



Travel Topics

Issue 128

Autumn 2018

The watchdog for
all Rail Travellers from Tonbridge,
Paddock Wood and Hildenborough

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Where are we going?

Originally scheduled for August 2018, the decision as to who will provide our rail services under the South-eastern franchise has been delayed to at least November and you would not need to be too cynical to think that this might be delayed further. In fact, the *Daily Telegraph* has speculated that an announcement may be as late as Easter 2019. The exact reason for the delay has not been made publicly available, but in the wake of the GTR timetable chaos, the Government is also under pressure from the opposition to 'nationalise' anything that isn't nailed down. It has now announced a review into railway franchising, which is unlikely to speed up the franchise decision.

We are not resting on our laurels, though, and have been using the time to further our lobbying of the Department for Transport to apply pressure to tweak the franchise specification.

As we mentioned in our last bulletin there is some very vague wording that could see a number of our trains being forced to stop at Orpington in the rush hour. We believe that this is totally unacceptable. Our passengers pay a high price for their rail travel and we are already starting to see a number of people forced to stand on trains during rush hour. Adding Orpington to the stopping pattern will cause misery for those able to board services and frustration for those unable to join a train due to the overcrowding. We think there is a realistic chance that some travellers wanting Hildenborough and beyond may not be able to board services at London Bridge.

We have been ably supported in our efforts by our local MP, Tom Tugendhat, who has been acting as our conduit to a Department who will not engage with us directly. In the last issue of *Travel Topics* (April 2018), we commented on the response we received from the rail minister (Jo Johnson, MP for Orpington) who surprise, surprise, thought everything was lovely and specifically commented how Hildenborough could benefit from 'new improved' Metro-style (lack of) seating. We promptly sent him to the 'naughty step' to join his brother, and the conversation moved to the Secretary of State.

Although Chris Grayling has dismissed some of his ministers' comments (including the introduction of metro trains), he has confirmed our understanding of the specification. Six out of nine possible trains an hour must stop at Orpington unless the rail operator can demonstrate that there are no available seats on the preceding stop (either Sevenoaks or London Bridge). How anyone is supposed to assess or police this is unclear. Our view is therefore that these stops are being rammed in, come hell or high water.

The delay to the franchise therefore gives us extra time to continue this fight. We are awaiting a response from the Secretary of State on our proposed compromise, which will see the requirement of six calls per hour reduced to three, with stops at either Chelsfield (as are currently in place on some services) or Orpington. Chelsfield has always been the preferred stop due to local parking demand issues, so we are hoping that this remains. **RM**

Annual General Meeting – 31 May 2018

There was an excellent turn out for our AGM in the Angel Centre, though we realise that the overcrowding in the room rather too closely mirrored conditions on some of the train services that our members have to travel on. Next year we will be booking a larger room!

John Reynolds gave the Chairman's address, noting TLC's victories such as the removal of misleading High Speed fares from ticket machines. However, the new Southern timetable for Redhill was a major concern, with through services to London withdrawn. Mr Reynolds thanked Kathy Pratt for her service as a committee member and former Chairman, and presented her with a certificate conferring life membership of the association. The Membership Secretary noted an increase in membership, due largely to a new online membership system on the association's website. The members of the committee were re-elected in their existing roles.

Chris Vinson and **Ross Balcombe** from Southeastern highlighted increased passenger satisfaction, with passenger ambassadors introduced at London terminals. Southeastern was the first operator to focus on right-time performance and had worked with Network Rail on removing Temporary Speed Restrictions. The cause of the shortage of toilet facilities on trains was that a cleaner had been killed in 2014 and a subsequent review had found that staff were not necessarily following completely safe working methods. A £5 million programme had been set up to rectify the situation.

Tom Tugendhat, MP for Tonbridge and Malling, noted that the railway was not just about getting people to work each day but also getting them home again. The shuttle service on the Tonbridge-

Redhill line was unsatisfactory, and there was a need for services to Gatwick Airport. The passenger ambassador initiative should be rolled out to Tonbridge as the busiest station in Kent. Mr Tugendhat encouraged those present to engage with TLC to bring about change, and noted that other lines suffered through the lack of advocacy of the quality brought by TLC.

Alex Hellier from Network Rail outlined the project to improve drainage in Sevenoaks tunnel, which was wet and challenging to maintain. The drainage works had been completed and work was underway to re-rail the tunnel. Proposals for investment were being put together in the Kent Route Study. There was growth on the HS1 and Tonbridge lines, with the capacity of Charing Cross and Cannon Street now the biggest constraint.

Questions from the floor focussed on value for money and the need for better connectivity from Gatwick to East Sussex and Kent. Communication about which trains were running without toilets had been poor, with no information at London terminals. It was also confirmed that Southeastern had removed otherwise serviceable units for installation of wi-fi and this had led to short formation of trains.

At the meeting we asked for new committee members, and were delighted when Kingsley Jarrett agreed to join the committee. Kingsley recently moved to Tonbridge from Greenwich and is a keen advocate for better passenger information and on behalf of passengers with disabilities, including those which are invisible or hidden. He has made excellent contributions to our committee meetings, being exceptionally well informed on key railway issues. **JM**

Tonbridge Line Commuters – Your Committee

the following were elected at this year's AGM:

Chairman: John Reynolds
14 Cumberland Court, London
Road, Tonbridge
TN10 3AL Tel. 01732 355871
Vice Chairman: Robert Mansfield
21 Ashley Road, Hildenborough
TN11 9EB

Hon. Secretary: John Morton
39 Rose Street, Tonbridge
TN9 2BN Tel: 01732 359308
Hon. Treasurer: Lionel Shields
13 Streamside, Tonbridge
TN10 3PU Tel. 01732 355919

Membership Secretary:
Steve Terry
6 Poppy Meadow, Paddock Wood
TN12 6BN Tel: 01892 833880
Committee: Kingsley Jarrett

e-mail: enquiry@tonbridgecommuters.org.uk

Step-free Access at Hildenborough

You may have seen (via our website, twitter, local press or our e-mail alert) that we have been campaigning for Hildenborough to receive a portion of a Government £300million pound scheme earmarked for improving station accessibility (in particular step free access). Southeastern have asked users to nominate their stations, with nominations now closed.

Hildenborough is the only station within our area not to have step-free access and so it was an obvious candidate for this fund. Regular users of this station will know that on exiting a train from London there is only one exit available, via a narrow footbridge, which is impractical for those with mobility issues such as wheelchair users, buggies or for those carrying heavy luggage. The bridge also serves as a pinch point where crowds entering the bridge can be forced to wait a couple of minutes before being able to exit the station.

While Tonbridge and Paddock Wood both have lifts, they often seem to be out of order for lengthy periods. We therefore wanted to find a 'low-tech' solution that couldn't easily break down. An investigation of the station site showed a parcel of land that could be used to provide a ramp from Platform 2 up to the roadside (Rings Hill). Our view is that this could benefit everyone and some examples are shown below:

Wheelchair users/those with buggies – These are the obvious winners as they will be able to exit the station of their choice (rather than travel onto Tonbridge and then back again). They will be able to access the disabled parking bays outside the station (which often go unused due to the lack of station facilities).

Those without mobility issues – The ramp would lead up to Philpots allotments, which are a popular parking alternative. This would then divert a number of people from the bridge to improve passenger flow. The ramp would also give an alternative exit point if the bridge were ever to be out of action.

We are grateful to all those members who completed the online survey request. We are also grateful to our MP, Tom Tugendhat, who shared our web-page on his Facebook page and re-tweeted our campaign messages, and Ed Simpson of Philpots Allotments who circulated our email to his customers. We are hopeful that Southeastern will respond to the popular appeal of this low cost, low maintenance, high impact proposal.

The Government is expected to announce the chosen stations in early 2019. We have made ourselves available to Southeastern to assist with any Hildenborough proposals. **RM**

The Bus Conversation

Readers of local newspapers may remember headlines earlier this year as to how local bus services were to be cut because of reduced KCC funding, but the furore this raised seems to have persuaded the Council to tread more carefully. The result was the 'Big Conversation', a heavily promoted consultation exercise, effectively, the cynic may suppose, to attempt to carry the community with them while saving money. Having a more than incidental interest in the services available to our members, we tried to set up a meeting. However, this was refused; the consultation, we were told, was being conducted on a district by district basis. The Tonbridge and Malling meeting was to be at Borough Green, and the Tunbridge Wells meeting at Cranbrook, both places almost impossible to reach by public transport in the evening! However, we persisted, and in August were able to have a useful discussion with the Head of KCC's Public

Transport Division, Philip Lightowler. We acknowledged that KCC had retained a higher level of bus support than elsewhere in the country, but had so far been less innovative in their ideas. While most bus services in our own area are operated commercially, some, such as those to Paddock Wood, Borough Green and Leigh, together with the 211 town service, do rely on KCC support, as do most evening and Sunday services on the commercial routes. The Council were now proposing three possible ways of providing local buses; feeder services, bookable flexible services, and taxi-style services, but we felt that none of the proposed alternatives would be suitable replacements, except perhaps for the 211, which could be operated by a bookable taxi-bus.

We wait to see how the Council intend to implement the results of the county-wide 'Conversation'. **LS**

TLC's victories for passengers

We campaign on a wide variety of issues and persuading rail and bus companies to make improvements is not always easy. It is therefore all the more important that we celebrate our wins and spread news of them far and wide, demonstrating that we can make a difference. Over the past few months TLC has scored several victories on behalf of passengers:

- In the May 2018 timetable there was a gap in departures from Tonbridge to Hildenborough between 17:00 and 18:01. We persuaded Southeastern to reintroduce a Hildenborough stop on the 17:41 from Tonbridge, plugging this gap.
- On weekends when buses replace trains between Tonbridge and Sevenoaks, Southeastern was reducing the service between Ashford and Tonbridge to one train an hour. We wrote to Transport Focus, which took up the matter with Southeastern to remind them of their contractual duties to preserve frequencies. On affected weekends Southeastern is now running its usual half hourly service between Ashford and Tonbridge.

- We persuaded Arriva to turn an empty return working of a school bus into a public service bus, providing a new bus service from Kings Hill to Tonbridge at 17:24. With Nu-Venture now providing an earlier service in the morning rush hour, it is once again possible to commute from Tonbridge to Kings Hill by bus.
- In autumn 2017 we wrote to Arriva to highlight the ongoing issue of inaccurate and confusing timetables at its bus stops. Arriva apologised, citing computer software issues, and has now replaced these timetable panels with more accurate versions.

Of course, we don't win every battle. We campaigned vigorously for the retention of through services from Tonbridge to Victoria on the Redhill line but GTR (the operators of Southern) were deaf to our demands. There are also ongoing battles that you can read about elsewhere in this issue, such as our campaign to ensure that rush hour trains do not call at Orpington. Whether we are victorious or not, you can be assured that TLC will always fight your corner. **JM**

Fighting for fair fares

In September, your committee submitted a response to an Easier Fares Consultation, which is being organised jointly by the Rail Delivery Group and Transport Focus, and we did our best to ensure a fair deal for all passengers. In particular, we made it clear that fares should primarily be calculated on distance travelled. For many years, passengers from Tonbridge and neighbouring stations have suffered from fares being far more expensive per mile even than other stations in the South Eastern franchise, let alone stations in the rest of the country. We believe it is considered that local commuters 'can afford to pay more', but this is far from the case in practice. We also pointed out that there should be no more 'split ticketing', whereby it can be cheaper to buy a ticket from Station A to Station B and another from Station B to Station C, than a through ticket from A to C. Split ticketing benefits only those with the time and means to search the internet and 'work the system'. It is unfair to the rest of us.

We argued that fares should be based on the time of travel. While this means that peak hour trains are more expensive, it does at least mean that most seats in these trains are occupied by the people they were intended for, i.e. commuters and others who are obliged to travel during the peak rather than those who could readily choose trains at other times.

Naturally we supported the retention of discounted season tickets and carnets for regular passengers who work part-time or on flexitime. We also said that fares should be treated more like two one-way journeys, unlike the present situation whereby returns are usually a single plus 10 pence. While buying tickets online can save time, we believe passengers should not be penalised for buying tickets at the station. Machines and the internet only answer the question you ask. A vigilant booking clerk might spot it was the wrong question and give helpful advice in buying a more suitable ticket. **JR**

The Lewisham Incident – 2 March 2018

As we reported in the last issue of *Travel Topics* there was a serious incident in March in which passengers were stranded in trains for several hours in the Lewisham area, and some dismounted onto the tracks. We made a number of observations at the time, and an independent report on the incident released in August 2018 has now made similar observations and a number of good recommendations.

In summary, the observations are:

- The “rail industry” (presumably in this case Network Rail & Southeastern) did not manage the incident in a manner that prioritised the needs and well-being of stranded passengers.
- The Network Rail signalling team did not recognise the significance of the incident and did not react quickly enough to prevent it getting worse.
- Command and control arrangements were inadequate, as were the communications between the various parties involved in incident management.
- The existing recommended procedures for the management of passengers were not followed. However, the report also mentions that these are inadequate for an incident of this nature and scale.

The report’s recommendations are around making technical improvements to increase resilience, strengthening situational awareness, incident

management and decision-making capabilities, and communication.

From our point of view, the report also echoes what we have observed in repeated incidents, which is that the rail industry needs to vastly improve the flow of timely and accurate information to passengers and staff “on the ground”. Additionally, there is a need to “change the mindset” of staff from a focus on operating the railway towards the immediate needs of passengers.

On a personal note, from the point of view of someone with professional experience of Incident Management and Business Continuity, I believe the root cause of the very disjointed response documented in the report to be lack of appropriate training for *all* operational staff, and the opportunity to “war-game” situations, with a particular focus on communication and decision making. Such training is not a ‘quick fix’, nor a one-off event, and should be seen as an enabler, part of a wider effort to review and improve how the railway deals with incidents in the future.

We can only hope that both Southeastern and Network Rail take on board the recommendations in the report and start to fix the issues. On this occasion there were only few minor injuries, and some loss of dignity for passengers who were unable to wait to use the toilet. If no improvement is made, then the next time something like this happens, the outcome could be more serious. **ST**

Still an inconvenience

We are approaching almost a year now since Southeastern first started having difficulties ensuring that toilet tanks on trains were empty, which over the course of the year has resulted in many services having severely reduced toilet facilities or in some cases none at all. This has posed significant problems for many travellers, but especially those with acute or chronic medical conditions, and families with children.

At our AGM in May Southeastern explained the problem they had faced, and gave an update on how restoration of the service was proceeding. Since then, the situation has been slowly improving and as of September toilet availability is hovering about 90%, but still short of their target. Certain services are also hit more heavily – trains

running between Paddock Wood and Strood are regularly operating without a toilet available. Critically, the disabled toilets are more often out of service than the cubicle-style ones, which can be devastating for travellers with mobility impairments.

One area which has improved since TLC raised the issue is the information provided on departure boards about toilet availability. Guards also tend to mention which coaches have functioning toilets. However, information is still an issue at London termini which are managed by Network Rail, who would need to add the data to their own systems. This is a complex process, and apparently is not a quick fix – we understand the current time frame is 6 to 12 months. **KJ**

Making international travel easier

Members may have seen that a group called HS4air has recently been promoting a 'high-speed' line from Ashford via Tonbridge to Gatwick, then to Heathrow to join HS2 in Buckinghamshire. While it is an interesting idea, it is not clear whether any trains would serve Tonbridge (the busiest station in Kent), or how four HS4 trains per hour would fit in with the intended four per hour between Tonbridge and Ashford from 2022. A new line (with an 8-platform station at Gatwick, presumably underground) would quite possibly involve demolishing many existing properties and

impede intended residential development near such stations as Godstone. We will follow this closely.

The new Eurostar service to Amsterdam is already running (only in one direction!), but sadly does not serve Ashford. Better news, however, is that when the signalling work at Ashford is finally completed the stops on daily Paris trains will resume.

In the long term we are pressing for four daily Paris trains in each direction, and four to and from Lille and Brussels, from where there is a convenient connection to Amsterdam. **JR**

Meeting with Arriva

On Thursday 11th October members of your committee met for a chat with Michael Jennings, Arriva's Commercial Manager, and Andy Creba, the manager at its new Tunbridge Wells depot. Michael Jennings told us that the introduction of new ticket machines in November would enable debit cards to be used to buy tickets. We agreed this could be an attractive feature, particularly if it was associated with a fares incentive. Meanwhile, the company's service strategy was to concentrate on its core network, transferring resources from Saturdays to Sundays where growth potential had been identified. The main problem was the seemingly endless crop of road-works which made timekeeping virtually impossible.

An example was the sinkhole on the A26 at Barming which was still not fully repaired, and which had had a devastating effect on Service 7. In response to TLC criticism, Andy Creba conceded that the minibuses currently occasionally used on services in Tonbridge were to be moved elsewhere. There would always be a problem in determining the optimal vehicle size to cope both with school and off-peak traffic.

The company had expressed an interest in increasing its commuter patronage and we discussed the possibility of participating in an online survey. Members may find a questionnaire associated with this issue of *Travel Topics*. **LS**

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