



Travel Topics

Issue 105

Spring 2007

The watchdog for
Tonbridge Line Commuters from Tonbridge,
Paddock Wood and Hildenborough

Steady as she goes

Govia's first year seems to have gone relatively smoothly, and punctuality is acknowledged to have improved, albeit very gradually. The new evening services introduced in December last year have generally eased overcrowding on the way home and the better frequency is well-received. Nevertheless, the usual threats to commuting remain, and we experienced severe problems in February because of snow. It appears with hindsight that Southeastern had seriously underestimated its effect, and information available to passengers was sometimes woefully inadequate.

The population of Kent is expected to rise dramatically and there is some evidence that traffic congestion is already forcing car users to switch to trains, so we were alarmed to find that the 1744 from Cannon Street is now shortened from 10 to 8 coaches, the lost carriages being used to strengthen a Blackfriars to Sevenoaks train which becomes overcrowded in South-East London. The solution is obvious: more rolling stock is needed. We shall be pressing hard for early delivery of the 1,000 new carriages recently announced by the Secretary for Transport. We must also be vigilant against over-reliance on Ashford to St. Pancras services leading to reductions in those along the classic

route to Charing Cross and Cannon Street via Tonbridge. Confirmation that Network Rail are to commence implementation of the re-signalling at Tunbridge Wells, which will allow 12-coach trains to turn round, was a further welcome item of news in this respect, but it can have only a limited effect.

Although the Committee remains active, it must be admitted that we are not getting any younger. Some of our members have already retired, and others are approaching retirement. Sooner or later, we will have to hand the torch to younger people and we really would be pleased if any of you felt like approaching us with a view to joining the Committee. The Committee usually meets about every 6-8 weeks or so in the evenings (currently starting at 7.45) and try to finish by 10.00. Other tasks depend on the availability of committee members for, say, helping with 'Travel Topics', or meeting Southeastern management. It is fully understood that we are volunteers and, where necessary, work or family commitments always come first. We also make every effort to spread the load so that no one person should feel unduly pressurised. Commuters' interests will always need to be defended; we welcome support for the challenge. **JR**

**THE ASSOCIATION'S 48th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
will be held on TUESDAY 22nd MAY AT 7.30 pm at the
FORSYTH HALL in BRADFORD STREET, TONBRIDGE**

We hope members will be able to join us on 22nd May, when we will be addressed by Charles Horton, MD of Southeastern, and a senior representative from Tonbridge and Malling Council who has promised to speak about the plans for Tonbridge station. Coffee and cold drinks will be served from 7 pm. On the domestic front we report this year the retirement from the Treasurership of Terry Hines, who has looked after

the Association's finances since 1999. Terry has worked tirelessly for the Association not only during this period, but for many more years before that when he was organising recruiting drives, AGMs, 'Travel Topics' distribution, in fact virtually every task which a campaigning body like us needs in order to thrive. We owe him and his wife Ann a great debt, and hope they are able to enjoy Terry's 'retirement' in style. **LS**

Station News

Our latest meeting with Tonbridge Area Duty Manager Jane Bridle in February covered several issues. For some time we have been pressing for a "Post Office" type of queuing system in the booking hall at Tonbridge to avoid customers being unduly delayed by protracted transactions in front of them. Southeastern and its predecessors have always said it cannot be done in the restricted space available, citing health and safety among the reasons. Sometimes, however, a single queue evolves naturally, and we encourage members to maintain this pattern when possible, but we hope that a more permanent solution can be found soon.

On train information we raised the points made by a number of members that the train departure signs on the platform rest too long on screens 2/3 when most passengers are more interested in imminent departures on screen 1, while in the ticket hall some indicators show London Bridge as the terminus for trains via Croydon. Although the latter is true, it is not helpful, as the direct route via Sevenoaks is always quicker.

During later discussion about Platform 3, we acknowledged that, in response to our requests, extra cycle space and seats had been provided, but reported that there was demand for more.

In the last re-organisation Southeastern transferred Hildenborough back to being managed as one of the Tonbridge group of stations (as opposed to Sevenoaks) and is now discussed at the same times we meet the area management over Tonbridge matters. At our February meeting we asked if the new ticket machine could be moved back on to the platform where passengers would be protected from the elements as well as passing traffic and where they would be more likely to see any warnings of unexpected delays. **JR**

Paddock Wood is covered by the Ashford area, and we were hoping to arrange a meeting as we went to press.

If you have any further suggestions for any of the local stations, please let us know so that we can raise them.

Kent and Sussex debarred from Eurostar

Many members will now be aware of the changes being made to Eurostar services from November. While the London terminal becomes St. Pancras instead of Waterloo, the main change for local users is the reduced availability of Ashford as a stop en route. The Ashford - Paris service will be cut from 7 departures daily to 3 and the Ashford - Brussels service will be axed completely. Services will instead stop at a new Eurostar station at Ebbsfleet, near Gravesend. The virtue of this location is said to be its proximity to the M25 and A2. However, it will not be accessible by train from South Kent; Eurostar directors seem to believe that customers will happily leave their cars at Ebbsfleet after a journey along the A21 and M25.....

We have always been irked by the fact that the fare from Ashford is the same as that from London; (the journey between Ashford and Calais is per mile the most expensive in the world.) When Eurostar opened, we argued that, as season ticket holders, a trip abroad obliged us to pay twice (once with our season ticket and once on Eurostar) for a journey to London even though we were actually going in the opposite direction

towards France. As a result of our lobbying, it was decided that season ticket holders living between Ashford and London would be able to travel to Ashford free. Now, however, even this concession has been quietly withdrawn. Members will note that these two 'kicks in the teeth' for Kent and Sussex come at a time when the government implores us to 'go green'. A train journey from, say, Tonbridge, Hastings, or Canterbury to Ashford is far more convenient even than one to Waterloo, let alone to St. Pancras, and infinitely preferable to a car ride to Ebbsfleet. We do not understand how Eurostar can be allowed to throw away potential custom from Kent and Sussex in this way.

Southeastern themselves are not without a degree of culpability in the matter. We believe they have not gone out of their way to promote European travel in the area, and train connections at Ashford are given little prominence in the international station. Within the last few months, pressure on Eurostar has increased with letters to national newspapers, and a petition with 8,000 signatures. Those interested can place their views on record at www.saveashfordeurostar.eu. **JR**

Car parks

We have been informed that Southeastern took over the administration of car parks from 1st March through their own arm Meteor Parking, who have promised a number of improvements. Members can find out more by e-

mailing: queries@southeasternparking.co.uk. It should be noted that existing car park season ticket permits issued by Central Parking are valid until expiry. **LS**

Hildenborough - Ticket Office opening hours

The Association recently wrote in to complain to Passenger Focus and Southeastern about the proposed reduction in ticket office opening hours which would see them reduced from 11hrs per day weekdays to 6 hrs 40 min. The station has many ad hoc visitors who rely on information from ticket office staff. Many early commuters also travel up before the ticket office opens and pop in to the ticket office on their way home - not possible under these proposals. When the ticket office is closed there is no waiting room and no toilet facilities. The new ticket machine has been sited in a totally inappropriate location. It is currently a safety

hazard blocking the pavement outside the ticket office, and there are other problems. When it is sunny you can't see the screen for reflections, and when it rains you have to stand in the rain getting wet! There is no Customer Information Phone to enable you find out what is going on when trains don't appear, and the platforms have no CCTV coverage. The station was subject to much costly vandalism over the New Year break. Reducing ticket office opening hours is going to discourage off-peak travel and will certainly not improve the vandalism problem. **KP**

Redevelopment of Tonbridge Station

In our last edition of 'Travel Topics' we reported on our response to the proposals for the Tonbridge station area outlined in the recent consultation document produced by Tonbridge and Malling Council. We followed this up with a meeting on 26th February with the Council's Director of Planning to discuss the current state of play. We were already aware that Network Rail had drawn up an outline plan for the area, which necessitated the investment of a certain amount of retail and residential development to make the plan commercially viable due to the difficult nature of the site. At the meeting it became clear that the Council was keen for progress to be made with this plan and felt that Network Rail were dragging their feet. The Council has its own plans for the redevelopment of neighbouring sites and feels that planning for the two areas could usefully be progressed at the same time. It is thus anxious that Network Rail upgrade the priority attached to this project.

In a recent letter Network Rail confirm that a station design team has been investigating a replacement to the existing station, taking into account all operational aspirations. The key to the redevelopment is the use of the large railway-owned sites to the east of the station, which include the car parks. Among the problems Network Rail face are the need to relocate both the Maintenance Depot off Priory Road, and the Rail Renewals site off Vale Road. The major threat is obviously to the number of car parking spaces to be made available, but we understand that following consultation with Southeastern, car parking proposals have been substantially increased over what had previously been provided for. We have been formally promised an opportunity to make our views on the station development known, so we in turn are keen to hear what you, the members, feel should be offered in the way of station facilities. **LS**

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The above members offer themselves for re-election at the AGM and look forward to your support. However, we have vacancies that could be filled. In particular we would be interested in anyone who would be able eventually, perhaps, to take over as Treasurer.

We now have an e-mail domain: tonbridgecommuters.org.uk through which you can contact us for help, queries etc. The addresses are: enquiry@..., hildenborough@..., tonbridge@..., membership@... and paddockwood@...

Buses



For the past year we have been trying to get the deplorable timetable frames in Tonbridge High Street opposite Boots (above left) replaced. This stop is the major picking-up point for anyone wishing to go in a northerly direction by bus and the frames are a disgrace to the town, particularly when compared with the well-maintained facilities in neighbouring towns. For over fifteen months the left frame has been empty and the right one vandalised and filled with torn leaflets. Responsibility for maintaining these frames is unclear; responses from Arriva, Tonbridge and Malling, and Kent County Council all appeared to pass the buck. Finally, in a last gesture we went to the local press and the 'Courier' kindly publicised the issue. Within a week the improved version had appeared (above right) and now shows the times of buses from the stop, surely easier for the traveller to understand. Perhaps the surplus poles could have been removed, but one thing at a time! All we need now is for buses to arrive at the time scheduled, an aspiration unfortunately partly

dependent on the traffic between Tunbridge Wells and Southborough. However, it is imperative that buses starting from the station leave the terminus on time.

From 1st April, against the usual run of reductions, Arriva increased the frequency of several local services, e.g the services to Hadlow and Mereworth (now every 20 minutes during the day), to Hildenborough and Sevenoaks (now 2 buses every hour), and to Tunbridge Wells (now every 10 minutes during the day). This is to be welcomed and, provided reliability has not been put at risk, will hopefully encourage more people to use the bus instead of their car. However, we are concerned that both in the early morning and after the evening peak period, some of the local Tonbridge buses may now be scheduled to run out of service to and from their Tunbridge Wells depot, thereby depriving Southborough members of useful connections at commuting times. We shall be taking this up with the bus company. **LS**

TONBRIDGE LINE COMMUTERS

The subscription (for the year ending March 31st) is £3.00. This includes UK-wide travel insurance.

If any of the details on the label on the left are incorrect, please amend them. If you would like to receive e-mails from the Association, please give your e-mail address here:

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Please renew my Association membership for:

- One year (£3.00)
- Two years (£6.00)
- ... years (£)

Cheques payable to Tonbridge Line Commuters. Send your payments to the Acting Treasurer, Lionel Shields, at 13 Streamside, Tonbridge, Kent, TN10 3PU