



Travel Topics

Issue 107

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The watchdog for
Tonbridge Line Commuters from Tonbridge,
Paddock Wood and Hildenborough
e-mail: enquiry@tonbridgecommuters.org.uk

Gatwick Derailed

When you go abroad by plane which airport do you fly from? I am sure many of you use Gatwick in preference to Heathrow because of the train service. If you haven't considered going there by train, it would be well worth doing so this year, as this may be your last opportunity. Currently the off-peak service provides one through train from Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge to Gatwick (and onwards to Horsham), and another which allows a journey to Gatwick by means of a change at Redhill. There is thus a half-hourly service at most times of day (hourly on Sundays and late in the evenings) which can be attractive in comparison with the alternative of driving and parking, probably some way away. However, all this is due to change in December 2008 when Southern Railway, the operators of the Brighton Line, take over responsibility for the Tonbridge-Redhill line. Under recently published proposals, they want to reduce the service to hourly, and cut it back to run between Tonbridge and Redhill only. This will have ramifications for the service between Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells, and Southeastern will have to provide their own replacement trains to maintain the current 4 trains per hour service.

We have to recognise that this was to be expected, since the conclusion of the Government's Brighton Line Study was that the Tonbridge-Redhill line should revert to local traffic. However, Southern's slavish adherence to the dead hand of ministerial edict is as depressing as it is predictable. We consider that the reduced service

will prove to be the 'kiss of death' for off-peak traffic on the line. With connections at Redhill unknown we feel that few airport travellers will now be prepared to risk relying on a train to get from west or central Kent to Gatwick. Even if the outward journey can be planned precisely, the uncertainty of plane arrivals means that there is a chance on arrival at Redhill on the return journey of up to an hour's wait for a connection to Tonbridge and beyond (compared with a maximum of 30 minutes today).

We said in our response that this failure to maintain a convenient rail facility from Kent to the major airport in the south of England flew in the face of current thinking. This recognises rail as the main mode of consumer choice for long-distance domestic travel to reduce the adverse effects of road congestion, airport parking, and carbon emissions. We further pointed out that elsewhere in the country, rail services to airports have been the subject of continuing development and improvement. We are pleased that all the local authorities, including KCC, none of whom were originally consulted, are supporting our objections.

Since responding to Southern, we have also contacted Southeastern with a suggestion that they could continue to provide the critical half-hourly service between Tunbridge Wells and Redhill in conjunction with Southern at no extra cost. After all, as you may know, they are both part of the same company! We await their response. **LS**

Note from Chairman John Reynolds

In spite of the publicity for the proposed High Speed commuter services for Kent from December 2009, we remain convinced that most residents of east Kent with jobs in the City and West End will continue to use existing domestic services. Likely population growth in South and West Kent will lead to more overcrowding and we are fighting (alongside our colleagues in Sevenoaks and Tunbridge Wells) to ensure that services from this area should, if anything be improved. Our success with the 1700 Hildenborough stop shows we can get results, and we will push strongly to retain the half hourly service on the Redhill line.

Having recently retired from work, I am planning to step down as Chairman at the AGM. I thank you all for your support over the past five years and wish you all the best for the future. I know that my successor will do his utmost to ensure the best possible deal for you. However, the Committee's age profile remains high. Our task will be hugely assisted if any of you are prepared to join us. Rail is a very environment-friendly way of travelling, and the interests of the whole community (not just commuters) are served by its being made as convenient as possible. **JR**

Annual General Meeting – Tuesday 13th May at 19.30

The AGM will be held at the Forsyth Hall, Bradford Street, Tonbridge

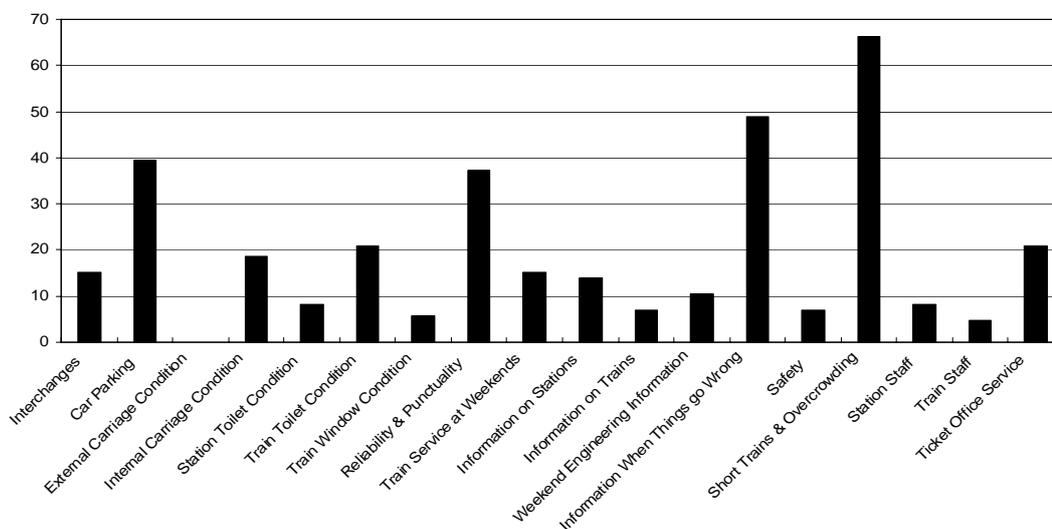
The Thameslink scheme will have a major effect on the train service from this area. Come to our AGM this year to hear from Andrew Munden of Network Rail about how far the line and station reconstruction at London Bridge will disturb your trains between 2012 and 2014. You will also have an opportunity to question spokesmen from Southeastern and Passenger Focus in particular about the 2009 timetable, and any other general rail issues.

This year our Chairman, John Reynolds, plans to relinquish the role he has held for the past five years. John has been a member of the Association for over 30 years, and an enthusiastic and dedicated member of our Committee for 19 years. His is a hard act to follow, and we are glad he has agreed to remain on the Committee. We are delighted that Steve Terry, currently our membership secretary, has agreed to step in to replace him. **LS**

You tell us ‘what is *still* wrong with the railway’

In the last issue of ‘Travel Topics’ we asked members what 4 items concerned them most about their railway journeys. This was a repeat of a similar survey that we carried out in 2001, and we asked the same questions so as to get a fair comparison between the two surveys. These deliberately did not include questions related to cost or value for money, as we already know that this is at the very top of the list both locally and nationally. In total, we received 86 responses back from the approximately 400 forms distributed, which is an

extremely good response rate. Many thanks to all those that took the time and effort to reply. The overall results are summarised below, and show the percentage of respondents that ticked each area of concern. The results varied a little from station to station, and if anyone is interested in the detailed results, please contact us via e-mail at ‘membership@tonbridgecommuters.org.uk’ and we will pass these on (in statistical form only, no personal information will be included).



As can be seen, this time round the top 5 areas of concern are: **Short trains & overcrowding; information when there are problems; reliability & punctuality; car parking and train toilets** jointly with **ticket office service**. In 2001, the top 5 areas of concern were: Short trains & overcrowding; reliability & punctuality; internal condition of carriages; information when there are problems; and information on stations. So, despite a great deal of investment in new trains over the past 6 years, the train operators still don't provide us with enough information when there are problems, and the trains are still overcrowded and late!

Car parking has risen from 6th to 4th place, which reflects both the increasing shortage of parking space at our stations, and the large increases in costs for parking, both of which were specifically mentioned by several respondents in their detailed comments.

The rise in concern over the condition of train toilets from 8th place in 2001 to joint 5th in 2007 is very disappointing; with people commenting on the disgusting smell that some of the toilets produce. Given the supposed technological improvements in this area since slam door days, this is worrying, and is certainly something that we shall be highlighting to Southeastern management.

Finally, ticket office service has risen from 9th to joint 5th place, and here Hildenborough stands out with just about double the percentage of people concerned as in Tonbridge and Paddock Wood. Again, we will be taking this up with Southeastern. We are still collating all of the specific comments about the service, ready to

present these to Southeastern at one of our regular meetings. We will also be passing on the displeasure of our membership at the withdrawal of Eurostar services at Ashford, as we received quite a number of specific complaints on this subject. **ST**

A Notable Victory



One of the timetable changes announced for December 2007 involved the provision of an additional train from Cross to Tunbridge Wells, which would stop among other stations, at Hildenborough. We were told that as a consequence the following train, the 1700 from Cannon Street, would no longer stop there 'in order to speed up services to Hastings'. The fact that Hildenborough passengers would have to leave 15 minutes earlier to catch the replacement train was neither here nor there. However, the fact that the Cannon Street train would actually sit

in Tonbridge station for 3 minutes was the 'last straw', and we asked members for comments in 'Travel Topics'. From these we learnt that about 50 commuters alighted regularly from this train and would accordingly be inconvenienced, so we began to compile a petition to take to Southeastern. However, after considering the facts, the company surprisingly conceded the point, and stated that the stop would be retained from the commencement of the timetable. We would like to thank all those who took the trouble to contact us. **LS**

Car Parking at Paddock Wood

The parking situation at Paddock Wood is still causing problems, November and December 2007 being particularly bad, when even season ticket holders were finding that there were no spaces for them by 8 am on some occasions. Following a number of complaints to Meteor (the parking management organisation), about the non-enforcement of the rules for season ticket spaces, they did increase their activity, with the result that since Christmas, season ticket holders generally don't seem to have had a problem finding space before 9.30, when the reservation period expires. However, daily ticket users are still finding things very difficult, with the car park being full by 08.00 most mornings.

The alternative of an £8 daily charge in the council car parks, or an increasingly long walk to the station as the extent of roadside parking restrictions grows ever greater, is not a pleasant one. Unfortunately, there has been a delay to work starting on the 80-space station car park extension, because someone in Network Rail still believes that the land has some other commercial value. However, we are hopeful that it will be finished by the end of June, which should bring some relief. We anticipate that most of this new space will be allocated to daily parking, since the demand for season ticket spaces seems to be a bit lower than of late. **ST**

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Tonbridge Station Car parks - The Future?

Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council published their draft Tonbridge Town Central Area Action Plan (TCAAP) in May 2006. This included proposals to develop the Vale Road and Priory Road station car parks. Although the draft plans for the railway car parks were indicative, they showed a mix of 400 or more residential units and retail development, with the retention of some commuter car parking areas. As part of the consultation process, in October 2006, we said “....we challenge the wrong conclusion that the (Vale Road) site is underused. It is a very well used rail travellers car park....we would hope that commuter parking provision could be greatly increased in the interests of encouraging the use of public transport from the extremely important Tonbridge station rail hub. It is the Town’s most promising access to alternative modes of travel”. Our suggestion was accepted and the Council amended the plan to include a further bullet point

- *The retention of at least the existing amount of commuter parking on the site”.*

So far so good. In October 2007 the plan was the subject of an independent “examination in public” by a Government Inspector, Laura Graham. Subject to a number of amendments, mostly minor, in February, the

Inspector approved the Plan. This decision is binding on the Council. However, one worrying amendment required the deletion of the Council’s reference to at least retaining the existing capacities of the two commuter car parks. In her report the Inspector says “....*The extent to which parking provision can contribute to or detract from achieving sustainable transport objectives is a complex matter. I also recognise that it may have an impact on the viability of the Station complex development proposals. However, there is insufficient evidence before me to indicate that any particular level of provision should be specified in the TCAAP. When more detailed proposals are brought forward, the level of parking proposed will need to be justified taking all relevant considerations into account....*”

We are most concerned over the possible implications of the revised status of the car parks. Whilst we realise that income raised by developing the sites would help to fund the redevelopment of the station complex, we hope that Network Rail, and the current and future railway operators will acknowledge the importance of retaining at least the current capacity of the existing car parks. We will monitor the situation and closely examine future detailed proposals. **TH**

Do you want to go to Brussels?

Following the withdrawal of Eurostar services from Ashford to Brussels last November, an enterprising coach operator has begun a weekly service leaving Ashford on Sunday evenings at 17.00. Fares are £99

return, which includes a channel crossing on Eurotunnel’s Le Shuttle. Further details on times and how to make reservations can be obtained from their website www.roadrats.uk.com. **MW**

TONBRIDGE LINE COMMUTERS

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