

First train from Swanage to Wareham for 50 years

April 5, 2023



A dedicated volunteer who was one of the first to start rebuilding the Swanage Railway – and who travelled on the last British Rail train from Swanage to Wareham as a child in 1972 – is to be the conductor driver on the first Swanage Railway passenger train into Wareham using the heritage line’s 1950s diesel train.

Peter Frost will be in the cab of the former British Railways diesel multiple unit on Tuesday, 4 April, when the four-carriage train forms the 10.44am Corfe Castle to Wareham train and the return 11.19am Wareham to Corfe Castle and Swanage train.

Tuesday marks the first day of a four-day a week trial heritage diesel train service from the main line at Wareham into the heart of the Isle of Purbeck between 4 April and 10 September, 2023, thanks to what Swanage Railway Trust chairman Gavin Johns describes as “working in partnership”.

For the first time, the Swanage Railway will be using its restored and upgraded 1950s heritage diesel trains, used by British Rail across its network from the 1950s to the 1990s, to operate the eleven mile service from Swanage – one mile of which will be on the Network Rail main line from Worgret Junction into Wareham station.

Peter Frost, from Swanage, said: "It will be a great moment when our 1950s heritage diesel train runs into Wareham for the first time and then out ten minutes later bound for Corfe Castle and Swanage – something that several generations of dedicated and determined Swanage Railway volunteers have worked towards since 1972.

"As a 13-year old, I rode on the last British Rail train from Swanage to Wareham on that cold night in January, 1972, and watched the depressing sight of the track ripped up for scrap during that hot summer when it seemed the Swanage branch line would never come back. Rebuilding the line and returning trains to Wareham seemed impossible.

"I remember the first day of restoration work at a disused and boarded up Swanage station in February, 1976, when most people thought we were mad. We ran our first fledgling diesel trains in 1979 and the first steam trains over a few hundred yards of hand-laid track at Swanage in 1980," added Peter who grew up in Corfe Castle and drives steam locomotives on the Swanage Railway.

Also on the 11.19am train from Wareham to Swanage on Tuesday, 4 April, 2023, will be Swanage Railway Trust director Peter Sills who, as a 13-year old, travelled on the last British Rail passenger train from Swanage to Wareham on the evening of Saturday, 1 January, 1972, and who still has his ticket from that last diesel train.

On New Year's Day 1972, Peter Sills travelled on that last British Rail train with his late father Frederick. Now, 51 years later, Peter Sills will be travelling on the first train from Wareham to Corfe Castle and Swanage with his 16-year old son Frederick who is a keen member of the Swanage Railway's popular Sygnets youth group.

Peter Sills, aged 65, from Wareham said: "Riding on the first train from Wareham in the Swanage Railway's heritage diesel train with my son – 51 years after riding on the last British Rail train from Wareham to Swanage in 1972, with my late father – will be a very special piece of history and rather poignant. It will be like turning back the clock."

The trial 90-day Wareham service operates on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays until 10 September, 2023, with the first train departing Wareham at 11.19am and the last train leaving Swanage for Wareham at 4.20pm – enabling visitors to spend four hours in Swanage or Corfe Castle. The timetable is subject to change on Swanage Railway special event days.

From the end of April, tickets for the Swanage Railway's Wareham service will also be available from main line train operating company South Western Railway so its passengers can purchase add-on tickets for Corfe Castle and Swanage to their main line tickets.

It will be the first time in 51 years – since British Rail controversially closed and lifted the Swanage branch line in 1972 – that such a main line ticket facility for train travel to Swanage has been possible.

Gavin Johns, the volunteer chairman of the Swanage Railway Trust, said: "This trial train service is the result of working in partnership with the Government's Coastal Communities Fund, the Department of Transport, the former Purbeck District Council, Dorset Council, British Petroleum, Perenco, Network Rail

and South Western Railway.

"I would like to thank our valued stakeholders for their far-sighted investment of £5.5 million to re-connect Swanage and Corfe Castle with the main line at Wareham which included £1.8 million from the Government's Coastal Communities Fund so we could restore and upgrade our 1950s heritage diesel trains for running on the main line directly into Wareham station," added Gavin who is also a volunteer Swanage Railway signalman.

The Wareham trains will be operated and staffed for the Swanage Railway by West Coast Railways, one of Britain's leading main line charter and special train operators. A Swanage Railway conductor driver and conductor guard are required to be on the Wareham trains with the West Coast Railways driver and guard.

The four trains a day service from Wareham will be formed of a three-carriage heritage Class 117 diesel multiple unit that can have a one-carriage heritage Class 121 diesel multiple unit added at busy times, giving a total of 292 seats.

The two heritage diesel trains have been restored and upgraded for the Swanage Railway by specialist contractors who fitted the same technical, signalling and safety equipment that is installed on all other trains running on the national railway network.

The conductor guard on the first day of the Swanage Railway's Wareham heritage diesel train service will be volunteer guard and signalman Trevor Parsons who is chairman of the Swanage Railway Company - which runs the heritage trains - and a director of the Swanage Railway Trust which manages the volunteer-run heritage line.

Trevor explained: "I would like to thank our stakeholders for their help and patience over many years with a complicated and historic project that has been as ambitious as it has been challenging.

"The Wareham service would not be possible without Purbeck District Council committing £3.2million from housing developers' transport improvement contributions for re-signalling improvements between Wareham, Worgret Junction and the Swanage Railway as part of Network Rail's Poole to Wool re-signalling scheme," added Trevor.

Purbeck Community Rail Partnership chairman, Councillor Mike Whitwam, said: "This trial train service to Wareham marks an important opportunity to return to a fully-functioning and sustainable rail service that meets the needs of local communities, visitors and businesses.

"The trial service holds the prospect of Isle of Purbeck residents travelling anywhere possible by rail, leaving their cars at home and taking traffic off the congested A351 road," added Mike who is a Swanage Railway Trust trustee and Swanage town councillor.

During the summer of 2017, the Swanage Railway operated a 60 selected day trial train service from Wareham using hired-in diesel locomotives and carriages operated and staffed by West Coast Railways.

The Swanage Railway had hoped to operate a second year 90 selected day trial train service from

Wareham during 2018 but this was delayed and then the Covid pandemic hit with further delays caused its practical and economic effects.

Anyone interested in finding out about volunteering should contact the Swanage Railway volunteer recruitment and retention office on 01929 475212 or send an email to iwanttovolunteer@swanagerailway.co.uk.

More details about the Swanage Railway's varied volunteering opportunities can be found at swanagerailwaytrust.org/volunteering.

Photo credit: Andrew P.M. Wright