

Dear Sir,

I should like to clarify the events of Monday 21st January, as reported on the front page of the Henley Standard on Friday, 25th January. Some background information is, however, important for an understanding of the branch line in Shiplake.

A group of residents and I are line-side neighbours in Shiplake. We have had an arrangement for around three years, whereby we advise GWR of any horn sounded at an excessive volume. A senior manager then speaks to the driver concerned and in theory, the driver will sound the horn more moderately on future trips. This informal agreement came about because a few years ago, the use of the horn seemed to change. What had previously been a friendly toot, frequently became a heart stopping blast. Many drivers continue with the friendly toot but equally, some do not.

This change in horn sounding was swiftly followed in 2016 by a decrease of the period in which drivers should not sound the horn, known as the Night Time Quiet Period (NTQP). This change was introduced to protect pedestrians at footpath crossings, where there are no barriers or warning lights. Unfortunately, it is an umbrella ruling and therefore we, with all manner of protection at the crossing, also suffer the reduced hours of peace.

Furthermore, a shuttle service was introduced, leading to more day time trains, more late night trains and hence more horns. The last one now travels through Shiplake at 12.20am.

The rule that GWR drivers must sound the horn when they are leaving the station goes back decades. The level crossing, before it had barriers, was a source of danger for all of us. After the occurrence of two accidents, the parish council lobbied Network Rail to install barriers. These were added several years ago and the crossing has been accident free since then. For extra protection against misuse, we have bright yellow automatic number plate recognition cameras, CCTV cameras and wig wags to provide flashing lights and sound warnings. One could say that the crossing is now very well protected and is no longer regarded as a dangerous crossing.

Network Rail, wishing to help residents suffering the loud horn noise, has asked the Rail Standards and Safety Board (RSSB) to make a change to the Rule Book and we are hoping that soon there will be a trial period, during which drivers will no longer be required to sound the horn. This initiative may well be rolled out nationally. Unfortunately, changing the Rule Book is no small task, requiring much gathering of facts and figures and it is taking some time to achieve. Nevertheless, it will be worth the wait, as the impact of the horn on the health and general welfare of adults and young children, woken from sleep, is considerable.

On Saturday, 19th January, Shiplake suffered incredibly loud horns from around 9.55pm until after midnight. We beleaguered residents wrote to GWR and asked that this particular driver should not be used on the branch line again. We were told that the driver would be spoken to.

On Monday evening, at the same time, the train came through Shiplake and the driver blasted in exactly the same manner as on the previous Saturday. Concerned that we would all be suffering yet another disturbed night, it seemed reasonable to go out when the train returned and ask the driver to moderate the horn. This I did in a very polite manner but the driver immediately became aggressive. We had a short conversation, during which it became obvious that this was going to achieve nothing positive. At no time could I be accused of verbal abuse. I simply asked sensible questions and received negative answers. My last words were "Please let us not fall out. Could you please just try?" The driver then continued on to Twyford, where she stayed in the cab and refused to drive the train. Apparently she was too "shaken" by my supposed verbal abuse. Nevertheless, she had mentioned to me that on Saturday night she had experienced "drunks" leaning up against her cab, which was why she had found it necessary to sound the horn so loudly. It is curious that a number of "drunks", leaning against the cab and necessitating the sounding of a loud horn, caused her less anxiety than an elderly woman politely asking for respite from the horn.

Another puzzling point is that the driver states that I “shouted” at her. This is physically impossible for me, as I have had an operation that damaged my vocal cords and I cannot shout, even if I wish to. Furthermore I did not “storm up to her cabin”. I was standing waiting for the train to return from Henley and I simply walked up.

As for the situation at Twyford, when the driver refused to work, I am extremely sorry that this caused inconvenience to a number of passengers travelling to Henley but the delay was not of my making.

I trust this explains the events in the manner they happened and that your readers will now have an appreciation of what occurred.

My last words go to a train driver I spoke to a few weeks ago, as I walked across the station. I thanked him for his considerate use of the horn. He smiled and said, “It’s just common sense, isn’t it?”

Yours faithfully,

Vivien Pheasant