

THE BEST TIMETABLES OF THE BRITISH ISLES

UPDATED 17/02/12

All the printed editions of my Directory contained this section, and it always seemed to stimulate great debate! In those days I merely listed the best without comment, except to say that for a timetable to qualify for consideration it had to be in 24-hour clock, have an index of places served and have decent maps. However, in those days, whilst the Directory attracted advertising it did not have sponsorship as such and I feared on switching to the internet with sponsorship it might be difficult either to expect sponsors to possibly have their own products ignored, or to have the confidence of users that the choices were indeed not dependent at all on any such sponsorship. I received, however, many requests to restore the section and so felt the time had come to do so. I sincerely hope all users accept that my choices are those that I would make whether or not any sponsorship of this site existed. A benefit of the new listings is that I now give reasons for my decisions and I hope this might spur on some who are not there, and wonder why, to realise that it is often the omission of something small that disqualifies them. One thing I consider essential: leaflets are fine as an extra but no replacement for an area booklet, or combined map and guide, showing the network. Sadly this is why, for example, not a single Arriva operation appears below. Finally a word about size. I consider only the content of a timetable, as it is reasonable to accept that an A4 volume permits greater clarity but on the other hand an A5, or even smaller, book lends itself to portability. Comments below regarding size are therefore mere facts and have no bearing on my decision to include a publication.

ENTRIES IN RED ARE THOSE I CONSIDER TO BE OUTSTANDING IN THEIR FIELD

ENTRIES IN BLUE ARE THOSE I CONSIDER TO BE EXCELLENT PUBLICATIONS

ENTRIES IN GREEN ARE THOSE I CONSIDER TO BE VERY GOOD PUBLICATIONS

BEST LOCAL AUTHORITY TIMETABLES:

ENGLAND

Bedford

Bedfordshire is now a county like Berkshire that has no county council but is administered wholly by unitary authorities – in this case Bedford Borough Council, Central Bedfordshire Council and Luton Borough Council. Bedford Borough was quick to introduce an excellent timetable for its area, produced by 'Fabrik Communications', who publish quite a few bus and rail timetables for operators and authorities. The latest edition is a 150-page A5 book, issued February 2012, with all tables shown with decent print size and with black print on white paper – cheaper to produce than colours, yet better conforming to standards suitable for the visually impaired. A detailed 25-page introduction includes an explanation of bus provision and bus shelter ownership and lists operator details and school term dates. A very detailed index of places served is added towards the rear. There are three maps on a pull-out flap to the back cover: diagrammatic maps for the rail and bus systems and a geographical map for the town. Town centre and Bus Station blow ups are added towards the front, showing bus stops and stands. This is a genuine attempt to produce something comprehensive and useful and should put to shame other authorities in Britain that don't want to bother producing timetables any longer and/or who use the excuse that everything is available on the internet nowadays. Even if that last statement were true it would not lessen the need for complementary printed publicity to carry round or look up at home to assist the planning of journeys.

Central Bedfordshire

Central Bedfordshire has also produced some excellent timetables – five in all. Each has a detailed introduction including lots of general information, school term dates, concessionary fares and operator details, plus a list of services, a very detailed index, a system map, town maps and blow-

ups of town centres and these are clear, showing routes well as they pass through towns. There is also an excellent separate system map of the whole Council area. This is again a genuine attempt to produce something comprehensive and useful and should put to shame other authorities in Britain that do little or nothing towards publicity.

Cornwall

Cornwall has been publishing a comprehensive timetable summer and winter without a break for as long as any authority in Britain. In recent years, whilst it has kept this up, the quality of the publication slipped as it followed a policy of obtaining significant financial contributions from its main operators. The problem was three-fold: firstly it tended to be a 'First' book with the others tacked on, leading to an Index that was largely First-oriented; secondly each operator appeared in its own house-style of font, leading to an inconsistent appearance; and thirdly it was consistently 24-hour apart from the then Truronian input, where that operator alone insisted on its times appearing in 12-hour. In Summer 2006 every one of these problems was corrected and the publication once again became first-rate. The style became the same throughout with various operators merely delineated by various coloured headings, the Index was much improved and became 'neutral' and well sub-divided too, and the whole went 24-hour – and all this with the financial contributions from major operators maintained. Town maps were, as always, superb, especially for a county that does not have many large towns at all. The overall System Map was a separate publication, which makes sense as it stands alone as a general guide. Cornwall's 23 ferry services and its air routes were included and the whole was a massive 160-page perfect-bound A4 book, reduced to around 150 pages in winter editions. Summer 2008, however, saw this split into four volumes, each A5 in size, and this has continued. Whilst there is inevitable duplication this has made the volumes much more useful for portability on day trips – and indeed the four together are not all that bulky for a holiday. It is good to see standards being maintained at a time when other authorities are (wrongly) starting to think printed timetables are no longer needed – though a little disappointing that town maps have changed from colour to black & white. Also, since the May 2010 edition Western Greyhound has been shown with its own fonts and I hope this is not the start of a reversion to operators having too much say in what should be a neutral publication. The publication would also benefit from having details of what has changed since the last edition – something its neighbour Devon has always included to good effect.

Derbyshire

It is difficult to find words to adequately extol the excellence of this county! They have always produced the most excellent books, updated with cumulative supplements as required. There are so many refinements: always a main index of places served plus at least one other to show access just from the main towns; an indication of the publication date of the next volume; a subscription form for future issues; an inserted system map; local town maps; and copious information regarding access to places of interest. Each timetable is, where possible, shown with 'up' and 'down' services facing each other. Incidentally, no nonsense here about omitting unitary parts of the county: Derby City is treated as is the rest of the county, with full details shown.

Devon

Devon has for some years produced an excellent series of books, both summer and winter, and this is no mean feat for a county that is predominately rural in nature. Despite the volumes being relatively small, each always has an excellent index and always adds the main changes since the last edition. The table layout is a model of clarity, there is always a system map and town plans are excellent. What is more, the timetables are always out well before implementation date. This year there has been the inevitable need to save money. Too many authorities are taking the lazy way out and merely abolishing timetables and/or maps. Not so here. The May 2011 timetables have abolished spot colours and hence are black & white only (which personally I prefer anyway), removed some optional information, slightly revised some table banks to save pages and they are to last until May 2012 unless too many changes occur – but each volume has retained its colour system map and all the town plans.

Dorset

Dorset has published timetables for many years and they have gradually increased in quality and now have both summer and winter editions. A series of six A5 books covered the county but this was reduced to three larger volumes for the July 2011 editions. Of course, the local government parochialism that created the two unitaries of Bournemouth and Poole – the largest conurbation in the geographical county of Dorset – means the residents of those two towns (of whom I am one!) have access only to our operators' publications and lose the benefit we once had when we were fortunate enough to be under Dorset control. Most locals are unaware of what exists just over their boundaries whereas in the old Dorset CC days their timetables were liberally available in our libraries. Each of the three books shows clearly how it fits in with the other two and has details of

school terms and public holidays, plus operators' contact details. There is then a numerical list of services plus a good index of places served. Town plans at the rear are a model of clarity and a system map covering the whole county is published separately. Winter issues have just been published (October 2011). Altogether an excellent series.

Essex

For some years Essex produced an excellent series of five A4 timetables, also covering the unitary authority of Southend. This has been even bettered with the introduction of a single volume publication, originally brought out three times a year. Everything seems to have been thought of: details of bus rovers; a calendar showing school days; contact details for operators; a very comprehensive index of places served; a separate index for places served from the main towns; details of changes since the last edition; and 23 high-quality town plans (produced by FWT, a sponsor of this site). A full system map is available separately. These town plans also show what can be achieved simply with red and black – not only cost-effective but some of the clearest I have seen. There is also a rail and tube map (the latter there as the Central Line serves Essex). Unfortunately, whilst they only charge a mere £1 for these 520+-page volumes, it is no longer available by post. This is one of the finest timetables produced by any authority, but how outsiders can get one is a mystery. Sadly it has been announced that publication is currently suspended whilst a decision is taken regarding its future.

Hampshire

The timetables published by Hampshire do not cover the entire county but the eleven volumes that are produced are of a fair standard and re-issued quite frequently. They each have maps and an index and the set is complemented by various separate additional maps.

Herefordshire

Herefordshire has carried on the excellent work of the latter days of Hereford & Worcester. Its three volumes always have termination-dates and are updated with cumulative supplements - and the dates of these are specified in advance, something few other authorities do. System and local maps are superb. Tables have road-by-road route-descriptions and the front section always has details of changes since the last edition as well as copious information on fares. The index has sub-divisions for main places. September 2006 editions saw the start of a new format in landscape style. Altogether excellent for such a rural county.

Medway

Here we have another example of a unitary council within a county producing an excellent timetable when the county itself has given up effective publicity. Some years ago Kent produced booklets but subsequently gave these up in favour of just leaflets for tendered services, plus a few maps. Medway, however, has produced an excellent 217-page timetable with an index of places served, full details of schools services and plans of bus stops in the centre of Chatham, Gillingham, Rochester and Strood. There is also map of high frequency bus routes – defined as running at least every 10 min. A separate system map is available which complements this timetable so a system map is not reproduced here. Altogether a very high-quality publication.

Milton Keynes

A high-quality publication comes from unitary Milton Keynes with a superb 252-page single volume timetable. All routes are covered including long-distance services that go out of the area. It has an excellent index and 21 pages of maps, including sectional maps of the main area that show every road covered. The introduction covers no fewer than 26 pages and offers a great deal of information on fares, operators' addresses and contact details, details of what's changed since the last edition and information on how to join a three-year mailing list for future editions (and updates) for only £10. Previously I criticised the way routes on the sectional maps disappeared when they entered the central area – a common fault with maps that use a different colour for each route then 'cop out' when it gets too complicated – but this has now been addressed and the maps show excellent detail on all pages. Many another authority could learn from this publication.

Portsmouth

From July 2008 we had yet another unitary council publish a very high quality timetable, now with an October 2011 edition. With just over 100 pages it shows all bus, ferry, train and coach services that operate within or to and from the area. There is a good index, details of each operator, information on fares and also details of what has changed since the last edition. The rear has a very clear system map plus relevant blow-up (which is also available as a separate publication including a frequency guide). Altogether one of the best timetables available and once again from a unitary authority.

Rutland

Once again one of the country's smaller counties joins many a unitary authority in producing an excellent timetable just at the time many a larger county is ceasing production of timetables. This volume has only 28 pages plus a pull-out system map on the rear cover, but it has everything needed: an index of places served, school term dates and a summary of train departures from its only station, Oakham. The book is also interspersed with small colour pictures of the relevant areas. A first-rate publication.

Torbay

When unitary authorities were created there was disappointment within 'Glorious Devon,' for the county had for many years produced excellent timetables (see above) yet its two new unitaries of Plymouth and Torbay did little. The latter had a small publication it sold, then that disappeared, and Plymouth had some timetables, but there was little of quality. Things have changed! Torbay has a superb book, which initially appeared for Winter/Spring 2005/6 and made it qualify for an entry here, and this has continued (now with an October 2011 version). With 110 pages, and additional town maps, it has a great deal of general information regarding fares, an index of places served split into three subsections (local areas, hospitals and schools) and a system map. The timetables have superb route descriptions. A novel feature is that there are two versions of the book available, differing only in size: one described as 'pocket' (one-third A4); and the other 'large print,' measuring 14cm x 30cm. This is probably the finest timetable produced by any unitary authority in the country – no mean feat seeing no fewer than eleven appear in this section out of a total of 16 English authorities!

West Berkshire

This authority produced five (A6) booklets, complemented by a general guide to using public transport in West Berkshire, which contained a system map. In November 2009 the booklets were replaced by one large volume for the whole area, but still A6 and with a system map and index of places served. It then went over to five books again, owing a lack of stability in the network, before finally returning to a 162-page single volume in January 2011. The latest, for October 2011, has 184 pages. A plan of central Reading is included – not in the area, but very useful as many services inevitably go there. There is copious other detail added including operators' addresses, an index of places served and a map of Newbury and, of course, a system map, even though the authority also publishes a separate system map. Details of what has changed since the last edition are included. Clarity of the tables is excellent and each uses separate colours in headings to denote days of the week applicable. Other authorities should study these to see that it is perfectly possible to have a good publication in an A6 format.

Wokingham

Berkshire was unusual in not having some unitary authorities created within it, but in being split totally into six unitaries. As the county produced comprehensive information the fact half of the unitaries do little or nothing is a major disappointment, but at least the other half excel. Wokingham has three excellent books, each having an index of places served and town plans, as well as a system map. They also have little extras like a plan of the stops in Reading which, despite being outside the area, is nevertheless a main destination for many users in the area.

WALES

Caerphilly

South East Wales should have been Britain's eighth PTE but instead the area is one of the worst in Britain for public transport information with many counties producing nothing. The timetable from Caerphilly produced in 2008 would therefore have stood out as a giant among a lot of pigmies anyway, even if it had just been 'rather good', but the fact that it was one of the finest timetables ever to have been produced in Wales made it look the more amazing! The format has now changed from A4 to a third A4 and a series of four is being produced rather than one volume. Each will have all the attributes of the original single volume: bilingual, a full index and a system map complemented by town plans. It should be compulsory reading for all local authority transport staff throughout Wales so each can see what can be done where the will exists.

Conwy

Conwy has been producing good timetables for many years but they have not featured here as they were let down by the 'over-schematic' map of its most important town: Llandudno. However the summer 2010 edition upgraded all its maps to full colour and included a proper map of Llandudno and this has continued with subsequent issues. Indeed the town plans are now

substantial in number: for Abergele, Betws-y-Coed, Colwyn Bay, Dwygyfylchi, Kinmel Bay, Llandudno, Llandudno Junction, Llanfairfechan, Llanrhos, Llanrwst, Old Colwyn, Penmaenmawr and Tywyn. There is also a system map, a full index, details of rover tickets and of what's changed since the previous edition – and, needless to say, everything is bilingual.

Flintshire

Flintshire has been producing an excellent A4 timetable for some years. It has an index, a system map, an excellent blow-up of the Connah's Quay, Shotton, Mold and Buckley area plus town plans for Flint, Holywell and Chester centre – the last out of the area, of course, but a major destination for journeys from Flint. Quite a few pages have empty space, which could be utilised to advantage, but it is nevertheless a fine publication. Of special interest is the fact that there are two versions available. Both have the same bilingual introduction but the rest of the timetable is then either English or Welsh.

Monmouthshire

A new timetable was produced by the county in A6 size in 2010 and it has received its second edition (May 2011). Full colour throughout, it has 120 pages and is in sections. After a full system map come town plans followed by the relevant timetables for Abergavenny, Caldicot, Chepstow and Monmouth. At the rear is information on operators, school term dates and other items. Surprisingly this is an English publication with virtually no Welsh sections. It is, however, a very fine production in layout and presentation and well worth studying.

Pembrokeshire

Pembrokeshire's timetable is bilingual as one would expect - even for an area always considered less Welsh in outlook than its neighbours – but the arrangement is different from most others in that the book has an English introduction and Index at the front and Welsh versions at the rear, but each table has English names on left-hand-side table banks and Welsh appearing as right-hand banks. System and town maps are on the inside rear cover and it is to be noted how many town maps are included (eleven) for a county that might be considered to have few major towns.

Vale of Glamorgan

Matching Caerphilly for quality, the new Autumn 2005 timetable for the Vale of Glamorgan was superb in every way and this quality has been maintained since. It is now in its Summer 2011 edition. With 100 pages the front opens out into a full system map and a town plan of Penarth, whilst the rear has a town plan of Barry plus a detailed plan of its town centre stops. An excellent index is added, plus a list of routes and operators. The road-by-road route descriptions for each service are most impressive and each service shows its last revision date. As with Caerphilly's timetables, above, this should be compulsory reading for all local authority transport staff throughout Wales so each can see what can be done where the will exists.

SCOTLAND

Argyll and Bute

This is by far the largest and most diverse area of any covered by timetables in this section, stretching from north of Oban to the Mull of Kintyre (south of Campbeltown) on the mainland (120 miles) and going south-east to Helensburgh but also including the islands of Coll, Colonsay, Gigha, Islay, Jura, Kerrera, Lismore, Luing, Mull and Seil – plus a few others with no public transport! A series of high quality books is available covering the area and an excellent system map of the full area brings it all together. Each of the books has good maps and an index. When many a tiny area of England can't manage to produce any decent publicity one wonders how they would cope with an area of this size! This council is to be congratulated for doing such a good job. One interesting point is that the Helensburgh area has its timetables published by Strathclyde Partnership for Transport.

Dumfries & Galloway

This large area was covered by seven books but December 2008 saw them merged into a single 140-page publication. It has since expanded to 160 pages with the latest, August 2010, edition. It has a good index and benefits from a very clear layout for each table, despite only being two-colour (though with extra colours used in the rail section). It has a very attractive cover, all notes now appear at the foot of each page and school term dates and other general information is in a section at the front. The whole is complemented by a separate system map which itself has an excellent blow-up of Dumfries.

BEST BUS OPERATORS' TIMETABLES:

ENGLAND

Bournemouth Transport

Transdev having bought this company, July 2006 saw the launch of its totally revised network and a most welcome new timetable that moved to A5 format. Subsequent versions improved on it and the quality has been maintained with the ownership moving to RATP. The latest is for October 2011 and consists of 102 pages. Timetables appear in order with a summary table preceding each route showing first and last buses and frequencies as a 'quick lookup' reference. Each route then has its own route map, with every stop shown. The rear cover carries a system map and a full system map is also published separately. There is also copious general information and a full index of places served. Another summary table shows cumulative frequencies over core stretches such as the 32 buses per hour between the town centre and Bournemouth railway station. Blow-up plans of Bournemouth town centre plus 11 other parts of the conurbation are added. As a Bournemouth resident of long standing I can certainly say this is the finest timetable the area has ever seen – indeed one of the finest in the country.

Compass Bus

The new Compass timetable in September 2009 really showed what a small operator can do and should have put most others to shame. The latest is October 2011 and is a 28-page A5 booklet with details of what's changed since the last edition, an index of places served, a system map and local maps for its routes in Horsham and Worthing. It has copious information about rovers, seasons and child fares and lists its HQ phone and fax numbers as well as making its enquiry number prominent. So many operators nowadays omit most of this – and cop out on enquiries altogether by using Traveline. This is the best small-operator timetable in the country.

First in Berkshire & the Thames Valley

The Bracknell and Slough & Windsor timetables from the above are among the best such books First produces. The former has 49 pages and the latter 120, but each has no fewer than 14 pages given over to general information and marketing. They have a most comprehensive run-down of all the various types of day, week and monthly tickets available, and the exact areas of validity. Each then has a map showing how this area fits in with their other areas showing ticket zones; more maps showing the precise boundaries of each town's ticket zones; an inside front-cover map showing the full routes for each area in detail; then the rear outside cover is a slight blow-up of Bracknell or Slough; and there's also a route map for the London routes (still marketed as Green Line). There is also an index of places served in each volume.

First in Hampshire

This operator used to have rather poor books but gave them up a few years back in favour of leaflets. However it has returned to having books – and very good most are. That for the Gosport & Fareham area has 70 pages. It has details of what has changed since the last edition plus a full index of places served. There is copious information about using buses, the range of tickets available and, not least, at the rear two excellent full-colour maps of the network. The Southampton area book has 94 pages with similar general information, but the maps are different from those in the Gosport & Fareham book. At the rear is the system map – albeit diagrammatic – but each city route has its own detailed map showing the roads used throughout. These are both excellent and something other operators should study. The other three books – for Paulsgrove, Portsmouth and Waterlooville – are not of the same standard as yet.

Metrobus

A new timetable was issued by Metrobus for West Sussex in May 2007, produced by designers 'The Image Team'. It has been updated several times, the latest edition being September 2011, much expanded since its 2009 takeover of the ex-Arriva Horsham network. With 76 A5 pages it has a full index, a full-colour map of the whole area and blow-ups for Crawley & Horley, East Grinstead, Haywards Heath and Horsham town centres and copious information on fares and lots of small pictures of places of interest served. Details of changes since the last edition are added. The tables themselves are excellent, retaining the old London Transport style of bold digits for the hours, but looking very clear. This is by far the best timetable produced by any Go-Ahead company – indeed one of the best operator timetable books in Britain.

Mullany's Coaches

Mullany's Coaches is a relatively small operator in Watford so it is all the more welcome that it has taken the trouble to produce a high quality timetable book. Dated September 2011 it has details of

recent changes and lots of information on rovers and sample fares. Each of its six routes has a detailed map showing street names and bus stops. I think it is fair that with such a small system there is no need for an index of places served, but I do feel that it would gain from having a system map, even if only a small line-diagram type, so that it's possible to see how each route relates to the others. However the operator is to be congratulated for producing a quality book when so many larger operators seem content with issuing only leaflets with no maps at all.

Stagecoach South West

Stagecoach has a group standard for its timetables that utilises folders for most services with the occasional area booklet. In many parts of the country this is rather disappointing but if the operation is contained in a county that offers high quality comprehensive books of its own it is less of a concern as it implies the operator could cease all publications of its own bar general marketing. This would apply to Stagecoach South West. It does indeed produce very high quality folders detailing of its range of day, week, monthly and annual tickets, but it also publishes quality timetable folders too and it features here for its excellent series of maps and guides, particularly for Exeter and Torbay where a combination of attractive design, quality mapping, decent frequency guides and copious tourist information offers a very effective complement to the Devon and Torbay council publications. It is also one of the few operators to publish a booklet showing its Conditions of Carriage.

Thamesdown Transport

Thamesdown has a first-rate timetable for its town services (Swindon). It starts with general details regarding Bank Holidays *etc.*, lists changes since the previous edition then has an excellent index showing separately route numbers for daytime and evenings. It then has two pages of 'FAQs' before showing its timetables. Each is printed in the colour by which it is shown on their maps. The rear cover opens out to show a full colour map in A4, showing all bus stops, the rear of which has a blow-up for stops in the town centre, together with details of rover tickets (all of which offer unlimited travel on both Thamesdown and Stagecoach in Swindon services).

Wilts & Dorset

W & D used to have excellent timetables but in recent years they were improved in clarity but simultaneously watered down in content to the extent they lost decent mapping and at one stage didn't even have an index of places served. This changed in May 2011, however, when its new Bournemouth, Poole & Purbeck area book got nearly everything right and it merited a place here. Its downside was in omitting a major route run by its Damory subsidiary from Wimborne. I was told this would definitely be inserted in the September issue, but, sadly, it has not been which has led to a downgrading of its entry. A 100-page third-A4 book it has an index of places served as well as a route list-style page-index, and timetables follow in their previous style of red for Mon-Fri services, blue for Saturdays and orange for Sundays. Column-headings are very rarely used (at one time W & D had so many that they ran out of letters and Hearts, Clubs and Spades were used!) There is a rear-page system map and maps of where to catch buses in Bournemouth and Poole town centres, but the huge advance is in having 16 pages of street maps for Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch with road names shown and routes superimposed, right down to bus stop level – and these even distinguish between bus stops shown in timetable banks and the others. A more minor criticism is that there is plenty of spare room (to the extent that the centre-spread has nothing more than a picture of Bournemouth Pier) and yet there is still no detail offered of what has changed since the last edition. I hope these will both be corrected next time so the timetable can be restored to the highest-quality grading here.

WALES, SCOTLAND, IRELAND, ISLE OF MAN, CHANNEL ISLANDS

Isle of Man: Bus Vannin

At last, a quality timetable from an operator outside England & Wales – indeed, outside the UK! Bus Vannin is the relatively-new name for what was once Isle of Man Transport and it produced a first-rate 48-page A4 timetable for both its bus system and the Heritage Railways in September 2010. The latest version, dated 2012, is A5 with 102 pages but has the same information. There is a list of services followed by an index to places served and information on the various multi-journey and rover tickets available for bus and for bus & train options. The rear has an excellent system map of the IoM and there are full-page town maps of Douglas, Peel and Ramsey. Towards the rear are summary tables for buses over core sections of route and finally tables for the IoM Steam Railway, Manx Electric Railway and Snaefell Mountain Railway. This is a superb piece of marketing and is the equal of the best of any UK timetable.

Jersey: Connex Transport Jersey

So soon after the above entry for Bus Vannin introduced an award-winning operator outside the UK, the October 2010 timetable from Connex Transport Jersey has shown so much improvement over earlier editions that it also qualifies. There is an introduction in several languages, an index of places served, dates of term times and public holidays and 'terms & conditions' (what in the UK would normally be termed 'conditions of carriage'). The rear opens up to a full-colour map of the island which includes tourist sites and shows bus routes, each with its own colour. There is also a plan of the relatively-new Liberation Bus Station, from which all routes depart. Each table is now laid out more clearly than ever before and each has a route description. Unusually each stop also has its real time SMS code shown to obtain a text message for the next two departures. Does any UK timetable show those? All-in-all an excellent publication, the latest version being October 2011.

BEST RAIL TIMETABLES:

National Rail

First Great Western

FGW and SWT are two large rail operators each producing a high-quality single-volume timetable. FGW's December 2011 book will last until May 2012, is comprehensive and has 428 pages – the introduction alone takes up 75 pages. There is copious information on tickets, engineering work, on-board facilities and even four pages devoted to a history of each of its 18 named trains. Seating plans of all its rolling stock are included. Its station index lists details of every station it serves, right down to ticket office opening-hours and there is a separate table index. Mileages are also added at the start of each rail table. There are 40 tables, a number of them for bus links. A useful addition is that every train has its internal Train Reporting Number shown (eg 1C77). There is a good system map at the rear, showing table numbers. The bus links section is very detailed and, at 14 pages, includes frequencies and journey times to 79 places. There is also a section on heritage railways in its area. It is well worth the £4 cover price, but is only available from Bath Spa, Bristol Parkway, Bristol TM, Cheltenham Spa, Exeter St David's, Newbury, Oxford, Paddington, Penzance, Plymouth, Reading, Slough, Swindon, Taunton, Truro and Westbury. It is not available by post.

South West Trains

South West Trains has always understood the need for a single high-quality timetable for its network. The latest, valid from December 2011 to December 2012, is a 270-page book, including all other operators' services and with a full system map. There is an index of places served, details of services over holiday periods and lists of other pocket timetables and mini-guides. Full timetables are added for many bus links (Dorchester-Axminster, Bournemouth-Hurn Airport, Woking-Heathrow, Honiton-Sidmouth, Axminster-Seaton, Yeovil Junction-Yeovil Pen Mill, Exeter-Exeter Airport and Feltham-Heathrow) plus a 14-page table giving frequency and contact details for bus links to 105 places in the SWT operating area not served by rail. There are guides to ferries to the Isle of Wight, plus Southampton-Hythe, Poole/Weymouth-Channel Islands, Portsmouth-France and Portsmouth-Gosport. The production uses a higher-quality paper than FGW and utilises the space rather better, hence keeping down the size and SWT are to be congratulated for producing such a superb publication. It remains free of charge and available at Basingstoke, Bournemouth, Clapham Junction, Guildford, London Waterloo, Portsmouth & Southsea, Richmond, Salisbury, Southampton Central, Surbiton, Wimbledon, Winchester and Woking stations. Alternatively it may be obtained for £1.00 to cover postage & packing, by credit/debit card from SWT's Customer Service Centre on 0845 6000650 between 0600 and 2200. This should be compulsory reading for every other operator.

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