



Travel Topics

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



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Austerity on the railway? A tale of timetable woes...

The Government has ruled out a return to austerity as a response to the coronavirus pandemic, but on the railway it seems to have already become a reality. Given the vastly reduced demand for train travel, the taxpayer has fully taken on the cost of running the railway. This means that Southeastern and other operators are now effectively on management contracts with the Government. As a result, the Department for Transport has ever more control of the day to day running of the railway and the level of service. We see this playing out in a decision to continue running a greatly reduced service right through to at least December 2021.

After a series of timetable changes that were continually wrongfooted by changes in the state of the pandemic, Southeastern is again running a severely reduced timetable. Cuts occurred in two stages on 8 February and 22 February. This has culminated in an extremely sparse off-peak service between the hours of 11:00 and 15:00, with just two trains an hour between Tonbridge and Charing Cross rather than the usual six trains an hour. From both Paddock Wood and Hildenborough there is just one train an hour to Charing Cross.

The cuts in the rush hour are less severe but we've seen almost all direct services to and from Cannon Street withdrawn. Meanwhile, the late evening service is a mess, with three trains leaving Charing Cross within the space of 15 minutes and then nothing for 45 minutes. This will be a considerable problem when theatres and other evening venues in London reopen.

We've had a notable success in persuading Southeastern to run an extra service for school children. School trains have mostly been preserved in the timetable, but it was pointed out to us that the absence of a 15:39 service from Tonbridge to

Sevenoaks (and on to Charing Cross) left a gap and resulted in children having a long wait at Sevenoaks for a connecting service to Otford and Swanley. We highlighted this to Southeastern and the company agreed to reinstate the 15:39 service from Monday 29 March. We're glad they listened on this point.

More generally, we've made the case to Southeastern that the overall level of service is barely sufficient now and will simply not meet demand if the further planned easing of coronavirus restrictions goes ahead. In a meeting with the rail minister Chris Heaton Harris and ourselves, Southeastern's Managing Director David Statham and Train Services Director Scott Brightwell suggested that the rail industry was keen to get back to twice yearly timetable changes in May and December. No increase in services could be contemplated until May, and the May timetable would see just a 4-5% step up in services. After pressure from TLC and Sevenoaks Rail Travellers Association, Southeastern agreed to reinstate a second hourly off-peak service on the Hastings line. This will boost the mainline service from Tonbridge to London to three trains an hour, but with no increase at either Paddock Wood or Hildenborough. This will take effect from 17 May.

In our view, the proposed level of service will soon be inadequate, especially if no further changes are made until December. If all lockdown measures were to be removed from 21 June, as contemplated in the Government's roadmap, we would be likely to see a substantial return of leisure travel in July and August. We're therefore pressing for a second hourly off-peak Ashford train, giving an additional service each hour at Paddock Wood and Tonbridge. The other serious gap is the complete lack of rush hour Cannon Street services. Southeastern is being ambivalent about the prospects of a further increase

in services before December, but the plan appears to be to avoid doing so if at all possible. It says any increase in demand will be accommodated by increasing train lengths in the first instance.

In many ways we've had an easier dialogue with GTR (the umbrella company of Southern) than with Southeastern. From the outset, GTR showed a willingness to listen to our concerns and to actively ask our opinions in shaping its timetable. As a result, GTR is continuing to run its full normal service between Tonbridge and Redhill, including half hourly services in the rush hour and at school times. This has been a major relief to the school children who rely on the service. In contrast, Southeastern initially showed some reluctance to work with us constructively, preferring to announce its timetable decisions as a *fait accompli*. The pandemic provides an evergreen excuse that "no consultation is possible due to exceptional circumstances". We don't expect full passenger consultations in the current circumstances but we do believe that dialogue with rail user groups can benefit train companies by allowing them to shape

the train service to best suit passenger needs within the constraints they face. There are some recent signs that Southeastern is once again becoming more receptive to working in partnership with us.

Meanwhile, the age of austerity is also hitting Network Rail. In an effort to reduce costs, a major review of working practices is planned. Andrew Haines, the Chief Executive of Network Rail, has said that "outdated practices, and the impact of Covid on passenger numbers, show that the railway is not serving passengers, taxpayers or staff as well as it should". Predictably, the trade unions have not reacted positively to this news. It's difficult to judge the merits of the changes themselves until they are announced, but the prospect of strike action looks set to be added to the litany of misery faced by passengers in the months ahead. As we write elsewhere in this issue, passengers are also affected by an above inflation fares rise and the continued delay in offering flexible tickets. It's a challenging situation, and we recognise the difficulties the industry faces. Our goal is to ensure that passengers are not forgotten in the process. **JM**

An end to franchising, but what of the Williams Rail Review?

As covered in our previous issue of *Travel Topics*, an end to franchising on the railway was widely expected to be announced as part of the oft-delayed Williams Rail Review. Fast forwarding to Spring 2021, the Williams Rail Review has still yet to be published. However, it could be argued that we have already started to see some of the expected outputs from it being implemented on today's railway. One such expected output was a move away from franchises to management contracts – as has been used for several years on some services in London, such as the DLR and Overground, and some National Rail services such as GTR/Southern.

At the National Rail Recovery conference in February, Keith Williams, the author of the Williams Rail Review, claimed that the review is "far from being stuck in the sidings" and "has been tested against the pandemic". The Minister for Rail,

Chris Heaton-Harris, also pledged to publish the review as soon as possible. However, at the time of going to press we are 2 months on from this claim and the review has still yet to be published.

Whilst it is good to see the railway effectively "testing" ideas by making changes little and often as opposed to risky "big bang" changes, the lack of transparency and opportunities for feedback so far has not inspired confidence. The outputs of the review are intended to shape the long-term future of the railway and include significant areas of reform. This is not something that should be done in secrecy – and although we remain sceptical that the review will ever see the light of day, we strongly call upon the rail industry to improve the transparency with which they are making changes and involve a wide range of stakeholders as part of their decision-making process. **KJ**

Annual General Meeting – Thursday 20 May

The AGM will be held on 20 May at 19:30 via the well-known Zoom video conferencing software. This will be a full meeting with speakers from Southeastern, Southern (GTR) and Network Rail. Tom Tugendhat MP is also planning to attend.

Further details will be circulated by email nearer the time. Any members without access to the internet may obtain details of how to dial in to the meeting by phone by phoning the Chairman on 01732 359308 within one week of the meeting. **JM**

High Brooms landslip – praise for Network Rail

TLC take pride in our position of being a critical friend to the rail network and where praise is due, we are keen to highlight this as well as point out failings.

The recent landslip near High Brooms highlights a problem that is happening with increasing frequency. Construction techniques have improved tremendously over the past 100 years and a lot of the old infrastructure has been ‘sweated’ to its limit.

In early February, Network Rail’s monitoring system picked up that the land was moving north of High Brooms station. They took pre-emptive action and closed the line, with replacement buses providing the passenger service.

Once they had a chance to investigate, they discovered that c5,000-6,000 tonnes of material needed to be cleared and the slope regraded. The poor weather at the time added to their challenge.

In some ways it was fortunate that it happened whilst we are in lockdown, with fewer passengers travelling. However, I am sure that was no consolation for key workers still needing to travel.



An aerial view of the landslips near High Brooms. Credit: Network Rail

We were impressed with Network Rail’s proactive emails to us keeping us apprised of the situation and also their decision to widen the area of the shutdown so they could undertake nearby preventative work at the same time. Hopefully this investment will mean better reliability and fewer restrictions in the future.

The line has now reopened, and engineering works have taken place between Battle and Tunbridge Wells over the Easter break. These works were preventative and targeted vulnerable earthworks, which is work we support. **RM**

An audience with the rail minister: the case for the Medway Valley line

As a result of our campaign to have Medway Valley Line trains running through to Tonbridge, we achieved a meeting with the rail minister, which allowed us to make our case directly to the powers that be on this and to bend his ear on timetable cuts and flexible fares (detailed elsewhere).

As is the way of life at the moment, the meeting was conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams. Chris Heaton-Harris MP (rail minister) had invited representatives from the DfT and Southeastern to the meeting and, with Tom Tugendhat MP supporting our cause, it was pleasing to see our local line gaining so much attention.

We raised our concern over the lack of consultation for the Medway Valley Line cut, which was accepted, but defended on grounds of the speed at which changes had to be brought in due to the pandemic. Southeastern accepted they had made errors (insufficient attention to school services, for example) and that they had reacted when these problems came to light.

For the moment, trains on the line are once again running through to Tonbridge. This is because the reduced timetable means that connections would be awful if they turned around at Paddock Wood. However, Southeastern is intent on cutting the service back to Paddock Wood again in December.

It seems that Southeastern is determined to stop trains crossing the lines at Tonbridge and it is passengers who will suffer. We maintain that this has relatively little impact on performance (the mainline near London being a much bigger cause) and that terminating at Paddock Wood should be used much more sparingly at times of severe disruption rather than a permanent curtailment.

On a personal note, I was very impressed with the way the rail minister conducted the meeting, making sure we had plenty of opportunity to put our points across and I felt it was a very constructive meeting. We are set to meet with Southeastern directly in the coming weeks to make our views known. **RM**

Fares rise but little progress on flexible ticketing

On 1 March season tickets and other regulated fares rose by 2.6%. The Government made much of the fact that the rise was delayed by two months, but that appears to have been more to do with disorganisation than concern for passengers. The key point was that this was an above inflation increase, being set at 1% over and above July's RPI inflation rate. Of course, RPI is already inflated measure of inflation, and one that has been disowned by the Office for National Statistics. We have long argued that the lower and more accurate CPI inflation rate should be used, and that the rise in fares should be no more than this measure.

The above inflation rise contrasted starkly with the freeze in fuel duty announced in the budget. The Department for Transport argues that the Government is giving unprecedented financial support to the railway and that passengers must make their contribution. It seems that the same argument does not apply to roads, even though the Government is responsible for their upkeep just as it is for railways. Motorists will understandably feel relieved that they didn't face a rise, but rail passengers should perhaps be treated with the same generosity.

Coupled with the fares rise is the ongoing lack of progress in offering flexible season tickets. Almost everybody recognises that the new normal is likely to see a mix of working at home and in the office, and yet the Government continues to give mixed messages about the prospects of offering fairer fares for part time commuters. As we've written before, the present choice of expensive daily fares and season tickets simply doesn't make commuting two or three days a week a cost-effective option.

We understand that Southeastern and other train operators provided the Department for Transport with concrete proposals for flexible ticketing several months ago. Since that time little appears to have happened, with new coronavirus lockdowns having provided a handy excuse for inaction. At a recent online meeting with the rail minister Chris Heaton Harris, we took the opportunity to ask what was happening. We were told that nothing could be announced because it would conflict with the message of the lockdown. We pointed out that employees and employers were already planning for the future and not knowing what tickets would be available made it difficult to take decisions.



South Western Railway offers carnet tickets on its "touch" smartcard – could our local train operators offer carnets in paper or smartcard format? Credit: South Western Railway

Back in February we launched a campaign for flexible ticketing and we're grateful to all our members and supporters who took part by writing to their MPs. We advocated a system of carnets as a simple way of providing flexible ticketing. These would be pre-bought books of tickets sold at a cheaper per journey price than daily tickets.

Recent press reports suggest the Government is indeed looking to roll out carnets, but the discount to peak daily fares would be just 15% rather than the 25% to 30% we've argued for. The smaller discount would provide some benefit for those travelling one or two days a week, but would be of no help to somebody travelling 3 days a week because buying a season ticket would be cheaper. Worse still, an expiry date of just one month is proposed, greatly limiting the flexibility of the carnet tickets. It appears that even this modest scheme will not be launched until June.

The combination of the fares rise and the reluctance to offer reasonably priced flexible tickets puts passengers in an invidious position as they contemplate a return to the railway. It appears that the Treasury needs a lesson in basic economics. The price elasticity of demand of rail travel has fundamentally changed. Former commuters can now simply decide to continue working from home all the time if suitable fares aren't provided to make part time commuting attractive. The railway needs to win back its passengers, and that just won't happen if fares aren't available to support modern flexible working patterns. We will continue to stress to the Government that allowing the railway to offer fair fares is in Treasury's own interests, as well as the right thing for passengers.

JM

Eurostar must serve Ashford

As society reopens following the reduction in Covid cases, it will be vital for public transport systems to meet the challenge to carry people efficiently and safely. Trains (especially electric ones) are ideal for carrying large numbers of people quickly while causing far less pollution than road or air transport.

When Eurostar starts increasing services (hopefully quite soon), the international station at Ashford should reopen at the same time. Being the station nearest the tunnel mouth, it will save many people from having to travel in the wrong direction to and from London, and so reduce congestion on crowded commuter trains. Ebbsfleet is useful to North-West Kent and to some motorists but that is all. Ashford, situated on a junction, will benefit passengers on or near six different routes: from the Ebbsfleet area; Mid Kent via Maidstone; North-East Kent via Canterbury; East Kent via Dover; Romney Marsh and Sussex via Hastings and South Kent and Surrey via Tonbridge.

We are pushing for a minimum of four trains every day (with corresponding return journeys) to both Paris and Brussels to serve Ashford; early morning principally (but not exclusively) for business, mid-morning and mid-afternoon mainly for leisure and evening mainly for business. Delaying reopening Ashford is not a viable option. **JR**



Happier times – holidaymakers wait at Ashford International for a Eurostar service to the South of France.

TLC needs you! Can you spare your time and energy?

Since 1959, TLC has been working with the rail industry to protect and enhance rail services for us all to benefit from.

Over the past few years, the number of people serving on our committee has been steadily declining and now sits at 6. At the same time our workload and campaigning activity has increased. The pandemic has radically changed how rail services operate and we do not yet know where it will end up. At least one member of the committee is likely to stand down at some point in the near future and so we need to recruit additional committee members to help out.

There is no need for you to have any technical knowledge as our committee is incredibly experienced and we feel it is important to have a range of opinions. I, myself, have very little

technical knowledge of the railway and most of what I do know has been picked up whilst I have been on the committee.

Therefore, the qualities that we are looking for are, primarily, time and a desire to make things better (constructive criticism). We meet approximately 10 times a year. Outside of meetings, we correspond with stakeholders to pursue the organisation's aims. I would expect the time requirement to be at most 2-3 hours a week, with many weeks needing less than an hour (just keeping up to date with emails).

If you think this could be of interest, please let us know. We would love to arrange an informal chat to get to know you better and then we can discuss next steps. We look forward to hearing from you.

RM

Membership extension

In view of the ongoing effects of the pandemic, we have again extended the subscriptions of annual members. Everyone who was a member as at 31st March 2021 has been granted a free extra year.

Updated expiry dates are in the covering email received with the electronic edition of Travel Topics or on the address label for those receiving copies by post. **RM**

Buses – what are they?

Members may be excused for wondering why your newsletter has a paragraph on this less-favoured form of transport. While trains and tram networks have consumed billions of pounds in subsidies, buses have been largely starved of funding and attention. Passenger numbers have been allowed to drop as fares have risen far quicker than even train travel. Although the recently announced injection of funds into the industry is welcome, and may slow the decline, the current pandemic has been a killer, as politicians and others have emphasised that the public should avoid using buses ‘at all costs’. However, it is clear that if towns are not to return to times of gridlock, this denigratory attitude will have to change, and enormous efforts will be required, both nationally and locally, to restore the confidence needed to encourage passengers back to this relatively ‘green’ form of transport.

Nevertheless, buses have continued to run for the sake of those who have no other means of getting about, even if it becomes ever more difficult to find out exactly when they run. For most services you will be able to find times on these websites:

‘traveline.info’ and ‘bustimes.org’, which do appear to be reliable. For others like the erstwhile regular No. 200 Hildenborough station bus, you now have to book in advance.

Arriva, meanwhile, have gone out on their own and completely given up showing times on stops and hard copy timetables, directing you to their ‘app’ which claims to give departure times to those with the necessary know-how. However, perusal of this information does not guarantee accurate data. Their ‘official’ timetable for service 7 for instance omits a number of journeys shown elsewhere as operating, and marks most journeys well into the evening as ‘schooldays only’. Sunday services are marked as ‘bank holidays only’ despite having being seen on other occasions. All one can do is to look forward to the return of normality and hope that most of the existing services will eventually survive. For now, those in Tonbridge with a wanderlust and time off mid-week, might try a trip to Underriver on a Monday, or to Tenterden on a Friday. Obscure services like these must be surely living on borrowed time. **LRS**

Editor’s Note

After 20 years and some 40 issue of this newsletter I have reluctantly decided to relinquish my role as editor and pass it to someone who really know what is going on at the heart of local railway politics, namely Kingsley Jarrett. I wish him all the best, and

am very grateful to him for taking on this job which increasingly involves the use of computer wizardry to manipulate words and pictures imaginatively within the confines of the printed page. **LRS**

TONBRIDGE LINE COMMUTERS

As elected at last year’s 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 email address: enquiry@tonbridgecommuters.co.uk

There is again no subscription needed this year. However, we still welcome renewals and will simply extend your membership by the number of years paid for (£4 per year). To renew simply [visit our website](#) and pay by **PayPal**, **BACS**, or **cheque**. Our BACS details are:

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