

Gordon Pettitt

IN 1967 THIS TRAIN 3417 WAS ONE OF THE FIRST VEPs TO ARRIVE ON THE SOUTHERN REGION AND IT WILL BE ONE OF THE LAST TO BE WITHDRAWN BY SOUTH WEST TRAINS. TO COMMEMORATE THIS IT HAS BEEN NAMED GORDON PETTITT IN HONOUR OF ONE OF THE MOST RESPECTED GENERAL MANAGERS OF THE FORMER SW SOUTHERN REGION.

Eight units remained in service with SWT, one of which was 3417. Although similar units worked until later that year on Southern and South Eastern Trains, the last timetabled passenger working of a 4 VEP on SWT was on 26 May 2005.

After the train's retirement from front-line service, Chris Buckland, Steve Upton and a small band of volunteer fitters and drivers from Wimbledon Park and other depots across the former Southern Region continued to ensure that the VEP was kept in good condition.

This small group of enthusiastic railway professionals, now supplemented by generous support from individuals from across the erstwhile Southern Region of British Rail, as well as from outside the railway industry, are now the backbone of the Southern Electric Traction Group, with massive support from the train's newest owners, the Bluebell Railway Preservation Society.



There was a further special ceremony that Gordon attended at Waterloo on 27 January 2024, when not only did the guests celebrate 3417's official return to passenger carrying standards, but also Gordon's 90th birthday.

Today's special event to celebrate the life of Gordon Pettitt OBE could not have a better backdrop than 4-VEP 3417, which meant so much to him for so many years.



4-VEP 3417

***A train named for
Gordon Pettitt OBE***

HISTORY 1967 TO
THE PRESENT DAY



Class 423 4VEP unit number 3417, named 'Gordon Pettitt', was formally handed over by South West Trains to the Bluebell Railway on Saturday, 17 January 2009, at a ceremony at the newly created Bluebell Railway East Grinstead station.

The unit remains in Bluebell Railway plc ownership, but as of May 2012, has been in the care of the Southern Electric Traction Group. This was founded in 2009 by staff members of South West Trains based at Wimbledon Park depot. A long-term loan agreement exists between SETG and the Bluebell Railway, whereby SETG provides specialist operational and technical expertise to ensure the long-term future of 4VEP No. 3417, and intends to return the unit to mainline operation.

During the 1950s and 60's, the Southern Region of British Railways had a plan to electrify much of its system. Stage 1 of this plan was the Kent Coast electrification, which was completed in 1962. The second stage, planned for 1964, would have involved secondary routes: Redhill to Tonbridge, Reigate to Guildford, Sanderstead to Oxted, Oxted to East Grinstead, Oxted to Lewes, Eridge to Tunbridge Wells, Christ's Hospital to Shoreham and Ash Junction to Wokingham. This stage was not progressed, and a couple of the lines were closed instead!

What finally materialised from Stage 3 of the plan was Woking to Bournemouth Central, with an extension to Branksome to access a new EMU maintenance depot built on the site of the former Bournemouth West station (closed in 1965). The depot incorporated the old Bournemouth West carriage shed.

The opening of Stage 3 allowed BR(S) to achieve its goal of finally ridding itself of steam locomotives in July 1967. Thereafter, regular fast trains to Bournemouth were formed of "TC" trailer units propelled by 4 REP units to Bournemouth, where a class 33 with push-pull control took the train on to Weymouth and propelled it back

Meanwhile, the 4 VEP (later BR class 423) was designed for semi-fast/stopping services with 2+3 seating and a door to virtually every seating bay on both sides. The first twenty units (7701-20) were delivered in 1967 and were allocated to the new Bournemouth electric multiple unit depot. It was the ultimate design for commuter traffic, enabling minimum dwell time at stations and very quick coupling and uncoupling in service.

The original livery of 7717 was overall blue with small yellow warning panels and cast aluminium double arrows below the driving side cab windows. Orange curtains were fitted in the second-class areas. Over their years of service, alterations were made to the VEP fleet. It was found that the curtains in the second class were superfluous, and these were removed. The sliding glass ventilators caused draughts during the winter and were largely superfluous, so these were sealed closed; some were later replaced by full sidelights. In the late 1980s, the Southern Region adopted the TOPS numbering system, and 4 VEPs became Class 423s, but with only the last four digits painted on the ends, this unit became (42)3417

The units were built with a large guard's van area in the motor coach. After the parcels and mail business diminished, it was decided to convert part of this area into two seating bays, and this work was undertaken at Eastleigh Works during the 1990s. (42)3417 was later again refurbished throughout, including new strip lighting in the passenger areas.

In 2004, South West Trains repainted 3417 into its BR Blue livery to commemorate the final months in traffic of the slam-door fleet. The man tasked with overseeing this operation was Chris Buckland, a Fleet production manager based at Wimbledon Park depot in southwest London. His first task was to select a unit from the fleet. No. 3417 was the best candidate, as it was the freshest from overhaul and had suffered very few mechanical failures. The state of its bodywork and upholstery was acceptable. It was a 'good 'un'.

Once in the shed at Wimbledon Park, Chris masterminded the work needed to turn the clock back to 1967. Fresh paint, a refreshed interior – everything possible was done to ensure that when the unit arrived at London Waterloo for its grand relaunch, the unit would look fresh from the factory. It looked resplendent as Gordon Pettitt, the last General Manager of British Rail, Southern Region, unveiled the special name board at Waterloo Station on 2nd June 2004.

