



Travel Topics

Issue 132

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

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The inflexibility over flexible season tickets

Commuting habits have been gradually changing for many years, with more and more employees dividing their time between working in the office and working from home. The current pandemic has only hastened this change, proving not only the feasibility of home working but also the downsides of foregoing any face to face interactions with colleagues. For many professions, the future has to be a mix of working at home and working on site.

Sadly, the railway has simply not kept up with this change in society. The only options for commuters continue to be full-time season tickets or expensive daily tickets. This makes travelling three days a week as expensive as travelling five days a week. For instance, an Annual Season Ticket from Tonbridge to London Terminals works out at just over £86 a week, whereas buying three daily peak returns costs over £98. The current fares structure is simply no longer fit for purpose, failing to provide the flexibility that modern working patterns demand.

The Government and the rail industry have belatedly woken up to the idea that something has to change, but promised action has so far failed to materialise. Southeastern, in conjunction with other train operators, submitted proposals for flexible ticketing to the Department for Transport back in July. However, there has been no word from Whitehall since. It appears that the Government sees its renewed recommendation that people should work from home as an excuse for inaction. This is hardly fair to those who have a legitimate need to be at their workplace for part of the week, such as those who work with the public some of the time.

Tonbridge Line Commuters has a straightforward proposal for reform. We are calling for pre-bought "carnet" tickets that can be used for travel on different days. Like season tickets, an upfront payment would be made for future travel, but they would be far more flexible. A typical example would be that a customer buys a book of 10 tickets which are valid for 10 single journeys. We believe a discount of 25% to 30% on daily ticket prices would be reasonable, being less than a daily ticket but more than a monthly ticket. Tickets should be valid for at least two months.

A major advantage of this approach is that it is not dependent on new technology. Pay-as-you go ticketing, similar to the Oyster system in London, may prove a good option for flexible ticketing in the longer term, but the need for reform is urgent and cannot wait for years of technological investment. Carnet tickets already exist on South Western Railway, but the 5% discount is far too low to make them an attractive option for part-time commuters. We are pleased to say that Tom Tugendhat, the MP for Tonbridge and Malling, supports our campaign and wrote to the rail minister in August to advocate carnets.

There is a real danger here that the railway will contribute to its own decline through inaction. Without flexible ticketing, many passengers will simply decide the only affordable option is to work from home every day. This will reduce fares revenue, which now goes to the Government, and will have a knock-on effect on the leisure economy in London and other major cities. It's therefore in the Government's own interest to provide a better deal for part-time commuters. The time for action is now.

JM

SeatFinder still Finding Its Feet

London Charing Cross	🚶	CHX	d	1100	1110	1115	1130	1140	1145	1200	1210	1215	1230	1240 1245
London Waterloo (East)	🚶	WAE	d	1103	1113	1118	1133	1143	1148	1203	1213	1218	1233	1243 1248
London Cannon Street	🚶	CST	d	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
London Bridge	8	🚶	LBG	d	1109	1119	1124	1139	1149	1154	1209	1219	1224	1239 1249 1254
Orpington	4	ORP	d	1126	-	1139	1156	-	1210	1226	-	1239	1256	- 1310
Chelsfield	3	CLD	d	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sevenoaks	4	SEV	d	1136	1143	1150	1206	1213	1220	1236	1243	1250	1306	1313 1320
Hildenborough		HLB	d	1142	-	-	1212	-	-	1242	-	-	1312	-
Tonbridge	4	TON	a	1146	1151	1158	1216	1221	1228	1246	1251	1258	1316	1321 1328

An extract from a SeatFinder timetable from the Southeastern website

Towards the end of August, Southeastern launched a new tool called SeatFinder which provides estimates for how busy various trains are. This is something we had been asking for even prior to the pandemic – knowing which trains had a better likelihood of having a free seat during peak-time commuting was hard to know unless you wanted to try every train! However, in the current climate it is even more useful – helping travellers to know which trains are quieter and on which it will be easier to maintain distancing.

The tool uses data gathered from weight sensors on certain trains – by knowing how heavy an empty carriage is and the weight of a typical person, a rough estimate for how many people are in the carriage can be determined. It is not perfect, how many of us can claim to represent a truly average person after all, but it is a reasonably accurate way of determining how much of a carriage's capacity is in use. The weight data associated with a particular timetabled service is then used to estimate how busy this service will likely be next week when it runs again. However, not all of Southeastern's trains have weight sensors – they are predominately fitted to the Class 375 'Electrostar' fleet, which run mainline services via Tonbridge to Hastings and Ashford, and the Class 395 'Javelin' fleet, which run High Speed services. Many of the older Class 465/466 'Networker' fleet, which operate the Tunbridge Wells and London Metro services, do not have carriage weight sensors and so predictions for these services are often unavailable.

We have fed back many suggestions and observations to Southeastern about the new tool, and some of them have already been implemented. For example, when the tool first launched, estimations were only available via online Live Departure Boards – i.e. the next 2 hours. This made it difficult to plan a journey in advance. Now however, the information is also visible on a weekly timetable.

Although the tool is still finding its feet, we hope to see more of our suggestions implemented. These include:

- Showing the data in the Journey Planner – suggesting trains which are quieter.
- Showing per-carriage data – as loading can vary significantly across a 12-carriage train!
- Including weekend data – data is currently only available for weekdays.
- Showing the data in more places – including departure boards and posters at stations for the busiest trains.
- Adjusting predictions in real-time – adjust the estimates if prior trains are cancelled, and work towards being able to show the data in real time.

Given how many of Southeastern's data innovations eventually find their way over to other operators owned by Southeastern's parent company, Govia, we would not be surprised if SeatFinder also finds its way on to Southern and Thameslink services in the future. **KJ**

Redhill to Tonbridge Line – Travel, but no trains



Will there be a green light in December for a return to full service on Tonbridge-Redhill line?

On weekdays Southern has been operating a modified Saturday service on the Redhill to Tonbridge line consisting of one train per hour all day with a few peak extras. This however is still a far cry from the previous 30-minute peak service, and indeed also omits some of the very early morning services that some travellers rely upon.

With schools returning in September, the need for additional capacity and a range of arrival times became even more critical. Tonbridge is home to several schools, with pupils travelling by train to Tonbridge across a very wide area. Given the starting times for Tonbridge's schools, and the typical walking times from the station, the pre-September 7th timetable was grossly unsuitable. Most pupils would need to catch the 07:34 arrival in to Tonbridge in order to arrive at school in time – and for some schools this would result in pupils arriving 50 minutes early at a time when being on the school premises for no longer than is strictly necessary is encouraged.

The new timetable starting on the September 7th did little to help matters – with the new 08:24 arrival into Tonbridge benefitting just one school, leaving a significant majority still having to catch the 07:34 arrival. Despite Southern's claims of working with schools and being ready to accommodate the return of school traffic, the reality was completely inadequate and caused quite a bit of concern from affected parents. Southern's excuse for not running a full service was that driver training has been affected by the pandemic – whilst this is likely a factor, we

believe that other lines have been prioritised at our expense.

After much pressure, Southern did concede that their arrangements were unsuitable and retimed the 08:24 arrival to 08:17 – allowing more pupils to catch this service and arrive at school just in time. This was done by shortening the turnaround time at Redhill which has unfortunately resulted in unreliability and delays at times – though recent performance does appear to have improved. In addition, prior to the timetable change Southern did introduce a supplementary bus from Edenbridge to Tonbridge calling at all stations to aid with distancing. However, with the bus taking significantly longer than the train, it was little used, especially after the timetable change, and has since been withdrawn. Whilst the bus did introduce extra capacity at short notice, usage may have been higher had it run non-stop from Edenbridge to Tonbridge and at a slightly different time.

Although the situation has stabilised somewhat recently, the lack of a proper peak time service on the line still results in some students and commuters arriving into school and work far earlier than they need to and makes distancing challenging. We have been told that a full restoration of service is set to take place in the December timetable change, but we keep a watchful eye to ensure that it happens. There may be factors outside of their control, but how Southern chose to prioritise and allocate staff and trains to the Redhill to Tonbridge line is not one of them.

KJ

All change please – is franchising dead?

Rail franchising has been around for 25 years and it's become the easy scapegoat for all of the railway's ills (foreign investors, profit before people). In the last general election, Labour were calling for nationalisation whereas the Conservatives had launched the Williams Review to consider the way forward. Fast forward to 2020 and the railway has been transformed by the pandemic. The recent headlines have suggested it is the death of franchises and that the railway has essentially been renationalised. As ever, the reality is more nuanced. Whilst franchises may not have been perfect, the rail industry now compared to 25 years ago is significantly different, with much greater passenger numbers and a significantly improved safety record.

With so many people staying at home, the railway companies will find it impossible to turn a profit. The fixed costs within the system mean that they cannot be adjusted down in line with new passenger numbers. Therefore, if the Government did nothing, the train operating companies would have gone bust in a very short space of time. Something had to change.

We understand that the findings of the Williams Review (expected to be published at some point in the future...) have been brought in, which is namely that the Government decides the terms and then outsources private companies to run the day to day services.

This essentially perpetuates the core model of the emergency arrangements brought in March, when all train operators went on emergency management contracts with the Government to bail them out for the pandemic. In Southeastern's case the franchise was up for renewal anyway, so it was given a new management contract lasting until 16 October 2021, which the Department for Transport can extend to 31 March 2022.

Travel to Gatwick?

Kent is currently the only county in South-East England not to have a through service to and from Gatwick despite it being our nearest international airport. We totally support Kent County Council's call, set out in its proposed Kent Rail Strategy 2021, for a service from Canterbury West via Ashford and Tonbridge to Gatwick and then possibly on to Guildford and Reading. Canterbury is Kent's largest tourist destination.

We would argue that for passengers, nothing much has really changed. Passengers will mainly feel the difference through their status as tax payers, as the Government is now underwriting the industry by assuming revenue risk. Therefore, if nobody uses the train, it's no longer Southeastern's problem as their management contract will continue to pay them.

To make this work, the Department for Transport needs to up its game. We suggest that being more open and engaging with stakeholders (such as TLC) who can provide critical feedback and highlight local issues. The danger is that the Treasury sees the rail industry as a money pit and starves it of investment. There seems to be a management by spreadsheet approach with GTR (the umbrella group for Southern trains) and it is really damaging the Tonbridge to Redhill line. We do not want to see this happen more widely.

What we want to see is genuine incentive for the industry and operators to innovate and improve passengers' experience. Decent length contracts and a rational bonus/penalty system would help, but the recent record has not been good. You may recall that at our Annual General Meeting a couple of years back Southeastern admitted to short-forming trains whilst WiFi was fitted, since the penalty for failing to fulfil an agreement with the Government to install WiFi was greater than the penalty for not running a train.

In our area, the most urgent need is a replacement for the Networkers (used on services that terminate at Tunbridge Wells). These are really showing their age, and we hear from many members that they actively avoid them. We also need more flexible ticketing solutions and hopefully this industry simplification will allow this to happen. Only time will tell but know that we'll still be here, fighting for you. **RM**

Gatwick is also a useful interchange for much of the Sussex and Hampshire coast, and Reading would provide good connections for much of the rest of England without having to use crowded trains via London. The Tonbridge to Redhill line is grossly under-utilised and under-publicised. The sooner it is treated as a major cross-country link, the better. It is good to see Kent County Council championing the cause. **JR**

KCC support for Eurostar at Ashford

Eurostar have so far said that their trains will not call at stations in Kent until at least 2022 as patronage there would be too low. We regard this as an unduly pessimistic view.

The latest publication of the Kent County Council Rail Strategy for 2021 includes a call for at least some Eurostar trains to call at the two Kent stations, Ebbsfleet and Ashford. Tonbridge Line Commuters is pressing strongly for a minimum of four trains per day from

Ashford to both Paris and Brussels, together with the one daily train to Amsterdam (and the corresponding return journeys). The earliest and latest trains would be aimed principally at business travellers; mid-morning and afternoon trains would cater mainly for leisure travellers. Both groups would, of course, be allowed on all trains. We consider the Ashford stops to be more important than Ebbsfleet, as fewer passengers would have to start by going in the “wrong” direction. **JR**

Work proceeds despite COVID



As most members are aware, this year’s Annual General Meeting on 14th May was held in a slimmed down form via the well-known Zoom videoconference system. This meeting is required by the constitution, and rail industry speakers were not present. All members were advised and could participate.

The main effect of the meeting was to elect John Morton, our conscientious and hard-working Secretary, to the post of Chairman. Most secretarial duties are now being undertaken by the extremely capable Kingsley Jarrett. Robert Mansfield took over the duties of Membership Secretary and John Reynolds became Vice-Chairman.

Your committee has continued to meet regularly via Zoom (as illustrated above) and we remain as active as ever in advocating for our members.

The railway itself has had to continue operating in order to carry key workers, and has gradually been brought back to full operation. The mandatory use of face coverings, though unpopular, seems to have been broadly heeded.

Apart from a few trains used by school children, passenger numbers have been severely reduced. This is not surprising given that Government’s initial edict to avoid public transport wherever possible. Though this advice was subsequently relaxed, many passengers understandably continue to be reluctant to return. It is noticeable that it is the elderly that have been most dissuaded to travel. It is thus possible to enjoy a train journey with a much-increased choice of seats and greater comfort. Nevertheless, we remain concerned that newer rolling stock relies on forced air ventilation systems which are not conducive to eradicating any airborne germs. **LS**

Medway Valley line curtailment at Paddock Wood

On 7 September Southeastern introduced a new timetable which they trumpeted as restoring services “up to 98% of our pre-COVID timetable”. Hidden in the small print, however, was a change which would see part of the network receiving a worse service than either before or during the COVID lockdown. Almost all weekday services on the Medway Valley line would no longer serve Tonbridge, instead terminating at and starting from Paddock Wood. The direct link between Tonbridge and the county town of Maidstone would be severed, increasing typical journey times from 30 minutes to 40 minutes, with some rush hour trips taking up to 50 minutes due to poor connections at Paddock Wood.

Suddenly the train would no longer offer competitive journey times compared to the bus or private car.

We were particularly surprised by this change because Medway Valley line services have operated through to Tonbridge for many years. The only exception was in the rush hour, when services turned around at Paddock Wood to keep the junctions on the mainline clear for the more intense peak service. During the COVID lockdown there was actually an improvement in the service in that trains operated to and from Tonbridge throughout the day, including the morning and evening peak periods. All this was swept away with the September timetable change. Following protestations from ourselves and others, Southeastern begrudgingly agreed to relieve a small number of services used by school children but stuck doggedly to its plan of removing Tonbridge from almost all other services.



No longer destined for Tonbridge – a Medway Valley line service to Paddock Wood leaves East Farleigh on Friday 16 October

There seems to be some confusion about the permanence of the change and reasons behind it. In August our contact at Southeastern stated that the company was “not planning this to be a long-term change” and presented it as necessary step to provide the reliability of the service during the “ever-changing and uncertain nature of the circumstances we are operating within”. However, when we asked about the matter at the Kent County Council Rail Summit (held virtually this year), Scott Brightwell, Train Services Director at Southeastern, justified the change as a necessary move to improve the reliability of the mainline services by reducing delays caused by trains Medway Valley line trains running in and

out Tonbridge. There was no hint that the move was anything other than permanent.

It is pertinent to note that Mr Brightwell previously worked at GTR (the parent company of Southern and Thameslink) where he was involved in simplifications in the service that saw certain direct links between stations withdrawn. The change to Medway Valley Line services seems to follow a similar pattern. He appears to firmly believe that cutting services deemed to be lightly used is a customer friendly approach because the inconvenience caused to the few is outweighed by the reliability improvements for the many. In the case of the Medway Valley Line, this argument is a red herring.

If there is any disruption to services then Southeastern can easily terminate trains at Paddock Wood in response to it. There is no need to pre-emptively withdraw services from Tonbridge when under normal off-peak conditions they can run in and out without affecting any other trains.

Perhaps the biggest shock was Southeastern's decision to make this change without any consultation. This was done under the cover of COVID, with Southeastern telling us that a consultation was impossible during the pandemic because "train planners have been required to work at an expeditious pace to make changes".

This is an odd argument because September timetable is based on the pre-COVID timetable, so it would have easier to for the train planners to keep the timetable as it was. Examining

Southeastern's Emergency Measures Agreement with the Government from March 2020, we believe it likely that Southeastern failed to fulfil its contractual duty to consult on significant alterations to the timetable. We're pleased to say that Tom Tugendhat, MP for Tonbridge and Malling, has agreed to put this point to the rail minister and tabled a Parliamentary question. Mr Tugendhat has also run a petition to put public opposition to this change on the record.

We strongly support all efforts to reverse this retrograde step, and will continue to press Southeastern to think again. In the past Southeastern has always dealt with us in good faith and given us the chance to provide feedback on timetable alterations. We deeply regret that on this occasion it has taken a different approach, and one that is decidedly unfriendly to passengers.
JM

Hildenborough – left standing at the bus stop



No go for the 200 bus

The location of Hildenborough station doesn't make it easy for the villagers to access by foot and a fair few people rely on the 200 and 235 buses to get them to and from the station. These routes are unlikely to be profitable for the bus companies and have in the past been subsidised by KCC.

It is therefore sad to see that the pandemic has robbed us off this service. Many people seem to be unaware of this change (understandably with so many of us working from home) and I have not seen any announcements other than at bus stops.

In its place, Go Coach have launched a new service called 'Go2'. This is an on-demand service where you drop a pin on your current location and your desired destination and then the

app calculates the best possible option for you, be it a timetabled service or an on demand 'van'.

I have yet to be able to use the service as it is completely useless for commuters in the Hildenborough area. Indeed, the first time I attempted it (at 5:50 pm when the service runs to 8pm), I was offered a timetabled bus ride in 15 hours 45 minutes, together with a half-mile walk from the station. All for more money than the 200 bus would have charged. Needless to say, I walked.

Morning commutes are similarly unhelpful. The best offer I have seen was a ride in 41 minutes. Now given that it is impossible to specify that you want a ride at a particular time I would need to time things to perfection in order to make a train. Perhaps I need to book the bus once I wake up or once I am out of the shower? At least it was offering to pick me up where the bus stop was. Again, I walked.

Whilst it is early days, I very much hope that once this pandemic is over the bus routes are restored, else commuting will be miserable for those of us without a car. Either that or they need more resources in Hildenborough to make this work for people.
RM

Tudeley Village – lots of houses but little transport

Many members will no doubt be aware of the proposed Tudeley Village development between Five Oak Green and Tonbridge, and the considerable amount of local opposition to the plans. Originally, the Hadlow Estate, (the land owners and promoters of the scheme) planned to hold consultations over the Spring and Summer of 2020. Covid-19 put paid to those plans, but recently a consultation has begun, in the form of an exhibition in Tunbridge Wells, and a website – <https://www.tudeleyvillage.co.uk/>, giving details of the plans and a chance to comment.

As our remit extends only to rail and bus travel, and associated interests such as road infrastructure, our response to the consultation will focus on these areas. The development assumes a modal shift away from cars towards cycling, walking and buses. Whilst this is a noble aim, and one that may be achievable within the development itself, we simply do not believe that this approach is viable for longer distance travel,

and inevitably there will continue to be a reliance on cars as the primary mode of transport to and from the village. There is no mention of any improvements to the local highway or transport infrastructure or on the impact within the town of Tonbridge.

Space for a new railway station is shown within the plan, but we believe that NR has already rejected this proposal, and even if approved would not be available for many years. While future utilisation patterns of the railway and growth in passenger numbers remain highly uncertain, pressure on Paddock Wood and Tonbridge stations and their facilities, including roads and car parks, would undoubtedly continue.

We will post our response to both the village plan consultation, and the second draft of the TWBC local plan, on our website, and aim to give a summary in the next edition of *Travel Topics*.
ST

Editor's note

The Committee is finding it increasingly challenging to keep up with the demands upon it, given our day jobs and other commitments. We are therefore keen to recruit a new participant to

our ranks. Whether you are a regular traveller or simply have an interest in improving train services, please let us know by contacting us at the email address below.
LS

TONBRIDGE LINE COMMUTERS

As elected at the AGM your Committee are:

Chairman:	John Morton	Vice Chairman:	John Reynolds
Hon. Secretary:	Kingsley Jarrett	Hon. Treasurer:	Lionel Shields
Membership Secretary:	Robert Mansfield	Committee:	Steve Terry

You may contact us at any time using the e-mail address: enquiry@tonbridgecommuters.co.uk

As mentioned in the last issue, there is no subscription needed this year. However, if you wish to make a payment to the Association in respect of future years (£4 p.a.) you may still use our website, paying by **PayPal, BACS or cheque**.

Our BACS details are: **Bank:** Santander **Sort code:** 09-07-21 **Acc. No:** 90919302

Cheques payable to **Tonbridge Line Commuters** should be sent to:

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