



Travel Topics

Issue 109

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

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Losing their Grip?

SouthEastern (SET) have so far been pretty good at the basic task of actually running the railway in our area, providing punctual and reliable train services. While there has always been room for improvement, at least we felt that they were mostly focussing on the things that mattered. In addition, we have always had the impression that they also had their eye on the longer term aspects of the service. Most notably, their insistence in challenging the original, badly flawed service specifications for the Integrated Kent Franchise, promises to be to the benefit of all.

However, in the last few months SET seem to have taken their eye off the ball, and recently there have been some major gaffes:-

- The above-inflation and unfairly distributed January fares increase was handled with the usual “blame it on the franchise agreement” approach, but with the extra twist of “demand pricing”, which loosely translated means “our passengers are a captive market so they will pay what it takes”.
- The fiasco of the sudden shortening of a number of overcrowded peak hour trains, which took place more or less without warning, and required parliamentary intervention to sort out. The impression was of a hurried cost cutting measure that went through with insufficient thought.

- The service disruption in the February snow. When fully explained, the decision not to run trains into London makes some sense, but the way it was handled on the day, and the total lack of accurate information being made available did SET no favours at all.
- The continuing lack of publication of the finalised timetable for the major changes happening in December 2009. Originally scheduled for release almost a year ahead of the change, we are now promised something in “summer 2009”. Apparently the timetable has been agreed but not put into a form that mere passengers can understand! The rather too obvious conclusion is that there are some nasty surprises lurking in there, which SET don’t want to reveal until it’s too late to change things, or that there were some last minute changes with a similarly detrimental effect.

Perhaps SET are focussing more on cutting costs and maintaining profits in the recession, so some of their other activities get less attention than they deserve. Whatever the cause, we can only hope that they realise that satisfied customers lead to more revenue, and they soon return to doing things properly. If not, we at TLC will be taking every opportunity to remind them! **ST**

Annual General Meeting – Tuesday 19th May at 19.30

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

December 2009 - is getting nearer

In December this year train passengers in this region are about to see the biggest shake-up for decades in the way their services are delivered. The introduction of High Speed trains from Ashford and the Kent Coast to St. Pancras has released a number of train paths on the congested lines into Charing Cross and Cannon Street, and SET have promised to improve services to this part of Kent. So far we have been given only the number of trains arriving and leaving London termini over a three hour period, but by comparing these with the present schedules we can guess what the new service will look like. For instance, there are at present 19 trains leaving Tonbridge which arrive in London between 0700 and 0959, 6 to Cannon Street and 13 to Charing Cross, all except 4 also calling at London Bridge. Under the new timetable 24 trains will leave Tonbridge during the same period, still 6 to Cannon Street, but 18 to Charing Cross, all but 6 also calling at London Bridge. However, what we don't yet know is

how the trains are distributed over the whole three-hour period; as the lines are already utilised to capacity at the busiest times, we have to expect the extra trains to be inserted either at the beginning or end of this period, probably leaving Tonbridge between 0620 and 0650 or between 0830 and 0900. The same applies in the evening peak, when the extra trains will probably be added between 1600 and 1645 or between 1830 and 1900. Hildenborough is promised one extra train to and from both Cannon Street and Charing Cross, and Paddock Wood will gain one to and from Charing Cross, but this time it is at the expense of a Cannon Street train. What is still not clear is the degree to which these peak trains will be given stops at Orpington, a seriously flawed feature of the original service specification. We think most will run fast to or from Sevenoaks, but the Tunbridge Wells line trains will most certainly stop at either Orpington (or Chelsfield, as at present). **LS**

Going by rail to Gatwick?

In the last edition of 'Travel Topics' we described the December 2008 changes to the Redhill line timetable which make it less attractive to use the train to get to Gatwick Airport. However, as the off-peak service is subject to review, we urge members strongly to 'Use it or Lose it'. Since it is very difficult to obtain all the booklets

necessary to find the times to and from Gatwick Airport (and we have already complained about this), we have decided to give below the complete service. Although a change is now always required at Redhill (mostly requiring use of the subway), connections are usually good, resulting in a total journey time of less than an hour. **LS**

Mondays to Fridays

Tonbridge	dep	05.00	05.20	06.14	06.47	07.25	07.59	08.16	08.37	09.19	10.19	11.19	12.19	13.19
Gatwick A	arr	05.46	06.19	07.03	07.39	08.24	08.53	09.10	09.23	10.08	11.08	12.08	13.08	14.08
Gatwick A	dep	05.38	06.24	06.37	07.07	07.45	08.05	08.35	09.07	10.10	11.08	12.08	13.08	14.08
Tonbridge	arr	06.26	07.15	07.33	08.02	08.32	08.53	09.27	09.53	10.52	11.52	12.52	13.52	14.52
<i>.....continued</i>														
Tonbridge	dep	14.19	15.19	16.19	16.49	17.03	17.23	17.49	18.23	18.50	19.10	20.10	21.10	22.10
Gatwick A	arr	15.08	16.08	17.08	17.39	17.49	18.12	18.37	19.13	19.36	19.58	21.08	21.57	22.57
Gatwick A	dep	15.08	16.08	16.23	16.53	17.23	17.53	18.10	18.40	19.40	20.38	21.38	22.38	23.23
Tonbridge	arr	15.52	16.52	17.17	17.42	18.11	18.42	19.02	19.34	20.21	21.21	22.25	23.25	00.15

Saturdays

Tonbridge	dep	05.24	06.19	07.19	08.19	then hourly	18.19	19.10	20.10	21.10	22.10	23.17
Gatwick A	arr	06.21	07.23	08.08	09.08	until	19.08	20.08	21.08	21.55	22.55	00.10
Gatwick A	dep	06.04	07.10	08.08	09.08	then hourly	19.08	19.39	20.38	21.38	22.38	23.23
Tonbridge	arr	06.52	07.52	08.52	09.52	until	19.52	20.21	21.21	22.21	23.25	00.15

Sundays and Bank Holidays

Trains leave Tonbridge hourly from 07.24 to 22.24. Connections arrive at Gatwick Airport from 08.11 to 23.11.
Trains leave Gatwick Airport hourly from 08.38 to 22.38. Connections arrive at Tonbridge from 09.39 to 23.39.

Incidentally, in the last issue we neglected to point out that some of the Monday to Friday peak time London trains viz. 0816 and 0837 ex-Tonbridge, run to Victoria, not London Bridge.

The 1819 from London also departs from Victoria. Interestingly, we understand that most of the Tonbridge branch trains are actually staffed by SouthEastern drivers! **LS**

Eurostar services still not user-friendly

After a petition calling for the reinstatement of through Brussels trains from Ashford attracted over 15,000 signatures, Eurostar promised a new daily through return service from December 2008. However, as soon as the fire broke out in the tunnel last autumn, they promptly cancelled the one train calling at Ashford.

From 23rd February 2009, the daily train has been reinstated, but Eurostar declared that it would need at least 25 passengers daily to be viable. However, leaving Ashford at 0627, it has no feeding connections from the Maidstone, Canterbury or Hastings lines, although an all-stations connection does leave Tonbridge at 0453. The return journey leaves Brussels at 1659, possibly too early for many business travellers. At weekends the weekend departure time from Ashford is 0828, somewhat early for a day of rest,

and there are no feeding connectors at all from SouthEastern lines on Sundays.

This is no way to run a railway. Many of us would prefer to leave our cars at home instead of clogging up the roads to Ebbsfleet. We believe there should be at least four daily return journeys from Ashford to both Brussels and Paris in both directions: early morning (business), mid-morning (leisure), afternoon (leisure) and evening (business). All trains should have reasonable domestic connections at Ashford. The Ashford trains were well patronised before they were axed (easily more than 25 passengers per train) and would again be popular if they were well advertised and ran at convenient times.

Incidentally, you may travel free to and from Ashford provided that you have a valid Eurostar ticket. **JR**

A facelift at last?

As we went to press we learnt that some £1.3 million has been allocated to major improvement works for Tonbridge station. Although the station has recently been given a lick of paint and upgraded lighting, more fundamental changes are now planned, appearing to centre on the ticket hall, which is to be completely stripped out and remodelled. This is not before time as we have long campaigned for a better ticket office queuing

system only to be told that the circulation area is too small. Perhaps something will now at last be done; we have been promised an opportunity to make our views known. In practice we believe all the major station facilities could do with improving, including waiting rooms, toilets, and areas open to the weather. We shall also be pushing for better information displays, such as available bus connections. **LS**

2009 AGM

The Association's AGM will be held this year on Tuesday 19th May at the Forsyth Hall as before in Bradford Street, starting at 7.30pm. Mike Gibson of SouthEastern, Mike McCulloch of Tonbridge & Malling Council, and Daniel Washington of KCC have all been invited to speak and answer

members' questions. We are hoping in particular that Daniel Washington will be able to outline improvements that are planned for local bus stops and timetable displays. If you want to know what is going on, come along and find out! **LS**

Tonbridge Line Commuters – Your Committee

will be hoping for your support at the AGM

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‘What is a siding?’

This was the question posed by the ‘Courier’ when describing the work due to start in April on the train ‘turn-back’ facility at Tunbridge Wells. Reportedly costing in the region of £10 million, this involves reinstating a stretch of the original double track, in the form of a siding into which 12-coach trains terminating at Tunbridge Wells

can be reversed clear of the through main lines. This has to be completed by December to accommodate the regular 15-minute service which will be operated under the new timetable. We have been told the work will be carried out mostly at weekends and will not disrupt weekday services, but will not hold our breath. **LS**

Buses at Tonbridge Station

Most northbound buses leave Tonbridge station from immediately outside the entrance. However, the London Road buses (204, 210 and 402) leave from outside Lidl and are not always clearly visible from the main bus stop. This effectively

reduces the frequency for passengers to the Portman Park/Dry Hill area. We are pressing for these buses to call at the station entrance as well. The lay-by at Lidl should be reserved for terminating buses and for drivers’ rest breaks. **JR**

Awards scheme for station staff

Were you aware that there are a number of awards by which railway companies can reward exceptional staff achievement? Staff who excel, as judged by their management and customer feedback can be recognised through Bronze, Silver

or Gold Awards. So, if you feel any of your station staff are doing a first-rate job, as opposed to causing you to complain, please do write in to SET. This will help them gain recognition and possibly one of these awards. **KP**

Fancy growing your own vegetables?

Finally, we understand something is stirring at Hildenborough. The owner of the field off Rings Hill has spent a fair amount of money converting it into allotments, and is inviting takers for £250 p.a.

So what, you may ask? Well, each plot comes with its own parking space..... ; we reckon not all the plots may be cultivated to the customary standard! **LS**

TONBRIDGE LINE COMMUTERS

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