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Train Operators Battle Spiralling Graffiti Crisis on UK Rail Network

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Graffiti is becoming a serious and costly problem for Britain's railway network. Thousands of incidents are reported weekly, and there is growing concern over safety, security, and taxpayer expense. Now, operators like South Western Railway are stepping up efforts to crack down on the issue, which staff say has worsened in recent months.

While delays, cancellations, and infrastructure woes remain key challenges, the rise in graffiti is pushing railway teams to divert significant resources toward constant cleaning and preventative measures. At South Western Railway's (SWR) Wimbledon maintenance depot in south-west London, a team of dedicated workers toils in scorching heat and harsh conditions to scrub trains clean, often within hours of fresh tags appearing.

Transport for London (TfL) recently revealed that crews remove up to 3,000 graffiti markings each week on the Central and Bakerloo lines alone. SWR, the fourth busiest train operator in the United Kingdom, is facing similar pressures, with presentation teams working around the clock to meet rising demand.

Charlie Hatcher, head of train presentation at SWR, said the scale of vandalism has grown noticeably. “We’re seeing a clear spike in graffiti across the network,” he told *Metro*. “It’s becoming more widespread, and we’re having to respond quickly to keep standards up and deter repeat offences.”

Daily Struggles

Staff wear protective suits and heavy-duty gear while working inside what they call “the shed,” a covered area where trains are deep-cleaned. The process involves spraying harsh chemicals to break down the increasingly sophisticated paints used by vandals. But the method requires care, as the cleaning agents are so strong that if applied incorrectly, they can risk damaging the train’s exterior.

It’s a physically draining job on the ground, especially during the current heatwave, where temperatures have reached 30°C. Train operative Jeff Asiedu described the sense of pride that comes with a job well done, despite the conditions. “Sometimes, you get graffiti all over, top to bottom. It can take hours to clean one carriage,” he said. “But once it’s done, there’s a real buzz. We want it off the unit as fast as possible.”

Asiedu noted that school holidays often coincide with a spike in graffiti cases, suggesting boredom may be a driving factor for some culprits. Other railway cleaning teams from across the country have echoed similar experiences, with security concerns now rising among operators.

New threats have emerged, too. Acid etching, where vandals use corrosive pens to inscribe tags into windows and surfaces, poses a health hazard to both staff and passengers. The chemical residue can cause skin irritation or burns if not dealt with promptly.

Aside from safety risks, there’s also the growing financial burden. In May, SWR became the first major rail operator re-nationalised under the current government. This means the cost of cleaning and repairs now falls directly on the taxpayer, raising questions about accountability and deterrence.

SWR is rolling out additional security measures, including closed-circuit television (CCTV) installations and more patrols, to clamp down on the issue. “We’re committed to getting ahead of this,” Hatcher added. “We can’t allow graffiti to take over our network.”

With public services under pressure and resources stretched thin, the rise in vandalism is not just an eyesore. It is a growing concern that affects safety, operations, and the public purse, and tackling it has never been more urgent.