



Travel Topics

Issue 135

Spring 2022

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



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The future of rail is at stake – but can the Government see it?

The devastating Russian invasion of Ukraine and the resulting sanctions are causing fuel bills to rise, and with OPEC missing several oil production targets, it seems that higher prices are here to stay.

If only there was another method of transport that was more carbon efficient and doesn't rely on fossil fuels! Admittedly not all of the country has been levelled up yet, but half of the UK rail network has been electrified, and so encouraging rail use should be at the forefront of the Government's approach for pragmatic and environmental reasons.

However, the Government seems to be obsessed with trying to make the railway pay its own way or jump through hoops to justify additional services/investment. This seems so short-sighted and potentially ruinous for all of us as taxpayers. As a reminder, following the outbreak of COVID and the start of lockdowns, train services became financially unviable overnight. The Government stepped in and essentially nationalised the industry, meaning that taxpayers foot the bill for future costs.

There is a certain logic to having those that use the service, pay for the service but the pandemic has shown many that working from home is a perfectly viable (if not antisocial!) route and so many will be weighing up £4,000+ on a season ticket or Zoom calls in pyjamas! This could create the same sort of vicious cycle that we see on buses, where they get more expensive, people don't use them, so the prices have to go up to make ends meet. Sadly, key workers, who often cannot work from home, just get stung repeatedly for ever more expensive fares.

It is infinitely easier to cancel a bus route and to sell/scrap a bus than it is to run a rail service down, and so it is in everyone's interest for the railway to be a viable service so that people want to use it.

Anecdotally, people seem to be returning to travelling to work by train, at least on the days I go in. How much of that is down to pressure from bosses, or a desire for workplace social interaction? People seem to be voting with their feet, and so we wonder whether we may see a slow decline as we settle in to a new normal? For now, I see no reason to increase my two days a week in the office.

The Government needs to think carefully about how they proceed. Southeastern's fleet is looking increasingly tired and made up of everyone else's cast-offs. The complexity of maintaining a wide variety of vehicles puts a further strain on their engineering team. Our old friend 'train fault' is never far away.

The Government needs to consider the role rail plays in meeting environmental net zero goals, and to attribute a monetary value for every person they get out of a car and on to rail. Southeastern have launched a carbon calculator to demonstrate the difference. It says that a single rail trip from Tonbridge to Charing Cross uses 29.83% of the CO₂ equivalent that would be used by going by car. This will continue to fall as the electricity grid continues to be decarbonised. The railway is already subsidised, so why not try and factor in these additional benefits rather than look to clobber anyone who has the need to use the train?

Going back to Ukraine, at the time of writing, Ukraine is putting up a heroic defence against a much larger Russian force, despite enduring relentless artillery attacks. We would like to offer our praise and admiration to the Ukrainian railway service, who have been amazing at keeping operations running and helping people escape the war and bring in much needed supplies. Not all heroes wear capes.

RM

Farewell to John Reynolds

Many of our readers will be aware of the enormous contribution made by John Reynolds to our association over many years. It was therefore with great sadness that we learnt of John's unexpected death on 11 December 2021.

Having joined the association in 1986, John became part of our committee in 1989. He served in a number of key positions, including two stints as Chairman (2003 to 2008 and 2017 to 2020). At the time of his death John was continuing to serve as our Vice-Chairman and Press Secretary. He was active to the end, writing to newspapers and giving media interviews on our behalf.

John was a frequent contributor to *Travel Topics*. His first article appeared in spring 1991 and highlighted the dangers of slippery Terrazzo tiling at stations. In 2008 he provided a keynote article to mark 50 years of the association. His very last

contribution appeared as recently as the autumn 2021 issue and was a plea for the restoration of Eurostar services at Ashford International. This was a fitting reminder that John enjoyed numerous trips to the continent, always starting his journey on a Eurostar train and often venturing further afield on European railways.



John Reynolds at a September 2021 TLC social

Members of the TLC committee attended John's funeral and it was good to see so many of his family and friends present to remember him. John was a true gentleman and a pillar of Tonbridge society. We will miss him greatly. **JM**

(In)flexible Season Tickets and the unfair sting of rail fares

Our battle against the (in)flexible season tickets continues. Recently we raised our concerns with the Government (via Tom Tugendhat, the MP for Tonbridge and Malling) and the minister replied to say they thought it had been a wonderful success and were not willing to consider our points. They cited sales of 100,000 tickets, which over the period in question meant that the equivalent of about 16,000 people nationwide were using them regularly at most.

We think that the scheme is a massive missed opportunity. The Government's approach seems to be keener in trying to drive people back to city-centre offices rather than in providing a genuine solution. They seem unduly concerned about not 'rewarding' people who only want to travel in one day a week. We have requested that the validity period is extended from 28 days to 42 days. Whilst this is not as flexible as we would like, we feel this is a compromise that removes the risk of buying a flexible season ticket and then having your plans change at short notice without 'rewarding' those that only want to travel once per week. We await their response with bated breath.

On 1 March rail fares went up by 3.8%, which was hailed by the Government as a success because the increase is based on the July 2021 RPI inflation rate and that rate has since risen higher. RPI is itself an

obsolete measure of inflation which is generally higher than the more reliable CPI measure. We have talked elsewhere about the missed opportunity around this rise.

If you have the flexibility to choose the time and station you travel from, then we would encourage you to look at fixed-train "Advance" fares. We are not sure how these are decided, but Tonbridge seems to be a big beneficiary of this. The services vary but at the time of writing, the 9:01 from Tonbridge to Charing Cross is often available for £8.70 whereas the train before and after will set you back £19.10. This is a very welcome and attractive discount, but there is an element of unfairness in there. The 09:01 stops at the lovely village of Hildenborough at 09:05 and should you happen to live there the very same train costs £17.40 as no advance fare is available. There would seem to be no logic as to why Hildenborough is unable to benefit from this discount and we are raising this issue with Southeastern.

As a general point, we are firmly of the belief that you should not need to have a master's degree in data analysis to avoid being ripped off on the railway. Fare reform is long overdue and the promised Great British Railways, which is expected to do away with the fragmented franchise system, should be in prime place to achieve this. **RM**

Rail funding squeeze dashes hopes for timetable improvements

As described in our front-page article, the railway is coming back to life but suffering a significant squeeze on funding. With the last of the pandemic restrictions coming to an end, more commuters are returning to their offices in London and leisure travel has recovered strongly. Late-night trains home from London are often particularly busy.

One would hope that this recovery in demand would usher in a similar recovery in the number of trains in the timetable, but this is not the case. Instead, the funding pressure we describe seems to have ushered in a new age of austerity. All former rail franchises are now run under tightly defined management contracts with the Government or, in the case of Southeastern, directly owned by the Government. This means the level of financial control exercised by the Government is in fact now greater than at any time since the demise of British Rail.

We see this play out in the way that train companies now respond to our requests for more services to meet demand. Whenever we put such requests to Southeastern, they pass the buck to the Department for Transport by saying that any change would need to be agreed by them and that there is no funding available. Any sense of entrepreneurial spirit – the thought that running more trains might make the railway more attractive to passengers and bring in more revenue – has long since evaporated. It is clear the railways are now viewed simply as a drain on public resources rather than a public asset, let alone a viable business.

So, what is in store for passengers over the next few months? A new timetable will start on Sunday 15 May, but there will see scarcely any uplift in the number of services. We made several demands to Southeastern but almost all were rejected out of hand:

- We asked that the Ashford-Paddock Wood-Charing Cross route should have half-hourly trains throughout the weekend. Services currently run only half-hourly for part of Saturday – with Saturday afternoons and all-day on Sunday seeing just an hourly service, despite demand for these services being higher at weekends than at off-peak times on weekdays. This was rejected “due to the costs involved”.

As a concession, Southeastern will be running a few extra trains on Sundays. There will be half hourly between Paddock Wood and Charing Cross in both directions during mid-morning and late afternoon/early evening. Services from Charing Cross to Paddock Wood will revert to hourly after the 19:40 departure.

- Late evening trains from Charing Cross on weekdays are often extremely busy, so we requested an extra departure around 22:30. This was rejected on the grounds of costs, but the 22:40 service from Charing Cross to Tonbridge and Paddock Wood will be strengthened to 12 carriages.
- We requested more mid-morning services on weekdays and Saturdays, in the form of additional Tunbridge Wells-Charing Cross trains. This was rejected (you’ve guessed it – on the grounds of costs) but Southeastern pointed out that some Hastings to Charing Cross services on Saturday mornings are already running as 12 coaches.
- We asked for the 08:23 from Tonbridge to Cannon Street on weekdays to stop at Hildenborough, to offer a third direct Cannon Street service supplementing the 06:01 and 07:18 services. This rejected because “there is not sufficient time in the schedule”.

No change to the timetable on the Tonbridge-Redhill line has been announced by Southern (or rather by their parent company GTR). We expect the current service of half hourly peak trains and hourly off-peak trains to continue. This is, in fact, the level of service which ran before the pandemic.

We are obviously frustrated that passengers are not being encouraged back to the railway with more services. The number of daily commuters may well never return to pre-pandemic levels, and we accept that somewhat fewer trains need to operate in the rush hour. What makes little sense is the ongoing cuts to off-peak and weekend services. With the summer ahead, demand for leisure travel is only going to increase. We hope that the railway does not put off potential passengers by offering an inadequate service. **JM**

GBR Headquarters – Tonbridge’s bid for glory

In May 2021 the Government published the long-awaited Williams Rail Review in the form of the Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail. The centrepiece of this new vision for the railways is to be the creation of a new organisation called Great British Railways. This arms-length body is set to act as the guiding mind behind Britain’s railways, combining the current functions of Network Rail with several other responsibilities, notably including setting fares and timetables.

In October 2021, the Secretary of State for Transport Grant Shapps, whose name is indeed immortalised in the very name of Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail, announced a competition to find a location for the headquarters of Great British Railways. With levelling up very much part of the agenda, it seemed likely that most candidates would be based in the North. However, local Tonbridge dignitaries had other ideas, with MP Tom Tugendhat highlighting Tonbridge’s rightful place in railway history and excellent rail connectivity. This led to Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council putting together a bid for Tonbridge to become the location of the new headquarters.

We backed the bid by submitting a letter of support, in which we highlighted the fantastic range of rail connections that Tonbridge offers, and the amenities that the town could provide to Great British Railways employees. In addition, we

submitted feedback on the bid document itself, including suggesting a broader mention of our own role in acting as a bridge between the railway and the local community. After all, surely Great British Railways should be based somewhere with a great rail user group!

JM



Applicants for GBR's new headquarters - putting Tonbridge on the map!

Annual General Meeting 2022 and Committee News

Our 2022 AGM will be held on Thursday 12 May at 19:30. We’ve decided to keep this as an online meeting on Zoom, given the success of that format last year. This will again full meeting with rail industry speakers and the chance for members to ask them questions. Further details will be circulated to members by email. 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.

At the AGM our long-standing committee member Steve Terry will be standing down, having recently moved from Paddock Wood to Northumberland. Steve joined TLC in 1989 and started his service on the committee in 2004. He took on the role of Chairman from 2008 to 2011 and did valiant service

as our Membership Secretary for many years. Always ready with a trenchant and witty comment, we will miss his expertise on engineering and business continuity – areas where the railway should know more than it sometimes does!

The departure of Steve means that we will no longer have a committee representative for Paddock Wood. We would therefore like to hear from any member based in Paddock Wood who may be willing to step into Steve’s shoes, or even to provide us with informal feedback on what is happening at Paddock Wood station. If you would be interested in learning more, please get in touch. We meet around 10 to 12 times a year, currently via Zoom. No railway knowledge or experience is required!

JM

TLC seeks to expand to the Wild West of Redhill

Technically TLC's remit stops at Tonbridge and does not include stations on the line between Tonbridge and Redhill. However, we have a number of members on this line and so we have always tried to do what we can to support them and campaign for the line to be improved. Strategically, it is a vital piece of railway and we would love to see a Kent to Gatwick service, or the restoration of direct trains to London Victoria, so it has always been in our interests to fight for the line.

What we do now is very reactive because, other than social trips to the Little Brown Jug, the current committee does not really use it. We would like to change this, and so have sought people in the area to join our committee to bolster our ranks (much needed!) and provide local first-hand knowledge. At the time of going to print we have had a few people register an interest and we are exploring how we can make it work.

At the forthcoming AGM we will be requesting that our remit changes to also include Edenbridge, Penshurst and Leigh stations and we hope you will support us in this.

Our relationship with Southern has improved dramatically over the past few years and so we are looking to build on this relationship to try and drive real change on the line. We would like to thank Paul Codd, who is our contact at Southern, for his constructive approach. We certainly do not always agree on everything, but we feel that Paul listens and has helped us achieve improvements that would have just been ignored/dismissed before.

The line suffered during the Omicron stage of the pandemic, seemingly because it was difficult to get trains from the depot at Selhurst to the train crew at



Penshurst Station on the Redhill to Tonbridge line

Redhill. The emergency timetable was incredibly poor for the needs of the passengers, but an additional 16:17 service from Tonbridge was added to help school travel. There were some early issues where systems were not updated to reflect the service and staff did not seem aware that the service was running, but that got corrected after a while. As an 'additional' service it was prone to being cancelled and we have reminded Southern of just how vital those school services are, especially given the lack of alternatives. I'd like to thank the users of the line who have kept us informed of the situation on the ground.

In the easterly direction from Edenbridge, the weekday service starts at 05:39 to Tonbridge and is half-hourly until 10:16 when it becomes hourly. This certainly makes a big difference for people getting to work/school in the mornings. On the reverse journey, trains start from Tonbridge at 04:40 and are then half-hourly from 05:28 through until 09:32 when the service reduces to hourly. School times home from Tonbridge are 15:46, 16:17, 16:47 and 17:17. We very much hope this timetable proves reliable and runs as advertised.

RM

What time is my bus?

Who needs buses? The Government's recognised commitment to zero-level carbon usage by 2030 presumes a reduction in car use, and a return to, even an increase in, the use of public transport, and for many this is the local bus. Most bus travel is to school or work, or as part of a longer trip on a commuter train, but one should not ignore the many other reasons people have to venture into their local communities by bus, be it for health, commerce or entertainment. In all these cases people have to rely on timetables for the times of buses that they can

catch. Paper copies of timetables having virtually ceased to exist save for a photocopy from your local library, but if you are tech-savvy you may be able to find a timetable under one of the generic websites such as 'traveline' or 'bustimes'. Arriva, the main local bus company, also have their own 'app', which will tell you the time of the next bus due at your stop, and this can be extremely helpful, if you can find the correct screen in time. This does of course presume you have a smartphone with you, and it can reliably access the internet!

However, without such accessories or know-how, you have to rely on timetables posted on bus stops, and, while most KCC-funded services have had current timetables posted, Arriva appear to have completely lost the plot. Ever since the lockdown, most of their local stops have had their timetables removed or covered up and replaced by notices directing you to 'your app'. Just recently, some stops, notably those serving Route 7, have been given timetables dated 2021, which we may assume are a fair reflection of the service being offered. However, in the case of the other major Arriva services in Tonbridge, namely the 218/9 and 402, most postings are still dated 2019, and should be flatly ignored. It is ironic that in these cases, the erstwhile basic Monday to Friday 20-minute service pattern was in general reduced to 30-minutes as long ago as last summer, and the times shown cannot accordingly be relied upon. Surely a blatantly incorrect timetable is worse than no timetable at all! Arriva have announced changes their schedules for 17th April, and it may be that by the time you read this they will have posted up to date timetables on their stops, but don't hold your breath! We have complained to the company so far without success and are seeking other outlets in which to do so.

We have also recently been notified of forthcoming wide-ranging cuts to KCC's supported bus services, but these are mainly those serving rural areas the other side of Tunbridge Wells. Apart from the 222, which loses the 17:56 from Tonbridge, and the whole of the Saturday service, the only major withdrawal in our area is route 208 between East Peckham and Pembury, where the main losers are residents of Golden Green and Little Mill, who stand to lose a long-standing (formerly 88) daily hourly service. Some suburban residents of south-east Tonbridge will also lose some facilities, but we are assured that Autocar's parallel service between Tonbridge and Pembury (208A) will continue to operate, albeit on Mondays to Fridays only. Finally, it is proposed to withdraw the 299, which offers one journey a week on Fridays between Tonbridge and Tenterden. Alternative facilities are available by traveling to Pembury Hospital and changing onto the 297, which runs daily (except Sunday).

Whether you travel by commercial or supported services the adage as ever is 'use it or lose it', but we do wish it were made easy to do so! **LS**

TONBRIDGE LINE COMMUTERS

Your committee seeking election at the AGM are:

Chairman and Membership Secretary:	John Morton	Hon. Secretary and Press Secretary:	Robert Mansfield
Vice Chairman:	To be nominated	Hon. Treasurer:	Lionel Shields
Newsletter Editor:	Kingsley Jarrett	Committee:	To be nominated

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

With many people now travelling regularly for work or leisure, this year we are returning to asking for membership subscriptions after a 2-year pause. Your membership renewal date is shown in the covering email, or on the address label if sent Travel Topics by post. Our annual subscription is just £4, but we welcome renewals ahead of time and you may renew for several years at a time. To renew simply [visit our website](#) or return the slip enclosed with your paper copy of Travel Topics.

You may pay 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:

Hon. Treasurer, Lionel Shields, 13 Streamside, Tonbridge, TN10 3PU