specialist equipment on two ex-British Railways 1960s heritage diesel trains being upgraded to exacting main line standards.

It was in September, 2014, that the Swanage Railway took on the lease of three miles of former Network Rail line – from a mile west of Norden station to a quarter of a mile south of Worgret Junction near Wareham – to give tracks, bridges and embankments a major upgrade ahead of the trial train service.

The restoration work has seen 1,200 wooden track sleepers replaced, half a mile of track laid, a quarter-mile-long embankment given a major upgrade, undergrowth and drainage cleared along six miles of embankments as well as the installation of a new set of track points at Furzebrook.

A new state of the art level crossing has been installed on the access road to the Wytch Farm oil field and Norden station while 2,235 cubic metres of earth has been excavated – and a new siding laid – so a new road-rail interchange could be built to enable the creation of the Norden Gates level crossing.

Swanage Railway Company Project Wareham director Mark Woolley said: "The historic transformation has been remarkable and I'd like to pay tribute to everyone – on the ground and behind the scenes in planning and logistics – for all their hard work which will see the ambitious upgrade of our three-mile extension completed by the end of March, 2016.

"It has been a major undertaking – the laying of half a mile of track, the replacement of 1,200 wooden sleepers, the major upgrade of a quarter-mile long embankment, the installation of a state of the art level crossing and associated signalling at Norden as well as the creation of the new road-rail interchange at Norden for the transfer of locomotives and carriages.

"The start of the trial passenger service to Wareham during the first quarter of 2017 – instead of June this year – is because of the need to replace, rather than restore, non-standard equipment on our two ex-British Railways 1960s heritage diesel trains being upgraded to exacting main line standards.

"Detailed technical examination has concluded that new non-standard axles and wheel bearings – known as wheel-sets – need to be manufactured by specialist contractors in the United States, South Africa and England. We estimate the completed trains will be tested and delivered to the Swanage Railway during the Autumn of 2016.

"We're very grateful for the assistance of our specialist contractors who have been very helpful in progressing the detailed examination and manufacturing work needed on our two diesel trains so they can carry passengers to Wareham," added Mr Woolley, a Swanage Railway volunteer for 33 years.

The Swanage Railway has been given a grant of £1.86 million from the Government's Coastal Communities Fund to introduce a trial passenger train service from Swanage to the main line at Wareham. It is planned to run the service on 50 selected days during 2017 and 90 selected days during 2018.

The grant covers the restoration of the former Network Rail line as well as the restoration and upgrade, to main line standards, of the two ex-British Railways diesel trains – a one-coach Class 121 'Bubble Car' and a three-coach Class 117 unit – which are known as diesel multiple units or DMUs for short.

The Purbeck Community Rail Partnership, of which the Swanage Railway is a member, has been working since 1997 to re-establish a passenger train service between Swanage, Corfe Castle and the main line at Wareham.

The public can donate money to the Swanage Railway's Project Wareham Sponsor a Sleeper appeal.

So far, the fund-raising initiative has raised more than £15,000 to help replace sleepers on the three miles of former Network Rail line between Motala and bridge No. 2, a quarter of a mile south of Worgret Junction which is just over a mile west of Wareham on the London to Weymouth main line.

Just visit the appeals page of www.swanagerailwaytrust.org.uk at www.swanagerailwaytrust.org.uk/index.php/appeals.

Because the Swanage Railway Trust is a registered charity, donations by taxpayers are subject to Gift Aid top-up.

Swanage Railway train times – and special event details – are available online at www.swanagerailway.co.uk or by telephone on 01929 425800.