



CONTRAST: New track and Victorian brickwork in the tunnel

The 'big box' tunnel

The small loading gauge of Britain's Victorian rail network has prevented rail freight companies carrying some of the "big box" or "high cube" containers which now account for half of all container traffic in Britain.

Although there has been some successful running with small-wheel wagons which can accommodate the 9'6" containers, Network Rail is carrying out work to enlarge the loading gauge on key routes, including Southampton to the West Midlands and Felixstowe to Nuneaton.

Work focused on Southampton tunnel over the Christmas period as part of the £71 million upgrade for the route to the West Midlands, via Winchester, Basingstoke, Didcot, Oxford, Banbury, Leamington Spa and Warwick. The aim is to remove 50,000 lorry movements a year from the roads.

Wessex branch's John Friedberger reports: "In contrast with the massive

over-runs and consequent inconvenience to passengers on the Portsmouth area resignalling project in 2007, we were delighted to see that the work undertaken by Network Rail over Christmas and New Year to permit greater use by container traffic through the Southampton tunnel was a model of engineering.

"The original plan had been to lower one track this year and the second next winter. However, with new technology and working practices, all the major work was completed by mid-January with no need for a second major closure."

Network Rail's route director for Wessex, Richard O'Brien said: "There is still much more work to do on the full route from Southampton Port to the West Midlands before the benefits of carrying the larger 9' 6" containers can be realised, but we have made a very promising start." Southampton Tunnel is the most complex of the 50 or so structures to be upgraded.



TEAMWORK: Southampton tunnel

Pictures: NETWORK RAIL

Wessex

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■ ■ Siemens Traincare

Wessex members were given an exclusive briefing and tour of Northam "Traincare" facility near Southampton by depot manager Andy Healey and Eddie Milligan, the production service manager. The depot was purpose-built to maintain Siemens class 444 and 450 electric trains under a 20-year contract to the rolling stock owners, Angel Trains. The depot was opened in 2002, taking only 14 months to complete. The 444/450 fleet, operated by South West Trains, is 172 strong of which at least 160 are required for service each day. Their performance, measured by service hours between failures, is consistently near the top of UK train fleets.

Our first visit in November was over-subscribed so Siemens allowed a second visit on 12 January. Both were much appreciated and all members expressed admiration at the efficiency of the operation and conditions for the depot staff, some with rail industry experience but others who were ex-Navy and Army personnel. Various modern aids to maintenance



Railfuture members at Northam Picture: JEREMY SLEIGHTHOLM

are in service, including an acoustic monitoring device which listens to the sound of each wheel bearing as the train passes on the main line, providing a printout showing wear and the need for replacement. Proximity to the main line and other space constraints means that the main shed is less than optimum size with the result that a 10-coach class 444 train has to be split before both end doors can be shut. Inside there are walkways at four levels for carrying out maintenance functions, from removing a wheelset via the bogie drop pit to hoisting an air-conditioning unit from the roof. Separate buildings house wheel lathe and train wash facilities. An impressive operation.

■ ■ Reconnection of Swanage to the National Rail network

It has long been a campaign aim of the Wessex branch to see the Swanage Railway reconnected to the main line at Wareham. The main obstacle to reinstating a regular passenger service to the Swanage branch remains the inappropriate signalling arrangements at Worgret Junction. Purbeck District Council has approved funding of £100,000 towards the design of the necessary work, indicating strong local support for the scheme. A major renewal project is under way for the signalling on the main Dorset line west of Poole but we understand that, at present, Network Rail is not fully committed to the modest additional investment of some £3 million. Readers may recall that Virgin CrossCountry ran a special Voyager train to Swanage a few years ago, indication of the potential for renewed through services to the popular south Dorset coast.