



Travel Topics

Issue 110

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

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Fair Fares Please!

As we predicted earlier in the year, SouthEastern have confirmed that, despite a negative inflation rate, there will still be fare rises for local rail passengers in January 2010. The average increase will be in the order of 1.6%, since the allowable increase is RPI+ 3%. However, this is just an *average* rise for regulated fares, individual journeys can go up (or down!) a few percent above or below this range. In the past, typically this has meant that a number of “popular” routes have seen above average increases, including some in the Tonbridge area.

In addition to the regulated fares, (broadly speaking, full price singles, returns and season tickets) the train operating companies can set their own prices for non-regulated off-peak and other leisure fares, and ancillary services such as car parking.

Although we can criticise SouthEastern for some of the large increases seen in recent years, the major blame actually falls on the Department for Transport for awarding the current franchise on a basis that passengers from all over Kent will pay for the High Speed line from Ashford to London, even though the vast majority will not benefit from it. It should also be noted that for at least part of the franchise, the DfT will not only be providing no subsidy for operating the railway,

but will actually require SouthEastern to return some of the previous subsidy to the government.

There can be very few commuter railways in the world that run without government subsidy, as most administrations recognise the social and environmental benefits of keeping people out of their cars and on public transport.

TLC believes that the fare structure in our region needs reform, including:

- An end to the cross-subsidy of the high speed line by ordinary train passengers
- An end to the requirement of the train operators to pay the government for holding the franchise, and the reinstatement of a (modest) subsidy so that fares can be kept at a reasonable level
- A fully regulated fare structure, which covers peak, off peak and leisure fares, and includes other services such as car parking
- A return to fares based wholly on distance, time of day and class of travel so that no one is paying more for the same sort of journey than anyone else.

Whilst train fares are obviously not going to be top of the agenda in the coming general election, you may wish to ask your candidates what their party policy will be for the railway over the next few years – we certainly will be! **ST**

What's in a name?

Although Tonbridge Line Commuters is what we call our organisation, it is not only about commuters and commuting. Our full name, Tonbridge and District Railway Travellers Association, is rather cumbersome, which is why, a few years ago, the shorter TLC was adopted. While commuters do form the largest group of passengers (and members), and pay the highest

fares, leisure travellers are an important group so we try to look after their interests too.

*So, whether you commute daily, work from home some days, or are enjoying retirement, please remember we are working for everyone who uses the railway and we look forward to your continuing membership. **AH***

December 2009 – now we know

In December this year rail 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 promised to improve services to this part of Kent. Tonbridge passengers appear to benefit most, with five extra trains in the morning and two in the evening (see table opposite).

As expected, the extra trains have been inserted at the beginning and end of the three-hour peak period, with three of them leaving Tonbridge between 0620 and 0650 and two between 0830 and 0900. The same applies in the evening peak, when the extra trains depart between 1600 and 1645. Unfortunately our other stations fare less well. Hildenborough, in spite of being promised one extra train to and from both Cannon Street and

Charing Cross, in practice loses an evening train, effectively the 1700 from Cannon Street, whose replacement will run fast from Sevenoaks to Tonbridge. Hildenborough passengers will, however, be able to change at Sevenoaks onto a closely following Charing Cross train. Paddock Wood gains a train both to and from Charing Cross, but this time it is at the expense of a Cannon Street train. What is most surprising, given the original draconian service specification, is that the bulk of the peak services to all our stations is much as at present with minor variations.

However, Tonbridge passengers will notice that all trains, both peak and off-peak, will now make a stop at Sevenoaks. For off-peak passengers at both Hildenborough and Paddock Wood a downside is that the first train on which cheap tickets can be used will be some 15 minutes later than at present. **LS**

Information for Gatwick passengers still patchy

As mentioned in the Spring "Travel Topics", Southern's timetables do not mention possible connections at Redhill for Gatwick.

This May, Redhill Line passengers were confused by two folding timetable sheets, one showing Leigh, Penshurst and Edenbridge (but not Godstone or Nutfield) and the other showing Godstone and Nutfield (but not Leigh, Penshurst or Edenbridge). It is difficult to see the thinking, let alone the advantage, of providing such publicity documents. Given that East-West road connections between the villages in this area are not good, it would seem common sense to produce one sheet to cover all the stations on the line. However, in September, the writer, on passing through Redhill from Reading (returning from Cornwall) asked for a "Tonbridge Line" timetable and was given a

booklet which did include all the stations, together with connections to and from Gatwick. One might assume that there are more Tonbridge residents who need to go to and from Gatwick than there are Gatwick residents who need to go to and from Tonbridge (unless they wish to continue to Ashford or Canterbury). We therefore do not understand why there was no sign of these booklets being available at Tonbridge.

We shall keep pressing for better services and publicity for the whole of this line, including connections to and from Gatwick (and, for that matter, Guildford and Reading for further connections). It is a tragedy that Southern continue to treat the line as though travel along the route should be discouraged. **JR**

2009 AGM

The Association's AGM was held this year on Tuesday 19th May once again at the Forsyth Hall in Bradford Street, Tonbridge. Mike Gibson of SouthEastern circulated his report, which included an outline of the December timetable, recent performance, fares, train capacity, station improvements and car parking. He also reviewed the serious disruption caused by snow on 2/3 February. He invited Committee members to a trip on the new High Speed services from St Pancras.

Mike McCulloch of Tonbridge & Malling Council commended the part played by TLC on local issues, and outlined the current position regarding the redevelopment of Tonbridge station. Daniel Washington of KCC described the plans to replace many local bus stops and timetable displays, including a proposal to provide bus information within stations. In addition to our re-elected officers we are pleased to welcome Steve Robinson to the Committee. **LS**

Where are we going,... or not going?

A surprising outcome of a recent Network Rail Consultation Document was a discovery that there was a working assumption that in 2015, after the implementation of the Thameslink works, all City trains for the Tonbridge line would be diverted from Cannon Street to Blackfriars, and thence to Farringdon and Kings Cross. We were horrified, and in our response to the document we expressed our concern that this proposal had not been yet put out for consultation and that many commuters had

moved to this area particularly because of its direct trains to Cannon Street, a station from which many people could walk to their place of employment. Diverting trains to Blackfriars would in many cases necessitate an extra underground trip adding to commuting cost. We understand that Network Rail's position is that nothing is yet set in stone and that Thameslink consultation will take place in the next few months. We shall maintain a watchful eye on developments. **LS**

Taxis at Tonbridge

With little warning Tonbridge and Malling Council suddenly submitted a proposal in July to alter taxi standing arrangements at Tonbridge station. This involved moving the taxi ranks from the front of the station to Waterloo Road and Railway Approach (the stretch of the bridge north of the forecourt). For several years we have been pressing for the removal of taxis from the

forecourt, arguing that the space would be better used by pedestrians, and traffic circulation would be improved. However, in a submission to the Council, we expressed our total opposition to the Railway Approach proposal, and this part has not been put into effect. We look forward to the promised provision of a shelter for passengers waiting for taxis. **LS**

Lost property

Have you ever wondered, as I have, why there is so much lost unclaimed lost property which is eventually sent to auction? Is it really that no-one cares enough to claim their belongings? I believe it is because the system for dealing with lost property is, in this technological age, so out-dated and inefficient.

When an item is found in the area covered by SouthEastern trains it should - eventually - arrive at the Lost Property office at Cannon Street station, where it is recorded and stored for about six months. But it isn't that straightforward.

If the item is found by a passenger it is handed in at a station, given to the conductor or, sometimes, taken to a police station. The place where it is handed in could be the destination for that train's journey, the station immediately after the item has been found, or the final destination of the finder, which could be many miles from where the property was lost. It could remain in that person's

pocket or bag for several days. All larger stations are instructed to send a lost property hamper to Cannon Street on a weekly basis, but for a number of reasons, it doesn't always happen. Items handed in at smaller stations are collected by the station manager and taken to a larger station, thence to be sent to Cannon Street. Of course all this takes time. How long will it be before the item arrives at Cannon Street? To which police station did the well-meaning finder take it? How many times can one enquire before being seen as a nuisance? What is needed is a completely new system whereby all lost property, whether at a railway station or police station, is on a single database, with safeguards so that thieves would not be able simply to select what they want from a list. At present, lost property is a big problem for everyone involved. Perhaps one of our members has the necessary skills to devise an improvement on the current procedure. **AH**

Beware Brussels!

Recently one of the Association's members travelled to Bruxelles Midi by Eurostar. Being relaxed, having enjoyed a fast service from Ashford International, our member dragged a case for, perhaps half a mile, from the arrival platform to the coach waiting to travel to the Moselle valley

for a short holiday. During this time his wallet was stolen. Later, he discovered that Bruxelles Midi is renowned as a hot spot for pickpockets. So take care if you travel to Brussels (or Paris) on Eurostar – there are professional thieves waiting to spot you off your guard. **TH**

Eurostar changes Ashford services

In the Spring "Travel Topics", we complained about through Ashford - Brussels services being made as unattractive as possible despite inconvenience to passengers and regular warnings about road traffic pollution by the government, etc. Some December 2009 changes have been published in the Thomas Cook timetable. (One naturally wonders why, at the time of writing, there does not appear to have been a public announcement by Eurostar). Under these the 0627 Monday to Friday Ashford departure will now leave at 0657 calling at Calais and Lille, arriving at Brussels at 0947 local time. There will be feeder connections from Ramsgate both via Canterbury and Dover and from Hastings via Rye. However, the 0453 connecting train from Tonbridge will still be at 0451 so we will not be able to have an extra half hour in bed. The 0828 Saturday departure will remain, as will the Sunday 1855 (not 0828 as stated in our last issue). The 1028 Ashford to EuroDisney and the returning 1937 will not always run on Tuesdays or Saturdays from January, so potential Brussels connections at Lille will be lost on those days. There will be some changes to

Paris timings (up to an hour or so) but the number of trains appears to be the same.

In August, the writer returned from Brussels on the 1659 train. An independent observer at Ashford stated that he had counted "at least 50" passengers getting off: more than the 25 that Eurostar claim is necessary to make the stop viable. The TV screens before the barriers at Brussels mentioned various trains serving Lille, Ebbsfleet and St. Pancras but Ashford was omitted from the display of the 1659. Why? The suspicion remains that Eurostar wish to run down their Ashford operation. That certainly is the view of Edith Robson, whose petition for the reinstatement of through Ashford - Brussels trains attracted over 15,000 signatures and whose website is www.save-eurostar.org. All visits to the site will be welcome and an e-mail to wheesht37@yahoo.co.uk could put you on her regular updates mailing list. The more support we can raise for improving Ashford Eurostar services to Paris and Brussels (and Lille), the better.

We are now keeping in regular contact with Mrs. Robson, and will help her battle on in her "Save Eurostar" campaign. **JR**

A long-standing problem

For some months we have been endeavouring to get more seats provided in the waiting rooms on Tonbridge station. When it is cold on the platform the waiting rooms are welcoming, or would be if there were anywhere to sit. Most of the seats seem to have been removed - why? SouthEastern now say that there have been few such requests for extra seating, so if you have found this to be a problem, do contact either SET or us. Whilst on

the subject of local issues, at Tonbridge we have also been trying to get more cycle racks, correct misleading platform train indicators, and remove the posters on the refreshment room windows to allow you to see out. At Hildenborough and Paddock Wood we have asked for the new ticket machines to be moved so that the sun does not shine directly onto the screen. **LS**

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Steve Robinson

A Hot Topic

On 29th June a line-side fire just after 5pm between Waterloo and London Bridge had potentially catastrophic effects on SouthEastern rail services. The power was turned off and trains came to a standstill. It was a very warm evening and trains at stations were able to open their doors. However, for those trapped between stations there was no such relief. The loss of power meant that

the air-conditioning could no longer operate, and with windows unable to be opened, the inside temperature on several trains rose alarmingly, leading to a number of passengers to feel some distress. While the train staff mostly did what they could to help, we have forcefully expressed our concern to SET at the possible ramifications of such an incident. **LS**

The Network card – is it worth it?

Two changes have been made recently to the Network card regime at SouthEastern which make it a poor deal. The lower limit on network card fares reductions of £13 already made it worthless for most local rail travel, but the new higher card price of £25 means it can also be irrelevant for travel to London if you don't go up often enough.

I realise that, as a lecturer I am not a typical commuter. However, the principle that you should look closely at prices applies to all of us.

The Super off-peak day return to Charing Cross from Tonbridge currently costs £10.90. One of my current weekly trips is within walking distance of Charing Cross; the other is a short Underground journey. At Oyster prices that is currently £1.60 each way i.e. £ 3.20 in total: which means that the trip costs me £14.10 – less than the off peak travel card at £15. If I bought a network card costing £25 that would reduce the costs on that day to £13: a saving of only £1.10. The Charing Cross super

off-peak return combined with an Oyster card is cheaper than the Travelcard with Network card reduction as long as you are within Zone 1.

I have an academic year of two 11-week terms which means that paying £25 for a network card would only save me £24.20. Admittedly I do have occasional meetings and exams outside of term-time. However, it doesn't really pay for me. Now Boris Johnson has changed the arithmetic, since the Oyster one way in Zone 1 will go up to £ 1.80 from January, so I am scouting out walking routes from Charing Cross for my second journey of the week. Boris is actually encouraging walking in London by pricing me off the underground! But SouthEastern are increasingly reducing the economic attractiveness of the Network cards. Is there something they're not telling us? Do they want to abolish the Network card altogether?

HD

TONBRIDGE LINE COMMUTERS

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