



# Travel Topics

Issue 111

Spring 2010

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

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## Amber lights

As we arrive at another general election the future of rail is in the balance. While all the main political parties have stressed the importance of developing railways as the carbon-friendly method of mass travel, there are other bodies who seem to be intent to sabotage its future. As we went to press, the impasse between Network Rail and the RMT over signalling rosters had yet to be resolved, and the threat of several days of disturbed travel remained. Meanwhile, the ability of railway management to manage when times get hard is still unconvincing as events around Christmas clearly showed, SET once again demonstrating weaknesses in the speed and accuracy of their communication, and managing their chain of control when coping with harsher than usual weather conditions. Well-intentioned initiatives, such as concentrating on a few key announcements on their website had the contrary effect of eliminating everything else. We hope the feedback they sought from this exercise may yet assist on future occasions.

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## Long Term Rail Plans

We have referred before to the unusually large catchment area of our local stations, which is caused primarily by the poor services on neighbouring lines. One of the main criticisms levied at the timetable changes that were introduced in December last year with the new franchise was the withdrawal of the remaining Cannon Street trains on the Maidstone East line. This has caused considerable discontent among commuters on this line who have been augmented through the major developments at Kings Hill, and as a result of the poor city service offered, many of these folk have been encouraged to rail-head to stations such as Hildenborough and Paddock Wood (and some have become TLC members, one must add!) It has therefore been good to see Tonbridge and Malling Council, KCC and Sir John Stanley together taking a forthright rearguard

action, writing tough letters to the Secretary of State to seek the trains' re-instatement. While West Malling station may be some way from our own patch, the forced migration of many of its natural users to our trains should concern us all.

However, all is not gloom for the Maidstone line: in 2015 the line has been promised a regular Thameslink service, although as we pointed out in our last issue in relation to our own trains, Blackfriars is a second-best substitute for Cannon Street. In addition, one of the proposals from the Kent Rail Utilisation Study (RUS) is the extension of domestic High-speed services from Ebbsfleet to Maidstone West. Though superficially illogical, the proposal appears feasible and is being seriously considered; if implemented, it could give the town the quickest service to London it has ever had.  
LS

## Annual General Meeting – Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> May at 19.30

This year's AGM will be held on 18<sup>th</sup> May in the Forsyth Hall, Bradford Street, Tonbridge, 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. If you want to know what is going on, come along and find out! Refreshments will be available, and there will be time afterwards for a chat and an answer to that pressing query.  
LS

## Eurostar breakdowns

Following five train failures in the Channel Tunnel on 18/19 December and the massive media criticism, Eurostar invited two experienced and respected rail operators, Christopher Garnett and Claude Gressier, to set up the "Eurostar Independent Review". Their report, published on 12 February, contained damning criticisms and made 21 separate recommendations, the main ones being:

- better insulation of the roof pantographs, which sit in a 'well', allowing snow to build up and produce arcing between the different electric and electronic components;
- improvements to maintenance procedures to reduce the chance of snow penetrating the louvred ventilation grilles and door seals on the power cars;
- better liaison between Eurostar and Eurotunnel regarding the organisation of evacuation procedures to alleviate the problems experienced by passengers who, following the failure of the lighting and air-conditioning, were evacuated onto

'shuttle' trains designed for cars, lorries and buses, with few toilet facilities;

- More staff to be drafted in when needed, help-lines to be improved and alternative transport to be made available where possible.

Rail commentators are pointing out that the trains will soon be due for mid-life refurbishment and this would be a good time to consider some permanent modifications. For example, now that trains run on the high speed line to St. Pancras which is built to the continental loading gauge, it may be possible to dispense completely with the pantograph roof wells.

Eurostar have also announced that the number of diesel rescue locomotives will be increased from two to four; we suggest they should make more use of Ashford International during emergencies instead of having made the rescue locos go all the way to London and back, thereby delaying the rescue of the trains that were still stuck. **JR**

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## Fares to Europe by train

Eurostar prices for standard return tickets to Brussels (valid to any Belgian station) range from £69 to £249, according to availability. Prices for Leisure Select (otherwise known as First Class) start at £189. Most such tickets (including those for the over-60s) are non-exchangeable and non-refundable. There is also a Eurostar ticket which includes 'free' onward travel to any station in the Netherlands by ordinary (i.e. non-Thalys) services. Ask for a ticket to any Dutch station. Although there is a special price for holders of InterRail passes, this is more expensive than the cheaper standard fares. However, one pre-travel exchange is permitted. Older members may be interested to learn that there are now reduced-rate InterRail tickets for those over 60. **AH**

Since 1<sup>st</sup> January 2010 Eurostar tickets have not been valid on SouthEastern services to and from Ashford. However, if you are not a season ticket

holder you can take advantage of the following offer which is available to passengers holding a valid Eurostar ticket from St Pancras. You ask for a ticket to "CIV St Pancras" to catch Eurostar. This ticket covers the rail fare and cross-London connection by Underground or Thameslink, and current single and return fares are: Hildenborough £10.60 and £21.20; Tonbridge £12.10 and £22.80; Paddock Wood £13.80 and £22.80. Return portions are valid for 2 months and can be used peak or off-peak, without time restriction! The only condition on purchase is that you present your Eurostar ticket at the time you purchase your rail ticket to London. The reason for this is clear when you realise that the price of a single from Hildenborough to St Pancras is less than the train fare to Charing Cross alone! It's just a pity we don't have more trains from Ashford and that this option does not benefit season ticket holders. **KP**

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## Hildenborough's peeling paint finally bites the dust!

At last after many years of complaints to railway authorities, some action. The platform canopy whose underside has suffered from curling flaking

paint has finally been rubbed down and re-painted, along with the rest of the station. So we now look spick and span! **KP**

## The Battle of Waterloo (East)

Regular users of Waterloo East will know that season ticket holders have been able to use the exit at the country end of the platform to get out into Blackfriars Bridge Road by exiting through Southwark tube station. We were therefore most concerned to see a poster in the tube station which said that this facility was being withdrawn from January 2010, because, (we were told), ‘.. station staff were spending a large amount of time helping National Rail customers...’ However, after taking the issue up at length with TfL, we are pleased to

hear that the proposal has now been abandoned, although it is said that some SET tickets may not yet work the gates properly. But more importantly, TfL now say that if you purchase an Oyster Card, (making a one-off refundable payment of £3) you may use the tube station exit for free, even if you only have a SET day ticket, a facility which a number of our members have asked us to pursue, and which until now TfL have always previously refused to consider. **LS**

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## Penalty fares

Members may be aware that a penalty fares regime is in force on SET, and some may indeed have been picked up and paid the penalty. However, the legal environment in which this regime sits is veritably labyrinthine, as we discovered when we were given the opportunity to comment on change proposals. For instance, individual rail operators are entitled to submit their own penalty fare schemes which civil servants then compare against their own regulations designed to regulate such schemes, and it is the latter that are being changed. Two aspects of the changes are controversial: firstly, the ‘standard’ penalty fare (set nationally) is to be increased from £20 to £50, though, like parking offences this is halved to £25 if payment is

made promptly. Secondly and more contentiously, the ability of train guards to issue tickets is to be withdrawn. (Note that this is part of the regulation regime, not of the scheme put forward by the operator.) We are most concerned about this point, as a passenger automatically becomes a criminal if he or she boards a train without a ticket even if there is no way to purchase one, if for instance the station is un-staffed, or there are lengthy queues. While most stations now have automatic machines these are sometimes inside locked waiting rooms, and in any event they do not sell every possible ticket. We have made these points to Passenger Focus (the rail watchdog) and hope they will be noted when the rules are re-drafted. **LS**

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## Long-standing problems

For some time we have been negotiating with SET to try to get various local improvements such as more waiting room seats, cycle racks etc. To the ever-lengthening list we have since added toilets on trains, misleading indicators on trains and platforms, and the positions of ticket machines.

With this in mind three Committee members met Mike Gibson and Station Manager Matthew Fraser at Tonbridge at the end of March to argue the cases further. They seemed sympathetic and have promised to report back to us on each item by the AGM. **LS**

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## Tonbridge Line Commuters – Your Committee

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**Steve Robinson**

All the above are seeking re-election at the AGM and look forward to your support.

## Travel Insurance

One feature of membership of the Association is an element of insurance cover while travelling by train. To be specific, while travelling by any UK railway train, regardless whether this is in conjunction with your regular local travel pattern or not, you are covered up to £5,000 for death or disablement. The latter includes the loss of one or more eyes, arms or legs, total loss of speech or of hearing in one or more ears. Any member who

believes he or she might have a claim under this policy should contact the Association giving full details of the accident. While thankfully no member has yet had reason to claim, we thought there might have been a payout following a bad accident to a Hastings train at Hither Green in November 1967 in which forty people died, but fortunately this occurred on a Sunday night when our commuter members were not travelling. **LS**

## Buses at Tonbridge station

Members may recall that we have been trying for some time to get bus stopping arrangements at Tonbridge station rationalised; at present London Road buses depart from the stop outside Lidl's, even though the buses usually to be found there are laying over and do not pick up there. To add to the confusion there is also little to guide passengers to the correct stop. Up till now KCC

and the bus companies have resisted any alterations, citing the pressure on the limited space available on the forecourt, but we are now pleased to hear that KCC may be seeking to implement the changes in conjunction with a general refurbishment of the station that is planned under Network Rail's National Station Improvement Programme. **LS**

## TLC website

TLC have launched a website at the following address: <http://www.tonbridgecommuters.org.uk>

This website contains a wide variety of information that will be of interest to the travelling public in Tonbridge, Hildenborough, and Paddock Wood, together with information about TLC itself.

The site is still being developed so new features and new campaign stories will be coming on line in the next few months!

If you have any feedback about the new site or have any suggestions about its content then please contact Steve Robinson at [spr75@hotmail.com](mailto:spr75@hotmail.com)

**SR**

# TONBRIDGE LINE COMMUTERS

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